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Building Literacy: The Boy Who Read

“’Lumos!’ Harry muttered to his wand and it lit again. ‘C'mon,’ he said to Ron and Lockhart, and off they went, their footsteps slapping loudly on the wet floor. The tunnel was so dark that they could only see a little distance ahead. Their shadows on the wet walls looked monstrous in the wandlight” (Rowling 302).

 “Jeremy,” spoke a voice, “Hey Jeremy.”

 The boy awoke with a start; not from a dream, as he never slept in class, but rather from an imaginary world, much to his dismay. He looked over toward the direction of the voice and saw a girl sitting in the desk next to his, looking at him.

 “Jeremy, can I borrow a pencil?” the girl asked politely.

 “Sure,” said the boy, taking a pencil off of his desk and handing it to her.

 “Thanks.”

 “No problem,” replied the boy, returning to himself and observing what world he was now in.

The scenery had changed, no longer the quiet yet intriguing halls of Hogwarts, but instead a loud and unruly fourth grade classroom. The teacher sat behind her desk in the corner, grading assignments while occasionally looking up from her task to monitor any unpleasant behavior within the classroom, though the students were keen enough to avoid her gaze and attention when necessary. The scent of dry erase marker and hand sanitizer permeated the room at all times, almost suffocating those students who could not stop noticing it. Desks were turned this way and that, some as a result of the class activity assigned by the teacher as a means of working together and socializing, while others were oriented towards nearby friends for some interesting after-class discussions common within a fourth grade classroom. Conversations ran throughout the classroom, always about some sports star, pop singer, or other common topic, although the boy could not be certain, as he never did listen very closely to what the others were saying. When not learning something, his attentions were always directed elsewhere.

 Rather than converse with his fellow classmates, the boy instead sought a world that seemed infinitely more fascinating than his own. And so, the incident now passed, the boy turned his attention back to his book. The novel sat closed on his desk with a scrap of paper sticking out of the top as a make-shift bookmark. He would occasionally use bookmarks of a more sturdy nature, but those were often in short supply and fond of tearing, despite their so-called strength. When he ran out of bookmarks or scraps of paper, he would try and remember the page number rather than bend the corner of a single page of that text. Somehow the bending of the page of a book seemed like an act of disrespect towards it, or even cause it pain. He did not mind remembering the page, however, as even if he were to forget the exact page number, which happened more often than not, he still enjoyed re-reading passages from the novel.

Given the sometimes abrupt nature of the teacher in how she would interrupt his reading with teaching, he would often re-read the same passage four or five times before having enough time to move on. Re-reading passages became somewhat normal for him, to the point where he would not mind reading the same passage of an article or text book multiple times for an assignment. While usually not as interesting or entertaining as a fantasy novel like Harry Potter, the boy still saw the value in reading the same thing multiple times. In fact, he would often read full novels more than once, much to his mother’s chagrin. While always willing to purchase a novel for him, she would always question why he wanted to own it rather than borrow a novel from the library. When he replied that he liked to read them multiple times, she relented, but still expressed some surprise and confusion as to why he would want to read the same thing more than once.

 The boy returned to his novel, and in doing so changed worlds. Gone were the conversations of the other students, the teacher in the corner, and the would-be annoying smell of hand sanitizer. The boy transitioned out of that world, slowly at first, as each of his senses began to escape from the physical world and into the imagination. Classroom chatter gave way to silence, and silence gave way to the sound of footsteps against the floor of a long corridor being walked by a lone student. The feel of the pages changed to the touch of the cold and damp stone walls of the corridor. The air was stagnant and tasted ancient, as if held there by a force as old as the structure itself. The boy could smell the mold on parts of the walls, and soon an even greater stench reached him. His eyes adjusted from the black and white print of the page to the darkness of the corridor, and soon he was completely surrounded by his own imagination. For the time being, the other world was gone, existing in some far-away place that he could not see.

Despite the foreboding nature of the world he was in, he still preferred it to the physical world in which he lived. The world of Harry Potter was one of danger and excitement, yet somehow it seemed more welcoming that the physical world. Reality was confusing, with people largely being the cause of that confusion. The boy’s classmates always seemed to behave in strange ways that did not seem to make sense to him, whereas the characters in Harry Potter interacted well together, creating great friendships and bonds with each other. To most people, the setting of Harry Potter would seem strange, fanciful, and out of the ordinary, thereby resulting in others being uncomfortable with existing in it; for the boy, however, the opposite proved to be true. The physical world seemed strange and confusing, with people and things behaving in ways that did not make sense in his mind. Therefore, rather than attempt to understand the physical world, the boy instead turned to the imaginary world, learning all of its rules, customs, and characters. It was here in this strange and fairly alien world that the boy found comfort and familiarity, rather than the one in which he lived.

 By now I am sure you have realized that the boy and I are the same, albeit ages apart, though the dialogue in the beginning is quite the giveaway. But, as in Stephen King’s “What Writing Is,” “We're not even in the same year together, let alone the same room ... except we are together. We're close” (106). I do not just mean my past self and I are close, as I consider that to be a safe assumption, especially given how much closer I feel to myself having remembered an event such as this. No, instead I would suggest that you and I are close, or at least as close as two can get from sharing a piece of their childhood. As to why I chose to share it, perhaps it would be best understood as a chance for both of us to learn a little more about myself, and why I like reading.

 During grade school, I was often within my own thoughts, observing physical phenomena around me or simply playing music in my head, and so to other students I would seem like quite the oddity; admittedly, I most likely was. Regardless, this led to a self-perpetuating cycle of misunderstanding and isolation between me and other students. As a result of this, I always felt like I did not belong with the other students, and so, left within a world of isolation in classes, I discovered Harry Potter and reading as a form of escape. I had often read other books, namely books with facts about dinosaurs or animals, so while reading was not a new experience, it was the first time I used it as an escape. From the lovable characters like Hagrid, to the fascinating monsters like the Basilisk, to the relatable character of Harry, who never seemed to fit in until he arrived at Hogwarts, the Harry Potter series provided an accepting atmosphere and a way to build my interest and curiosity in a world I was capable of understanding. In a way, the other students were my literacy sponsors, as my inability to understand or relate to them caused them to ignore me, which in turn drove me to read more and more as I resolved to become absorbed in entirely different and interesting worlds. I probably would not have read nearly as much as I did had I not been isolated. I actually became so invested in the worlds and characters when I read that I actively avoided single novels, instead reading series with multiple novels within them, such as Harry Potter, as shown in Figure 1, or the Inheritance Saga. Single novels did not provide enough content to fulfill my desire to explore and understand worlds, and even series would not last very long as my reading speed began to increase with every book read. My curiosity was ever-expanding as I tried to learn and experience as much as I could from books, to the point where, much like Malcolm X, “I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity—because you can hardly mention anything I’m not curious about” (126).

Figure 1: The cover of Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, my first series of rue adventure into reading and experiencing other worlds, exploring all that books had to offer.

 As a result of this drive to absorb and understand as much as I could about novels, I tended to carry over an attention to detail in everything I did. I began to take in details of ideas and situations, even if the details were seemingly arbitrary and my understanding of said ideas and situations was sometimes minimal. Eventually I would begin to comprehend the ideas and situations, but not without first gaining some details to piece together the concept, like individual puzzle pieces combining to form a solution. This was especially true in social situations. Before I had an attention to detail, I had often ignored certain social cues or little ticks that each person had. After gaining the ability to take in and focus on more details that previously, I noticed all the little things people did, such as the way that people looked at each other, talked to each other, or did some small physical action which varied depending on the situation. While these details may have seemed meaningless, they actually gave a great insight into how people behave, such as noticing how people speak or act when they hate each other or like each other. This in turn gave me some sort of understanding as to the idea of people tending to behave in a certain way around others depending on how they feel at the time as well as how they feel about those around them, something which before I had never really considered. Understanding exactly why people spoke or acted in such ways depending upon the situation came later, but not before gaining the details necessary to comprehend them.

Details were noticed in the physical world, allowing me to gain somewhat of an understanding of my surroundings while also creating an interest in the world I lived in, the reality in which we all exist; however, I do not exactly agree with that wording, as it implies that only the place where we exist physically is real. When I read, the places that I go, the people that I see, the stories that I experience, all of them seem just as real as if they existed physically, as if it were me tracking the basilisk or following the trail of spiders in Hogwarts. I was transported from the crowded classroom to the dark corridor, allowing me to walk through that ancient hall. I believe that when we read, we all truly experience the stories, not simply read them. The word “read” almost seems like an injustice to what actually happens because truly, when you read books, you live them.

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