



## Engaged in Young Adult Literature:

A Collaborative Conversation with Penny Kittle and Gay Ivey

**W**e are so very honored to converse with two of the leading voices on adolescent reading engagement in our inaugural issue. Penny Kittle teaches freshman composition at Plymouth State University in New Hampshire. She was a teacher and literacy coach in public schools for 34 years, 21 of those spent at Kennett High School in North Conway. She is the coauthor of *180 Days* (2018) with Kelly Gallagher, and is the author of *Book Love* (2012), and *Write Beside Them* (2008), which won the James Britton Award. She also coauthored two books with her mentor, Don Graves, and co-edited (with Tom Newkirk) a collection of Graves's work, *Children Want to Write*. She is the president of the Book Love Foundation and was given the Exemplary Leader Award from NCTE's Conference on English Leadership.

Dr. Gay Ivey is the William E. Moran Distinguished Professor in Literacy at the University of North Carolina–Greensboro. Her research centers around engaged reading as a tool for improving the academic and relational lives of children and adolescents. She is particularly interested in helping teachers and school districts solve problems related to reading instruction and children's achievement and engagement. She is an elected member of the Reading Hall of Fame and 2018 President of the Literacy Research Association. Her important research on adolescent reading engagement can be found in such publications as *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Literacy Research*, and *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*.

*Gay, you suggested in your Presidential Address at the Literacy Research Association (LRA) conference in 2018 that you were surprised in your research with 8th graders by the “depth” you saw in their reading engagement. We also noticed that “depth” is one of the words in the title for Book Love. Talk about what the word “depth” means to you in terms of your work with adolescent readers: What is it? How do you know it when you see it? Why is it important?*

**Penny:** Reading is an individual journey using all kinds of texts—those we read for pleasure or entertainment, those that confirm what we already know, and those that challenge us with new thinking, new experiences, and new ways to consider how we live and why. I believe that students should be on that journey throughout their years in school, setting the stage for a life lived between the pages. When I moved from my years as an elementary and middle school teacher to the high school, I was struck by how limited the journey in reading had become for students. There were only a few books each year in the curriculum, and all students read at the same slow pace. The K–12 curriculum in reading had moved from expansive to narrow, and I couldn't make sense of it.

I was concerned about the overall lack of engagement with the act of reading in high school students, of course, but also that the reading lives of students bound by this curriculum map would remain in a shallow place—as those who experi-

enced great texts from a distance, not as a transaction (Probst, 1988, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1978) between the ideas in the text and their own lives. Literature is about big questions, but students weren't asking them. English curriculum was about extracting the history and context and "worth" of great books, not reading to imagine and discover. When I opened up the wide expanse of literature and nonfiction to my high school students as a daily part of our time together, they responded by becoming deeply engaged in building their own understanding of what they read. They deepened their thinking about the ideas in books, and they hungered to experience the lives of people far from our tiny mountain town. You cannot find depth until you wade in, and without agency as readers, students will stay in shallow water. In fact, some won't even leave the shore.

**Gay:** I second Penny's observations about the real reasons adolescents read deeply! I worry that "depth" in K-12 English/language arts classrooms is reduced to the idea of being able to critically analyze a text or to use so-called higher-level comprehension skills. The students in the 8th-grade classrooms Peter Johnston and I studied over a period of years (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; 2015) made clear that such a focus is not only short-sighted in terms of reading development, but also in terms of how students might come to view and use reading as a way to manage and improve their lives and relationships. Like Penny, the teachers in these classrooms prioritized reading engagement. They arranged for students to have meaningful experiences by providing a vast collection of relevant books, letting students choose, and giving them ample time in class to read, all with no strings attached—no comprehension questions, journal responses, projects, or requirement for reading a set number of books, and so forth.

These decisions resulted in students reading more, and willingly so; they were also reading more strategically and analytically, but far surpassing what is expected on any set of curriculum standards I have seen. For instance, when students became confused in their reading, it was common for them to reread entire chapters and sometimes the whole book. It is hard to imagine students go-

ing to that much effort in a required reading of *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850). Likewise, they were quick to point out literary devices, such as the use of flashbacks and figurative language, not merely as exercises of analysis or critique, but as necessary tools the author used to make reading mind-expanding. Students were especially drawn to books with shifting narrators, such as *Jumping Off Swings* (Knowles, 2009), because of the access to multiple characters' minds at once. As one student told another one day, "These books go into all sorts of point of view. It will help you understand things." The "things" she is referring to are not the books themselves, but other people outside of books, and in turn, themselves.

This gets me to a kind of "depth" in reading that has gotten far too little attention both in the classroom and in research. Engagement with characters' emotions and motives, particularly as characters face moral dilemmas, raises more questions than answers for adolescent readers. These questions are about themselves, ultimately, rather than the books.

When readers are engaged, they are not trying to get to the bottom of the story or to learn a lesson or a "universal theme" of a novel (if such a thing exists). They want to dig in further, seek out new perspectives on the problem, sometimes from other books and often from each other. A number of students who read *Living Dead Girl* (Scott, 2008), for instance, were frustrated that the main character did not try harder to escape from her sexually and psychologically abusive captor, and they spent months recruiting new readers and reading related texts (e.g., *Stolen*, Christopher, 2010) in search of ways to knock the edges off of their own thinking, not just in relation to the character's motives, but also in how they viewed others. Uncertainty, coupled with caring, is a powerful motivator. Engagement at this depth is easy to spot in classrooms: students will be compelled to talk about what they are read-

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ing—as one student said to me, “to rage” about it—and they will work at convincing others to read what they are reading as a way to create conversation partners.

*Penny, you also talk a lot about the “joy” of reading—the title of your popular book is Book Love, emphasis on the “love.” You also have the word “passion” in your title. These are powerful emotions that you suggest adolescent readers feel when they are engaged readers. Gay, you also talk about the “socio-emotional” outcomes of reading engagement, including empathy and concern for others. Tell us more about the role you think emotions play in engaged reading and in positive reader identities.*

**Penny:** I often say love is the highest standard. When we love something, we are relentless in pursuing it. I want students to love the act of reading, and I believe we see it when they burst into our rooms ready to share what they found in a book. I see it when my students arrive in class well before the bell to be back in the pages, making use of every minute. When a hockey player tells me he has never gone home to read after an important match, but he had to finish his book club book: the ideas and the challenge of *Just Mercy* (2018) by Bryan Stevenson compelled him to keep reading. We know the difference between engaged and compliant reading when we watch and listen to students. We can see empathy in how students treat each other, how conversations in book clubs move as students wrestle with difficult ideas, and how seriously students attend to the experiences of characters they meet in books they choose. When we confer with students, we hear how they understand, but also how they feel about what they read.

**Gay:** I want to pick up on Penny’s fantastic description of the student who was pulled in by *Just Mercy*. Peter Johnston and I saw the same phenomenon over and over: adolescent readers drawn to books that cause discomfort. Oftentimes, the phrase *pleasure reading* is associated with students choosing their own books or reading on their own time. We had a hard time labeling much of the reading students in our research did as *pleasurable*. The situations students encounter in their preferred

books are often quite unsettling, or “disturbing,” as students told us. As it turns out, these engagements are productive spaces for substantial socio-emotional work. We shortchange student-preferred reading when we assume their experiences are light, or we assume that if they love it, it must not be complex.

When students are engaged in reading narrative, they enter the social worlds of the books, take up the perspectives of the characters, and experience their emotional and relational lives. Students told us repeatedly that such experiences caused them to be slower to judge and quicker to forgive. But what is more, they reported also recognizing antisocial behaviors in themselves (e.g., bullying; lashing out), and they explained how these realizations caused them to change. It is important that these transformations occurred when students experienced a sense of autonomy, a sense of competence, and a sense of relatedness in their reading. It is doubtful you would see the same outcomes in an assigned reading of any one text, from the canon or even from the latest award-winning or best-selling young adult book list.

In our research, we asked questions such as, “Have you changed as a person this year?” and “Have you read anything lately that made you think about things differently?” These would be great conversation starters with the whole class for lots of reasons. Teachers can get a sense of students’ engagements, for sure, but students’ thinking would also be made available to each other. One thing we learned is that once students realize that reading and talking with each other can lead to these kinds of transformations, they go about this intentionally.

*Gay, you challenge literacy researchers to focus on student agency and engagement in future research, encouraging us to think about reading as a “collective and interdependent” process (as opposed to something we do alone and solely “in-the-head”). You also say we have to do this research in classrooms, “side-by-side” with teachers and their students. Penny, you’ve been doing practitioner research in classroom(s) for a long time, paying close attention to your students as readers. (You say in your book on writing instruction to “write beside them”). What can you both say about why it’s*

*important to focus on student perspectives in reading engagement research, and why it's important to work "side-by-side" with young people to gain insights into their reading lives? What do you think adolescents want to teach us about reading and reading instruction?*

**Penny:** One of the most obvious missteps we make when we leave the student's perspective out of data-gathering is a shallow understanding of what the student knows. We give meaningless tests (like multiple-choice comprehension "checks") to standardize responses for ease in grading, but the personal connection between reader and text is entirely absent. We don't know what we don't know. Because Alan brings his love of sports to his reading of *Moneyball* (2008) by Michael Lewis, he uses his background knowledge to understand a text that is considered to be far beyond his reading level. Alan has always been told he's a poor reader, but he is as willing to be engaged as anyone when given a text he finds valuable and other students to discuss his thinking with. If we honor his need to read slowly, we will watch him set goals that push him far beyond what we once believed he could do.

We waste a lot of time in secondary classrooms trying to motivate students to read what we believe they should be reading, squeezing out time for them to develop an allegiance to authors and genres that will keep them seeking meaning in reading for years to come. We waste even more time testing students on their understanding when odds are they haven't read the book (they often use summaries found on the Internet, half-listen in class, or simply pretend to read) or asking them to write essays on books they haven't read. When a teacher makes time to connect students with books and then confers with them to listen and respond to their thinking, the teaching of reading is seen differently. Our work is to differentiate our teaching to respond to the individual challenges in our classrooms. When we ignore them, students read less and learn less.

**Gay:** Studying student perspectives on reading for the past 25 or so years has changed my thinking on reading, teaching, and research. As a teacher of

middle school readers, I thought I had two main jobs: to find books for individual students that matched their "level" and interest and to help them become engaged in silent reading. Then I would do it all over again, one student at a time. Students in engaged classroom communities taught me that first, peers bring a level of influence that a teacher alone cannot. The

processes leading to engaged reading are heavily social. In engaged reading classrooms, it is the students who do the heavy lifting of persuading others to read and helping each other decide what to read. I have also learned from working in classrooms, side-by-side with students and their teachers, that adolescents often leverage their reading to develop and expand relationships. Countless students have reported making friends over book conversations, using conversations about books to break the ice with acquaintances and to ease interactions with parents.

I also learned that going for silent reading alone was terribly limited. Deep meaning making is social—students' thinking is expanded as they talk to each other through and about books. I have come to think of engaged reading not as the product of a reader-text relationship, per se, but instead a complex network of reader-text-other. Engaged reading no longer means, for me, just an individual student's experience with a text; rather, it encompasses also the conversations that happen before, during, and long after reading, as well as the thinking that happens outside the presence of the book, over time and space. But as students have reminded me, this talking and thinking is not only about the book; it is inseparably about their own lives.

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For a long time, I studied what motivates adolescents to read. I was interested in that because of the link between time spent reading and reading achievement. That was all well and good until students helped me see that they do not spend time reading in order to work on their reading or get better at it. They read to work on their lives. Re-shifting my focus, I was able to see what students perceive as benefits of engagement—a sense of agency around their reading, a greater sense of social and moral agency, the development of relationships, emotional and academic self-regulation, more positive outlooks on their futures, and even happiness. The students I studied indeed got higher test scores due to engaged reading, but that outcome seems to pale in comparison with these other dimensions of human development. Now knowing these things that were previously in my own blind spot, I hope to nudge teacher friends to deliberately arrange for students to have these kinds of experiences with these goals in mind. Believe me, I am still learning.

***Penny, you say in 180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents (co-authored with Kelly Gallagher) that choice drives engagement, and you try to give students choice in what they read 75% of the time. You're also a big proponent of independent reading, as it gives adolescent readers more control over their reading lives and practices, and independent reading doesn't mean students aren't thinking critically or practicing strategic reading. Gay, you've noted in recent research that adolescents choose "emotionally disturbing" books to read when given opportunities to choose. Talk more about any insights you have gained about adolescents' reading choices through your work, and the role(s) choice/autonomy continue to have in reading engagement.***

**Penny:** I love the idea that readers perform “imagined rehearsals” (Burke, 1966) as they read. We are looking for ways to experience the world from the safety of home. I read of the deep sadness in a character contemplating suicide to better understand where that sadness begins and how it grows. I believe I am a better friend because I am willing to make that journey. I live inside the mind of a

young man determined to avenge his brother's death in *A Long Way Down* (2017) by Jason Reynolds and feel how complex his decision is. I empathize more easily with young people who are trapped in a cycle of violence. My students experience similar journeys of understanding, but each of those journeys begins with where they are.

This fall I had three students who had lost a parent before entering their first semester of college. Each struggled to understand that loss: one read ghost stories to imagine the afterlife, one read memoirs of others who had survived the loss of a parent and emerged whole, and the other read romance novels wondering how her future might help protect her from her past. The alchemy of individual experience is complex, and I don't try to prescribe the reading that might meet a student's needs, but I provide many, many books that speak to issues that are important to all of us. When we read to understand and to answer questions that haunt us, the hunt for meaning wraps us tightly around the strategies that strong readers practice without prompting. I reread a passage because it says exactly what I'm thinking. I might copy it in my notebook. I have students collect passages that matter to them from books they've chosen, and they amaze and delight me with their insight. Because we hold the author's words in our notebooks, we return to them, hear those words again, and remember why they mattered. That's engagement.

**Gay:** Adults worry so much about what adolescents will choose to read. That is probably because we see “disturbing” texts through our own eyes and life experiences rather than theirs. We worry that exposure to certain situations will be harmful to students. Like Penny, though, I have found that adolescent readers are drawn more to the moral and emotional complexities of the stories than to any of the necessary graphic details used to create the social world of the book. More often than not, students have shared with me that reading young adult literature, in particular, makes them more aware of potential dangers in the world—and thus less likely to participate in risky behaviors—and even more respectful and appreciative of their own parents. Like Penny said, it gives the students the

opportunity to imagine themselves into experiences and see the possible consequences without putting themselves in actual peril. One boy even told me that his parents had warned him about the risks of certain behaviors, but he did not actually believe what they said until he saw it happening to characters in books. It also helps when students can encounter “disturbing” narratives in the company of the teacher and other students, who can offer different perspectives on the topic.

What I have also learned from adolescent readers’ choices is that it is difficult to predict which books will resonate with individuals, and what part of a book will mean something. Coe Booth’s *Tyrell* (2006) was the favorite book of an eighth grader who, like the main character, had a father who spent time in jail. He managed to bring that book into nearly every other book conversation that happened in his English class that year! What he zoomed in on, though, was Tyrell’s shaky relationship with his mother, and he used that as a way to reflect on and improve his relationship with his own mother. Lots of times we try to find books based on what students “like” (e.g., basketball, hunting), but what they really find meaningful in texts—emotional and relational dilemmas—is something they cannot quite articulate until they encounter it. That is why it is important for students to get to hear other students in conversation about the deep stuff in narratives—so they will have a better idea of what books will be engaging for them.

*Gay, you have said that kids become different people—perhaps better people—when they are engaged readers, and that reading = agency to become the person you want to be. Penny, you say in Book Love that “kids will find time to read if given books that name what’s in their hearts.” Share, if you will, a time—either as an adolescent yourself or a moment from your adult life—when a book helped you find meaning in your own life. What was the book? What did it name in your heart at the time? And also, how has what you’ve learned from adolescent readers shaped your own reading practices?*

**Penny:** As a sixth grader, I found *Harriet the Spy* by Louise Fitzhugh. I believe I picked up my notebook

writing habit from Harriet. She was a great observer of people. Whenever I am struggling to write, I describe what is around me: on a plane, in a coffee shop, in my office looking out at the woods around my house. The act of putting words on paper gets my brain working. But more important, this act of observation paved the way for my understanding of kid-watching—the importance of paying attention to the students before me and listening to them to understand what I need to teach next.

My reading practices have certainly been shaped by adolescent readers. I have expanded what I read in order to share in their enthusiasm for popular books like *The Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2009). I also have learned to appreciate audiobooks, especially of my favorite novels. Recently I have been happily listening to Rosamond Pike’s reading of the works of Jane Austen, and each one is delightful. Another strategy that I used initially with students that I’ve been able to incorporate into my own reading is note taking. I often help students track their thinking in their notebooks when they are juggling multiple characters and plot lines. I find that the same strategy helps me stay with a complex book when I read it in pieces. I can get back to experiencing the world of each character if I have notes to remind me of my thinking. Last, I ask my students to collect beautiful passages and sentences from books they love. I have done this for years because I love rereading beautiful writing. It inspires me to write better and to listen to the musicality of sentences. The beauty and careful attention in their two-page notebook spreads inspire and encourage me to create my own.

**Gay:** Other than professional literature, I read young adult fiction more than anything else. It is so good! Certain characters have taken up permanent residence inside my head, and I am often reminded of the decisions they made. There is a character in *Hate List* (Brown, 2009) who is so unbelievably forgiving of a main character who was linked to a school shooting, and you are able to see the good that comes from that. I love Coe Booth’s books (as do many students I know), and in *Kendra* (2008), the title character becomes involved with a boy who, on the surface, seems like bad news. What happens as the story unfolds, though, is we get to

know much more about him, and it becomes difficult to maintain that judgment. I carry that experience around with me. *The Way I Used to Be* (Smith, 2016) really rocked me and without a doubt made me think more deeply and more compassionately about people dealing with the long-lasting repercussions of trauma. Books like these have definitely helped to shape who I am still trying to become.

How have engaged adolescent readers helped to shape my reading practices? Well, they have certainly made me read more! As with Penny, they have inspired me to branch out. I have never been drawn to books that dabble in the supernatural, but after students hounded me to read things by Neal Shusterman, I was sold. *Bruiser* (2010) is one of my all-time favorites. It is heartbreaking and helped me realize that I do like to read books in this genre because of the realistic and complex human emotions that drive the story.

***Anything else you'd like to say or share? Please do!***

**Penny:** We have students pretending to read from early middle school through AP English, and they are being rewarded for talking and writing about books, even though they are not reading them. Teachers and parents know this. We have made excuses for it (kids are too busy, overscheduled, always on devices, etc.) instead of acting on it. As Kylene Beers said, "If we teach a child to read, but fail to develop a desire to read, we will have created a skilled nonreader, a literate illiterate. And no high test score will ever undo that damage." However, we are experiencing a revolution in thinking about reading, particularly in high school. Many educators are taking disengagement seriously, shifting their teaching to balance independent reading, book clubs, and a few core texts each year. The movement to create reading lives that last is growing. It is exciting to live in this time, to imagine all of the joy possible for both students and teachers as they share a true engagement with reading. Engagement is everything.

**Gay:** In countless conversations I have had over the years with Peter Johnston, we have wondered what it would be like if all students had 12 straight years of English language arts class like what our

eighth-grade research participants experienced.

We are convinced that students would leave senior year not only much more proficient and versatile readers, but perhaps more important, as human beings who would change the world in positive ways presently unimagined. And what about teaching? I know the teachers in our studies were as invigorated as the students. Imagine if it became normal to assume that an English teacher's main job is to help students—through supporting engagement with books and with each other—become happy, agentive, socially secure, open-minded young adults who have come to view reading as a way to grow themselves. I am hopeful moving forward. Thanks for the opportunity to think more about all of this!

**Penny Kittle** teaches freshman writers at Plymouth State University in New Hampshire. She was a teacher and literacy coach in public schools for 34 years. She is the co-author of *180 Days with Kelly Gallagher*, and is the author of *Book Love*, and *Write Beside Them*, which won the James Britton award. She also co-authored two books with her mentor, Don Graves, and co-edited (with Tom Newkirk) a collection of Graves' work, *Children Want to Write*. She is the president of the Book Love Foundation and was given the Exemplary Leader Award from NCTE's Conference on English Leadership. She regularly travels to work beside teachers to empower young readers and writers.

**Gay Ivey**, PhD, is the William E. Moran Distinguished Professor in Literacy at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. She is a former middle school reading teacher, and as a researcher, her work has focused on what is possible for children and young adults when we arrange for them to be engaged in meaningful encounters with books and in conversations with each other about their reading. Dr. Ivey is a past president of the Literacy Research Association and an elected member of the Reading Hall of Fame.

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