
Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

Kylene Beers

Understanding Aliteracy

Consider what some reading researchers have to say about reading and reading instruction:

Learning to read is a rather fruitless activity if it is not utilized beyond school assignments. (Culliton, 1974, p. 183)

We are creating school time readers rather than life time readers. (Trelease, 1989, p. 12)

I believe a lot of children leave school without ever suspecting that reading can be a pleasant activity. (Smith, cited in Sabine & Sabine, 1983, p.134)

The consequences of not reading although you are able to are only marginally less frightening than those arising from illiteracy itself. (Crompton, 1980, p. 80)

If we teach a child to read, yet develop not the taste for reading, all of our teaching is for naught.

We shall have produced a nation of 'illiterate literates'—those who know how to read but do not read. (Huck, 1973, p.305)

Young people who cannot read at all are far outnumbered by young people who can read (poorly or well) but won't. The latter, who choose not to read, for whatever reason, have little advantage over those who are illiterate. (Holbrook, 1983, p. 38)

Plainly, reading experts recognize that some students leave school with the ability to read, but without the desire. However, like many things in education, we don't need researchers to tell us what we see everyday. Secondary school teachers are well aware that every year it is harder and harder to connect students to texts. We can all easily conjure up the image of avid readers. How do they sit in class? Slumped? Heads down? Jacket hoods pulled over their heads? Hardly! These students sit up, lean forward, smile, volunteer to answer questions, nod their heads. And they read! We can also visualize the reluctant reader. You know these students. They pull up their jacket hoods, slump into their chairs, roll their eyes, and look bored. These students read only under great duress and often fake it at that. Indeed, middle school teachers know it is more the norm to teach students who don't enjoy reading than those who do.

Additionally, we don't need statistics to show us that the less students read, the poorer the readers they become. The poorer the readers they become, the harder reading is for them, which validates their negative

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

attitudes toward reading. We also know that many of these students who dislike reading become parents who dislike reading. Consequently, they spend little time reading to, with, or in front of their own children. This in turn creates a new generation of students who often, taking their cues from home, see little use for reading beyond completing their school work. This downward spiral is difficult to break especially as state-mandated minimum competency tests force many teachers to think they should focus more on reading skills than on reading pleasure. Maracek (1978), reminds us that “when skills take over . . . and word recognition becomes an end in itself, there is a greater dislike for the whole reading process. Instead of opening up the world of literature as a source of pleasure, reflection, and insight, we close the door to enjoyment and exploration—the primary goals of reading” (p. 32). Skills alone do not produce readers.

If we want to do more than teach reading skills, if we also want to instill in students a desire to read, then we must do as Teale (1983) suggests and pay special attention to the extent to which the taste for reading is being fostered” (p. 14). Without this special attention, aversion to reading may develop, for as Frank Smith (1988) explains:

Reading can become a desired activity or an undesirable one. People can become inveterate readers. They can also become inveterate non-readers, even when they are capable of reading. One of the great tragedies of contemporary education is not so much that many students leave school unable to read and to write, but that others graduate with an antipathy to reading . . . despite the abilities they might have. (p. 177)

Agreeing that this antipathy to reading is a great tragedy leads me to wonder why: Why would a child who can read, choose not to read? Why do some youngsters enter school excited about reading (Holdaway, 1979), but then leave school caring little for it? Why in a time of more children’s and young adult books being published, why in a time of more being known about the nature of reading, why in a time of increased spending on reading programs are some students turning away from reading? Why won’t Johnny (and Jenny) read?

Whether called “literate non-readers” (Nell, 1988), “illiterate literates” (Huck, 1973), “nonreaders” (Smith, 1988), “reluctant readers” (Chambers, 1969), or “aliterates” (Beers, 1996 a&b; Boorstin, 1984; Decker, 1986; Mikulecky, 1978; Ohanian, 1989), this group of people who can read but do not is truly one of the “great tragedies of contemporary education” (Smith, 1988, p. 177). They are found throughout all age groups of our society (Winkle, 1988) and cross all socioeconomic and educational boundaries (Decker, 1985). External reasons—too much television, too little parental modeling, too much emphasis on a skills approach to reading—offer some insights as to why students dislike reading. These insights are crucial because these nonreading students have the potential to create, as William Baroody (1984), President of the American Enterprise Institute explains, a two-tiered society:

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

Aliteracy reflects a change in cultural values and a loss of skills, both of which threaten the processes of a free and democratic society. Literacy . . . knits people together, giving them a common culture . . . and provides people with the intellectual tools used to question, challenge, understand, disagree, and arrive at consensus. In short, it allows people to participate in an exchange of ideas. A democratic nation is weakened when fewer and fewer citizens can participate in such an exchange. Aliteracy leads inexorably to a two-tiered society: the knowledgeable elite and the masses. It makes a common culture illusory or impossible; it erodes the basis for effective decision making and participation in the democratic process (p. ix).

Obviously, this tragedy of choosing *not* to read reaches far beyond affecting state-mandated minimum competency test scores. The first step in curbing aliteracy is finding reluctant readers who are willing to talk about their dislike of reading with responses that move beyond the typical “it’s boring” explanation. Luckily for teachers, those students do exist. What follows are some excerpts of many hours of conversations with several aliterate students (Beers, 1991). While their names are pseudonyms, their comments are real, straight from their hearts, filled with honesty that can certainly guide us toward an understanding of why some choose not to read.

What the students said

Steve

I don't like it when people think I'm not real smart. I'm real smart. I used to be in the gifted class. Did you know that? I got in in second grade, in November, and I was in until two years ago. I was in sixth grade then. See, I had to do sixth grade twice. That wasn't a very good year—the first year for sixth grade. Last year was better. I think I'm probably still gifted, but I just got sorta lazy. I mean taking so much time. And like for everything, they wanted all this effort. Lots of time I just didn't have the energy. I'd rather do my Nintendo . . . I don't do much reading now. Well, you know how it is. I just got real busy. I read a lot in fifth grade. And I still like to read. I just can't find any good books anymore. I just don't do it much . . . I don't know. I'm just not into it right now. My friends are real important to me, and I'd rather hang out with them than read a book. You know, you can read a book any time but you can't always be with your friends, and if you aren't there when they say, “Let's go to the mall” then you don't go . . . I like to read, it's real good for you and all, but I just need to be with my friends now, okay?

Geoffrey

I don't read much now . . . I mean like you have to know how to read to get a job and stuff. And if it's a good book, like I really like those like Skinnybones, then it can be real relaxing. You sorta forget everything else, and it's like I just become that person and do what he's doing . . . I just don't read much now. I like to read, but I just don't have time for it. I've really decided that gymnastics is

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

something I want to concentrate on right now. [Reading] will just have to wait. Once you are a reader, that's just what you are. I just don't have time to be doing it right now.

Burt

I'm not one of "the ones," you know, the ones who get elected to everything, the ones who are the teacher's favorite, the ones who wear the right clothes, the ones who go to the parties. I don't like to read too much. It doesn't hold my interest very well. I just read slow. Most of the books I know are boring . . . I'm not really someone who enjoys reading—nothing really happens when I read, so I guess I don't see much use for it. Most of the stories are pretty dumb . . . Some people are just always having to do something. Like my mother never only watches TV—she watches TV and reads a book or does this sewing stuff. I don't have to always be busy. Sometimes I just sit, and I just don't think about doing something. If I wanted to do something, I guess it would be like watching a movie. I just don't have the same level of going out and doing things that other people have.

I don't like to read. [My teacher] keeps telling us about how some books are about kids our ages doing the same kinda things we're doin'. Why's that good? Don't tell me you can help me find books about kids like me. Why would I want to read about someone like me? I'm boring. I don't have many friends. I don't like me in real life—why would I like me in a book? It's just that sometimes I don't know what's going to happen to me. I try really hard. I don't know—maybe someday I might like to read. Maybe if I do it enough, I'll learn to like it. But I don't know. I think maybe I first gotta learn to like me . . .

I just don't like to read. It's boring and nothing happens. Then I just lose interest, and then when I try to start it again [a book], then I don't remember what is happening, and so I just give it up. I don't get any feelings from reading a book. Reading is just like just figuring out words and meanings and comprehension.

Angie

I wish I liked to read more, but reading just never really interested me. Reading makes me frustrated. I worry all the time "What is the teacher going to ask? What am I supposed to know?" and then all the names of all the people just get all mixed-up and then we have a test, and then what if I don't do very good? Then sometimes I have to read it over again, and then I get mad. Getting frustrated about not understanding and worrying about what the teacher will ask make me not like to read.

I don't read like that [for entertainment] too much. I learned that the best way for me to stay ahead of my comprehension problems is to constantly ask myself "What's the author saying here? What does the teacher want me to know?" So when I read, I am constantly thinking about what I'm

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

supposed to be knowing. But [reading] is okay for people who like to do it. I mean I guess I'm pretty uncommitted about reading. I haven't really made up my mind.

Kii

I wouldn't actually say that I don't like to read. Some things don't really interest me for me to read. So, I like reading, but it has to be something interesting. Like, if it is some sort of scary novel or it is fun or something. I rather prefer novels that have something to do with a mystery or something. I'm not against [reading] or anything like that. I just don't do it enough to be called a reader. I mean, like, I'm not hating reading, [but reading] means you can't be doing something else like going to the mall.

Paul

Reading is boring. It's a do nothing. You open the book. You look at the words. You close the book. Big deal. Reading is hard because you have to concentrate . . . All the time I have to keep saying to myself what is happening, and then I forget to say it, and so the next thing I know, I've turned all these pages and I don't know what happened. Why should I read? I mean what's it going to get me? Is there like a reward out for being the best reader of the year? And they [students who like to read] are still boring.

While those students' comments about reading were valuable, two particular interviews clarified some ideas for me. I want to share them with you:

Katy

"I never liked reading. It's boring. And I don't like it. You just sit there and nothing happens."

"What would you want to happen?" I asked.

"I don't know. What could happen? Nothing. It's just words and you just read them. Nothing happens."

"Do you think nothing happens to everybody that reads?"

"I don't know. Some kids in here are really into reading, and they talk about the people in the books like they are real or something. That's pretty strange, if you ask me . . . They are like strange, always going around with a book and going emotional over it . . . Why would anyone go emotional over a book?"

"Could you ever go emotional over a movie?"

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

"Yeah. I saw Beaches. My friend and me. It was so sad when that mother died."

"Did you cry?"

"We both did. We just sat there and cried and cried."

"So you went emotional over a movie?"

"Very."

"What if that had been a book instead of a movie? Would you still have gone emotional over it?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Why not? The same things would have happened."

"Maybe, but the book doesn't have any pictures. I couldn't see it, so I wouldn't know what was happening."

"So, Katy, did you ever see pictures in your mind from reading?" I continued.

"Elementary school."

"What about elementary school?"

"Well, those books had pictures, and so I could see what was happening."

"So you liked reading then?"

"Yeah."

"When did you stop liking it?"

"Around fourth or fifth grade. The books got really longer and no pictures."

"So what if you had books now with pictures?"

"That would be okay if they weren't baby books."

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

“What about magazines? They have pictures.”

“That’s not reading.”

“What’s not reading?”

“Looking at magazines.”

“Well, maybe not if you are just looking at pictures. Do you ever look at the pictures and read the words?” I asked.

“I do with Sassy.”

“So why wouldn’t you say that is reading?”

“I would, maybe.”

“Yeah?”

“Teachers wouldn’t.”

“Why wouldn’t they, Katy?”

Katy took a long pause, then tried her best to explain why she thought teachers wouldn’t call reading a magazine reading:

“It has to be something for reading. Oh. (Pause.) It is reading for you to learn about comprehension things. You study like prediction and fact and opinion. You can tell that is what it [reading] is because of the. like, questions you always get asked . . . Usually when I read something, it’s just to answer the teacher’s questions about it. I guess I’ve never thought about a book being something that I might think about. you know, emotionally. The teacher’s always told me what to think . . . [Reading] seems pretty boring, pretty useless. I just don’t feel any motivation to do it.”

“So, Katy, what should I tell teachers to do so that they can help students like to read?”

“Tell them to ask the students what they thought. No teacher ever asked me what I thought. And when I start to tell them what I thought, they say, ‘We all have our opinions, but what does the story

Kylene Beers
Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

Figure 3.1 Types of Readers

Avid		Dormant	
Enjoys reading		Enjoys reading	
Makes time to read		Does not make time to read	
Identifies self as reader		Identifies self as reader	
Defines reading as “way of life”		Defines reading as “neat experience”	
Views purpose as entertaining		Views purpose as entertaining	
Has aesthetic transactions primarily		Has aesthetic transactions primarily	
Has positive feelings about other readers		Has positive feelings about other readers	
Uncommitted		Unmotivated	Unskilled
Does not enjoy reading	Does not enjoy reading	Does not enjoy reading	Cannot read
Does not make time to read	Does not make time to read	Does not make time to read	May/may not make time to read
Does not identify self as reader	Does not identify self as reader	Does not identify self as reader	read
Defines reading as “knowing words”	Defines reading as “saying words”	Defines reading as “saying words”	Does not identify self as reader
Views purpose as functional	Views purpose as functional	Views purpose as functional	Defines reading as “figuring out words”
Has efferent transactions primarily	Has efferent transactions primarily	Has efferent transactions primarily	Views purpose as functional
Has positive feelings about other readers	Has negative feelings about other readers	Has negative feelings about other readers	Has efferent transactions primarily
			May/may not have negative feelings about readers

tell us?’ And you know what that really means? That really means what I think isn’t important. But maybe it is: maybe it was important to me.”

Martelia

“How do you feel about reading?” I asked.

“Hate it.”

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

“Do you ever read anything?”

“Well, sometimes I read the labels on cans at a grocery store if I’m shoppin’ with my mom.”

“How about magazines?”

“Sometimes I read the captions under the pictures. That’s all.”

“Do you read your school assignments?” ‘

“No. Sometimes. Don’t have to read in math. Science usually has a film. In here [language arts], I can usually just listen to what everybody else says and then just agree with someone.”

“What do you do instead of read?”

“TV.”

“How many hours of TV would you say that you watch?”

“When I get home, I do my homework, and then I watch TV, and then I talk on the phone, and then I watch some more TV, and then I take my bath, and then I watch some more TV, and then I go to sleep.”

“Why do you like TV?”

“Don’t know. You start watchin’ it and then you can’t stop.”

“Could reading ever be a way to be entertained?”

“No way.”

“Why not?”

“Borin’. All you do is sit.”

“You sit when you watch TV.”

Kylene Beers
Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

“Not really. You could be doin’ somethin’ else. And anyways when you watch TV, it’s like you are there. If they laughin’, you just start laughin, too.”

Funny books—wouldn’t you laugh at those?”

“Not at a book. Notbin’ happens. It’s just words . . . I’m never gonna like it, no way.”

Types of Aliteracy

As these students told me their thoughts about reading, I realized that these students chose not to read for a myriad of reasons. But within that myriad, after listening closely, I saw that there were patterns of responses. Those patterns led to categories of types of aliteracy (see Figure 3.1). To understand those categories, I used avid readers as the anchor from which to move. The students who identified themselves as avid readers during this study tend to do the following:

- 1. Enjoy reading.
- 2. Read often.
- 3. Make time to read.
- 4. Approach most reading events, those at school or at home, with an aesthetic stance, but read with an efferent stance if necessary.
- 5. Define reading as an experience, “a way of life,” an activity that “takes me places I’ve never been before.”
- 6. See the purpose of reading as providing entertainment.
- 7. Like being identified as readers.
- 8. Have positive feelings about people who enjoy reading.
- 9. Plan to read in the future.

Most telling about these avid readers, and perhaps the trait that determines what type of readers all students will become, is the fourth point: they approach most reading events, those at school or at home, with an aesthetic stance, but read with an efferent stance if necessary.

Rosenblatt (1978) explains that readers approach any reading event with a stance that is either more aesthetic or more efferent. Students who read efferently are “focused primarily on what will remain as the residue after the reading” (p. 23), while students who read aesthetically are concerned “with what happens during the actual reading event” (p. 24). Put into the context of middle school classrooms, students who read *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor efferently will read to answer questions about such things as setting, dialect, causes of the war, reasons Philip’s mother wanted Philip to return to America, how Philip changed

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

on the island, conflict in the story, and to explain the author's theme. Rosenblatt explains that when this response occurs then the reader has directed his attention outward . . . toward concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading" (p. 24). However, if the reader's "attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" then "he pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him" and "synthesizes these elements into a meaningful structure" (p. 25). Simply put, with an efferent stance readers read focusing on what happens when they are done, while with an aesthetic stance they live the adventure that unfolds in the book.

The stance readers adopt affects the type of transaction they have. For example, a wonderful poem could evoke an efferent transaction if the readers are concerned with identifying the meter when they are finished reading. Likewise, the same poem could evoke an aesthetic transaction if the readers are allowed to focus on their emerging responses—feelings, emotions, ideas, associations—to the ideas or images in the poem. I found that avid readers automatically approached the texts in their language arts class with an aesthetic stance. Other types of readers, though, did not.

Once I understood avid readers' behaviors, then all other readers' behaviors could be typed. These readers, the aliterates, begin to fall into two distinct groups. One group said they liked to read, but they did not have the time to do it right now. The second group said they didn't read because it wasn't enjoyable. As I studied these differences more carefully, I saw that the first group, even though they were not presently reading, viewed themselves as readers; the second group, however, did not see themselves as readers.

An earlier study (Beers, 1988) had identified a group of students who enjoyed reading but did not read. One student from that study labeled such a reader a *dormant reader*:

Sometimes you get so busy that you don't have time to read. Like those plants we've been talking about in science, the ones that don't grow in the winter, dormant plants. They don't grow because the time isn't right. Well, right now with everything, it isn't the right time for me to read. But when it's summer, and I don't have school and volleyball and all, then I'll have time to read. I'm dormant right now. (p. 18)

Dormant readers identify themselves as readers, enjoy reading, but do not have the time to read. (I think this term not only applies to middle school students, but to all of us who sometimes don't have the time to read. I certainly find myself "going dormant" when grades are due or term projects have come in. As one teacher told me, "I'm basically dormant between September and May—but look out summer, I bloom with books!") Geoffrey and Steve fit this category. Both boys like to read, both call themselves readers, yet both realize it is not part of their routines at this time. Dormant Readers, such as these students, are inclined to

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

do the following (the italicized items highlight this group's variance from the previously discussed group):

- 1. Enjoy reading.
- 2. Not read often at this time.
- 3. Not make time to read.
- 4. Approach most reading events, those at school or at home, with an aesthetic stance, but read with an efferent stance if necessary.
- 5. Define reading as "neat experiences" that sometimes "take up a lot of time."
- 6. See the purpose of reading as providing entertainment.
- 7. Like being identified as readers.
- 8. Have positive feelings about people who enjoy reading.
- 9. Plan to read in the future.

Notice, all their reading behaviors look the same as avid readers' behaviors except for reading often and making the time to read. They still like it, approach texts aesthetically (where a reader connects emotionally with the text) rather than efferently (where a reader connects cognitively, to carry away information, with a text), interpret reading as an experience for entertainment, call themselves readers and like people who do read. What is critical to remember with these students is that just like dormant plants will become dead plants if the growing conditions fail to materialize, dormant readers will become nonreaders if they go too long without reading. This speaks strongly to the need to create time for students to read. Furthermore, dormant readers explain that they don't like being confused with readers who have negative attitudes toward reading. They want the teacher to talk to them about books, like she does with avid readers. To keep from confusing dormant readers with other types of reluctant readers, we must remember that lack of a behavior (reading) does not always indicate a negative attitude. Spending time talking with individual students about their attitudes toward reading and administering reading attitude surveys certainly helps avoid this mistake.

While dormant readers have positive attitudes toward reading, students such as Angie, Burt, and Kii did not see themselves as readers. Burt continually stated, "I don't like to read," while Angie said, "Reading just never really interested me," and Kii admitted he couldn't be called a reader because "I just don't do it enough to be called that." However, unlike Katy, Martella, and Paul, these students would not speak negatively of those who did like to read. Furthermore, they each suggested they might find reading enjoyable in the future. Concerning reading, they were, as Angie offered, uncommitted. *Uncommitted readers* from this study are likely to do the following:

- 1. Not enjoy reading.
- 2. Not read at this time.
- 3. Not make time to read.

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

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- 4. Approach most reading events, especially those at school and perhaps ones at home, with an efferent stance, but have read and can read with an aesthetic stance.
 - 5. Define reading as a skill, as “knowing words and what they mean.”
 - 6. See the purpose of reading as functional; however, admit that under certain conditions it might be enjoyable (e.g. if there were pictures accompanying the text).
 - 7. Not identify themselves as readers.
 - 8. Have nothing negative to say about students who do enjoy reading.
 - 9. Not know if they will read in the future.

These uncommitted readers definitely have negative attitudes about readings and their view of it shifts from enjoying the process to focusing on what is due when they finish the text. For them reading is a functional skill. However, because there has been or occasionally is some sort of aesthetic transaction with texts, they haven't totally disconnected from reading. Most importantly, they haven't adopted a peer group that encourages negative thoughts and comments about students who do enjoy reading.

That is in fact what the aliterates with the most negative attitudes toward reading have done. These extremely *unmotivated* readers not only have negative thoughts about readers, but they surround themselves with peers who harbor the same feelings. These unmotivated readers call readers “strange” and “nerds” and “book boys.” These students are certain they would not read in the future. They talk about never “going emotional” over a book and reading being “just words” or “figuring out words and meanings and comprehension.” Reading is “boring” because they don't see the action of the words in their mind's eye. Few images are formed when they read, so reading remains the skill of word-calling. Their purpose for reading is to be able to answer the teacher's questions, an efferent purpose. They don't read because they “just don't feel any motivation to do it.” *Unmotivated readers* in this study are prone to do the following:

- 1. Not enjoy reading.
- 2. Not read at this time
- 3. Not make time to read.
- 4. Approach most reading events, especially those at school and perhaps those at home, with an efferent stance, but have read and can read with an aesthetic stance.
- 5. Define reading as a skill, as “saying words, looking at sentences, answering questions for the teacher.”
- 6. See the purpose of reading as strictly functional.
- 7. Not identify themselves as readers and not wish to be identified as readers.
- 8. Speak negatively about students who do enjoy reading.
- 9. Not plan to read in the future.

These unmotivated readers have none of the same traits as avid readers. Their view of reading, their inability to connect emotionally with the text, their negative attitude toward reading in the future, and their unwillingness to associate with those who do like to read make this an especially difficult group to reach.

To complete the contrast of avid readers to other readers, I must include those who don't read because they cannot read. While this study did not focus on disabled readers, students talked about them. They suggested that some students have reading problems because "they can't tell the words" or "they don't know what things mean." Several students pointed out that once students learn to read, they may choose to become readers. Angie, though, felt that if reading problems persist too long, reading might never become pleasurable:

I was having a lot of trouble with reading . . . Probably if that had kept on going on and on, well I maybe wouldn't ever like to read because it would have always been so hard.

Lack of reading skill, in her mind, could lead to lack of desire to read. After interviewing students in this study, I talked with seventh graders who read two or more years below grade level. I asked them how they felt about reading, how they viewed themselves as readers, and how they felt about others who enjoyed reading. I saw that these unskilled readers tend to do the following:

- 1. Not be able to read.
- 2. Not read often, unless it is to practice skills.
- 3. Not make time for reading, unless they are highly motivated to learn to read.
- 4. Approach most reading events with an efferent stance, especially those at school and perhaps those at home, but have read and can read with an aesthetic stance.
- 5. Define reading as a skill, as "figuring out words, sounding them out and all."
- 6. See the purpose of reading as functional.
- 7. Not identify themselves as readers as they recognize they lack the ability to read.
- 8. Have either positive or negative feelings about those who can read.
- 9. May or may not choose to read in the future. (Continued lack of success with reading may lead them to choose never to read.)

Analyzing Their Differences

Basically, the distinguishing attributes among these types centered on three areas: time spent reading voluntarily, identification of self as a reader, and feelings about others who enjoy reading.

Avid readers valued the time to read so much that they would make time to read. Anita reported "staying up late if I have to so I can read," and Maria said, "I'll find the time somewhere." As busy as these students were, reading was so integral to their lives that they made time for it. Dormant readers, uncommitted

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

readers, and unmotivated readers did not make the time to read. The commitment to read voluntarily easily divides readers from nonreaders.

Additionally, another distinguishing attribute is their identification of self as a reader. Avid readers called themselves readers and took pride in their love of reading. Adam put it this way:

I'm a reader, an avid reader, like some people are avid sports fans. It's what I do. I'll always do it. I don't care if anybody else thinks it's nerdy or anything.

They valued reading and, therefore, valued the identity of being readers. Similarly, dormant readers identified themselves as readers and were pleased when they were labeled as such. Uncommitted and unmotivated readers, however, did not reference themselves as readers. This label was of no value to them. They did not encourage the term, and unmotivated readers in particular were offended when I asked them if they were readers.

A final differentiating characteristic was students' reactions to students who liked to read. Avid readers and dormant readers had positive reactions to other avid and dormant readers. They thought reading was "neat" and didn't see anything wrong with students who liked to read. Interestingly, uncommitted readers also had favorable comments about students who enjoyed reading. They were quick to point out that they did not enjoy it, but that did not imply that others should not like it. Furthermore, they didn't mind working on projects with them and often would act interested in a book if a friend who was a reader recommended it. This willingness to be associated with students who do like to read is very helpful in convincing uncommitted readers to read. Unmotivated readers, however, did not respect those who enjoyed reading. They called them "strange ones" and "really weird." They did not value the act nor did they value the students who partook in the act. They did not want to sit near these students, work with them, or listen to them. Their distance—both in physical proximity and in personal interests makes connecting these students to books even more difficult. These unmotivated readers surround themselves with other unmotivated readers and together they create an anti-reading community that continually supports each student's decision to disconnect from the reading.

Why They Disconnect

As I have listened to students, I continue to see that avid and dormant readers remember many reading/storytime experiences as youngsters. These students continually talked about joining book clubs, attending reading groups, visiting libraries, and participating in play groups that included a story hour. They had concrete items such as library cards, reading certificates, their own books, and homemade reading logs to help make the intangible joy of reading real for them. They also talked about being read to almost every day "for as long as I can remember" and "every day that I was little" and "all the time—everywhere we went."

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

These students' parents confirmed their children's recollections explaining that they read to their children all throughout their childhood years, from birth through age 7 or 8. They read at least four times a week and often every day of the week. And they read for long periods of time, so that by age 4 or 5, they might read to a child for 30 minutes at one sitting and up to an hour over the entirety of the day.

Second, these parents explained that they not only read often, but read aloud to their children at different times during the day and kept books throughout the house and in the cars. When these parents placed their children in day care, they made sure that reading to children often and throughout the day was a number one priority for the school. If they saw that the day care center or preschool had a bigger video library than book library, they left.

Uncommitted and unmotivated readers do not share these memories. These students' parents, when pushed to recollect their own child's early childhood year by year and not just see it as a single time between birth and age 6 or 7, realized that they didn't read aloud to their child until around age 2 and stopped reading aloud by age 4. When urged to think of how often they read each week, these parents recollected two to four times a week, while others remembered that they only read on the weekends, or maybe on one weekend night. When they had to answer how long they read at each storytime session, the answer ranged from "as long as it took to read one picture book" to "about 15 minutes" or "I really can't remember, but probably not very long."

Next, when asked to name the time of day that they read to their children, most said they read at bedtime. Interestingly, some older children who report not liking to read, do remember being read to at night. That, they claim, is what convinced them that reading is boring: "it was an activity meant to keep me quiet and make me go to sleep."

These same parents also recollected that they themselves didn't do much aesthetic reading in front of their children. Except for some newspaper reading, most of these parents explained that they did not read in front of the child. They either waited for their children to go to bed or did not like to read themselves. Whichever the situation, their children quickly figured out that reading was something that the parents did for their children, but did not do for to themselves.

The contrast between parents of children who have positive attitudes and those with negative attitudes is obvious. Children with positive attitudes toward reading had parents who spent a lot of time firmly planting the notion that reading is an enjoyable, worthwhile activity. Most of these parents were creating for their children, without even realizing it, the feeling that reading is an enjoyable, and worthwhile activity. Though this took a lot of time on their part, it was time well spent.

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

I believe these early repeated ongoing storytime experiences do two things for children. First, this continual book sharing with children places them in the midst of what Margaret Early (1963) calls unconscious delight. This crucial first stage in the stages of literary appreciation must occur if children are to grow in their appreciation of literature. Second, while in the midst of this unconscious delight stage, these children develop an aesthetic stance toward reading.

Children who came to first grade with an aesthetic stance toward books firmly established remembered being read to long before school began; they remembered specific books, ones they “loved” and “liked the best of all,” ones that “really made me cry” or “made me laugh and laugh.” They entered school already ensconced into the unconscious enjoyment of literature knowing how to approach a text with an aesthetic stance. They encountered reading situations at school and expected that the purpose was to be enjoyable, meaningful, and relevant. They expected that school time reading would be to elicit their personal responses, and so they put themselves into the story as they read it. Their primary stance toward a text was an aesthetic stance. Then, as they encountered a need to read efferently (answering questions at the end of the chapter, comparing and contrasting two characters, identifying the setting, studying for a test, etc.), they learned a second stance that did not subsume the first.

Uncommitted and unmotivated readers entered school remembering few aesthetic transactions with texts. The uncommitted readers recalled more experiences with books prior to formal schooling that might have encouraged the unconscious enjoyment of literature, but these experiences were not repeated often enough to take firm hold. Therefore, when these students entered school they learned the main reading purpose of school time reading, an efferent purpose, as their primary stance. They learned that reading was to get information, answer questions, finish tests, make Venn diagrams, fill in the blanks, and write book reports. This is not to imply that they never encountered texts that could have evoked an aesthetic response, but lacking a predisposed stance toward reading, they waited for the teacher to set the purpose and generally, teachers have students read efferently. Even today, with the tremendous push toward using children’s literature in elementary schools to teach reading, textbooks and tests continue to ask students to answer questions that value efferent response over aesthetic. Purves (1990) points out that many reading educators, textbook authors, test designers, even those who use the term transaction when discussing reading have – “despite their seeming adherence to a view of texts and reading that has been advanced by Louise Rosenblatt, generally missed the point—they would put literature into the primary school curriculum but still focus on an efferent view of comprehension. It is the bottle that has changed, not the wine” (p. 85).

Consequently these students who come to school with no stance toward reading in place learn the predominate school reading stance, efferent, as their primary stance. They occasionally find a text that speaks to their personal response and have the opportunity for an aesthetic response. However, their time in

Kylene Beers
Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

the unconscious delight of reading is shortened, if experienced at all. As Early (1960) explains, this stage “cannot be by-passed” if literary appreciation is to grow.

Avid and dormant readers appear to have the ability to easily shift from an aesthetic stance to an efferent stance and back again. This is seen as they read selections from their reading basals, literature anthologies or science and social studies textbooks. As they move through school, they not only simply enjoy the story or the information, but see themselves in the text, wonder how their reactions would differ from the characters’, and ponder the implications of the theme. Then, they can shift and answer the questions that often require an efferent response. However, being told to read a book, or story, or poem and then answer the questions at the end of the selection, redesign the book jacket, write a new ending to the story, find 10 words to look up, find the author’s use of metaphor, or any of 1,000 other things we ask students to do when they finish reading just reconfirms the negative attitudes of uncommitted and unmotivated readers.

Lacking the ability to shift easily from an aesthetic to efferent stance, they read the literature efferently, a focus that provides them with little opportunity for personal connection and that reaffirms their belief that reading is “boring.” Efferent reading distances the readers from the emotional impact of the words which, over time, distances readers from reading. Smith (1988) explains the result of this distancing: “The emotional response to reading . . . is the primary reason most readers read, and probably the primary reason most nonreaders do not read” (p. 177).

Motivating Aliterate Students to Read

While the remainder of this book is filled with activities that constantly validate for middle schoolers our belief that their responses are important, what follows is a summary of what aliterate students say about what types of reading activities are motivating to them.

Motivating Activities

Motivation, the processes used in arousing, directing, and sustaining behavior (Ball, 1977), is integral to learning. It is that force which compels a student to choose to act, continue the action, and move to completion of the task (Wlodkowski, 1984). Just as motivation affects all aspects of learning, it affects reading. Mathewson (1985) states “if children are to read, they will need not only a favorable attitude toward reading, but also an appropriate motivation” (p. 842).

Rupley, Ash, and Blair (1983) emphasize that activities labeled as reading motivational activities should be used carefully with students. They explain that often teachers perceive an activity to be highly motivational if the students react with active participation and positive comments. In reality, although the activity may encourage interest, it may not actually encourage reading. For example, acting out a scene from a play

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

would encourage high levels of participation. However, very few students may actually transfer the enjoyment of acting out a scene to the enjoyment of reading. Thus, the same activity may not hold the same intrinsic value for all students. They conclude that “it is possible that even though all the students appear interested and motivated by an activity, only a few of them are actually motivated to actively engage in learning the desired reading behavior” (p. 26).

Keeping their point in mind, I was particularly interested in what activities alterate students in this study

Figure 3.2 Motivational Chart

<p>Avid and Dormant Readers They do want to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. choose their own books 2. Have teachers read aloud a few pages 3. Meet the author 4. buy books at a book fair 5. Keep a reading journal 6. Go to the library 7. Participate in panel debates, small group discussions, or share books with friends. 	<p>Uncommitted and Unmotivated Readers They do want to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Choose their own books from a narrowed choice 2. Have teacher read aloud an entire book 3. Compare movie to book 4. Read illustrated books 5. Do art activities based on books 6. Read nonfiction material (comic, handbooks on sports, drawing, cars, fashion, make-up, magazines)
<p>Activities move from motivating to unmotivating as attitudes shift from positive to negative.</p>	
<p>They don't want to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write book reports 2. Do many art activities 3. Hear the teacher read aloud an entire book 	<p>They don't want to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meet the author 2. Buy books at a book fair 3. Go to the library 4. Read for a charity 5. Keep a reading journal 6. Participate in panel debates, small group discussions, or share books with friends.

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

labeled as motivational. Again, it was easiest to begin with looking for the activities that students with positive attitudes toward reading enjoyed (see Figure 3.2).

It quickly became evident what kinds of activities avid and dormant readers found to be motivational. Their preferences (column one of Figure 3.2) reveal that avid and dormant readers desire activities that encourage a connection with what was read. For these students, reading is an intensely personal activity. They want to make their own selections, keep a journal about their reading, talk in small groups, and meet the author. They connect at a level that pulls them into active participation with their thoughts, the author's thoughts, and their peers' thoughts. For them, reading becomes a way to learn more about themselves; furthermore, it becomes, in Bloome's (1987) term, "a social process—a means to participate in and establish a community or social group" (p. 123). Reading begins as a solitary act between the reader and the text and then becomes an opportunity for interacting with a group, taking part in discussions, swapping favorite stories, or arguing over themes. Therefore, to keep these students motivated, we need to offer them first, a chance to connect personally with the story, and second, a chance to connect with others.

The same can't always be said, though, for students with negative attitudes toward reading. In fact, sometimes the very activities that encouraged avid and dormant readers to keep reading discouraged the nonreaders. Activities that avid and dormant readers preferred doing did not motivate students with negative attitudes, but instead the activities intimidated them and confirmed their anticipated feelings.

So what activities did these students see as motivating? In reality, very little. The standard first response to the question "What would encourage you to read more?" was "Nothing." However, observation of their actions coupled with observation of their reactions to their teacher's assignments showed that these students did see some activities as slightly motivating (see column two of Figure 3-2).

First, these students said that if they were going to read a book, they would want to be able to choose what it would be. Interestingly, though, for some, total freedom was frustrating as they had little ability to find good books.

Consider what usually happened to these reluctant readers when they visited the library. They often walked in and immediately sat at a table, not looking at books at all. When they did occasionally go to the shelves, they wandered aimlessly up and down aisles. I asked them if they liked going to the library and if they ever checked out books from there. Their responses revealed that they felt uncomfortable in the library, that it was "too big" and had "too many books" so that "I wouldn't know where any of the good ones were." An experiment with placing about 30 books in a box labelled *Good Books* revealed that these students were much more comfortable hunting for books when their area for choice had been narrowed (Beers, 1996).

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

Second, these students want to read books with illustrations. Initially, I thought this was because these students were lazy readers and wanted the pictures to provide meaning that they were not taking time to get from words. However, after listening to Martelia and Katy talk about not seeing pictures in their minds, I changed my beliefs. I was reminded of an avid reader from a previous study (Beers, 1988) who compared reading to a VCR. She said that reading was like having a VCR in her mind—she could hear the words, see the action, replay exciting passages, fast forward, and pause to savor ideas. When I asked her if she liked books with pictures, she replied negatively, saying “they ruin what I’ve created” (p, 42).

The avid and dormant readers in this study agreed with that student. Uncommitted and unmotivated readers, though, time and time again said that they liked many illustrations. The few materials they did read corroborated this preference for illustrations: Paul’s Nintendo magazines were filled with illustrations of video screens, charts, and graphs. Angie’s intramural rule book had pictures of the basketball court layout, proper stances for ball shooting, and examples of referee’s hand signals. Katy’s teen magazines were packed with photographs and illustrations. Judy and Judy (1979) support this finding, explaining that some readers need materials with illustrations to help them bridge the gap between print and meaning. Looking at these materials, it is obvious that not only do these students want illustrated texts, they want informational texts. In fact, many reluctant readers prefer nonfiction over fiction. Whether it is because the topics offer an immediacy to their lives that fiction does not or that the format of the book aids in their comprehension is of little consequence. More important is the fact that these students appeared to read their selections aesthetically. Paul saw himself getting the highest scores playing Nintendo as he read about new techniques; Angie saw herself playing basketball; Katy saw herself in the clothes being shown on the pages of her magazines. Their willingness to look at these texts reminds us that we must expand our definition of acceptable reading to include what interests them.

Third, they want to compare the movie to the book. They want to see the movie and then read the book. Burt suggested that by seeing the movie first, he could “get what was going on in my head.” By contrast, when avid readers mentioned comparison of film to book as motivating, they wanted to read the book first and then see the movie. As Anita explained, “Movies always leave out too much. I’d rather read about it first and then I’ll know what got left out.”

Fourth, these students want the teacher to read an entire book aloud. Avid readers also mentioned that they enjoy this practice. Amy clarified this when she said, “But not the whole thing. That would take up too much of the time when I could be reading.” Chris concurred: “What I like is when she reads just a little bit and then we get to finish it.” These readers with positive attitudes wanted her to read aloud, but only for a few pages—just enough to tease. Again, when reluctant readers want the teacher to read the entire book aloud, it is not only because they do not want to do the reading. Instead, they mention how the teacher’s inflection, hand movements, and explanations of what is happening combine to help them to understand the story.

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

Fifth, some of the reluctant readers want to do art activities. “I guess I would like to do a poster on what I read. You know, like read something and then draw it. I’m pretty good at drawing,” Kii reported. The students, especially those who saw themselves as artists, wanted to draw the setting, do a puppet show of a scene, act out a scene, or make models of characters. Whether these activities help them make the abstract words concrete or give them the opportunity to do something (drawing) they do well, I don’t know. Regardless, repeatedly, connecting reading to art was important for these students. On the other hand, avid and dormant readers from this study did not favor art activities. “I’d rather get to talk about it,” Christopher explained.

Much more revealing is to look at what students do not find as motivational. Avid and dormant readers in this study find very few activities as unmotivational. They like to read so much that one must work hard to dampen that enthusiasm. However, their least enjoyable activities included the following: writing book reports, doing art activities based on the books, and listening to the teacher read aloud an entire novel. By contrast, the unmotivated and uncommitted readers of this study had a long list of activities that were not motivational.

These students do not view reading as a positive activity, a process, that goes beyond decoding; they view it as a skill. However, the absence of interaction is the very factor that interested uncommitted and unmotivated readers. Activities they did not want to do included exercises that connected them to other people. They did not want to meet the author, have panel discussions or small group talks, share books with friends, or read for a charity. Trips to the library were overwhelming and purchasing their own books offered them little enticement. They did not want to connect with the text or themselves in the form of reflection or keeping a journal. Since they usually have efferent transactions with the text, they have little personal response to write about, hence the common complaint “But what do you want me to write about?” Furthermore, since these students were not comfortable with their own responses to literature, they were not at ease sharing those responses with others. In the words of one student, “Sometimes [it’s] really embarrassing because it’s like I don’t have anything to say.” Continually facing embarrassment, these students convinced themselves that they were right not to like reading.

Because reluctant readers do not recognize reading as a positive social experience, they have little motivation to move into a community of readers. To help reluctant readers move into a community of readers, we must first convince them that their reactions to a text are important and that in sharing their responses and listening to others they will enlighten others and learn from others. To do this, consider Moffett’s (1968) thoughts on becoming a writer. Moffett tells us writers first write for themselves; later, they write for a known audience; finally, they write for an unknown audience. I believe that avid and dormant readers follow the same progression. First, they read for themselves; after they have gained confidence in their own responses to texts, they feel comfortable joining a small, trusted community of readers; finally, after feeling

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

comfortable interacting with others about their reading, they are prepared to join a larger community of readers.

Uncommitted and unmotivated readers do not follow the same progression. We see that every time these aliterate students refuse to participate in group discussions, act out in literature circles, fail to keep their reading journals, and make snide comments about other readers' responses. But if we think about their actions in light of Moffett's stages, we can see why they sabotage their own participation within a community of readers. These students have not yet formed responses to literature for themselves other than believing "it's boring" or "it's dumb." Consequently, they have had no time to gain confidence in their own responses to texts. Lacking that confidence, they are uncomfortable interacting with a small group of readers much less the larger class group many of whom they may know only by name. Middle school students judge much of their lives on how well they fit into the larger group. For students who fear their responses may set them apart, it is much safer to play the role of not wanting to participate than to try and fail. Teachers might consider structuring reading events for uncommitted and unmotivated readers that enable them to progress comfortably from self as audience, to intimate known audiences, to a large community of readers. For that progression to occur, the disconnected readers must connect with texts in a way that they have not yet done.

So How Do We Reconnect Disconnected Readers?

Wouldn't it be nice if once we recognized disconnected readers (perhaps they could arrive with that loud, obnoxious beep-beep that uncradled telephone receivers emit), that we could simply put them back on their hooks and the connection would be made? In fact, these students do arrive in middle school emitting a warning signal, though the signal is usually withdrawn silence rather than purposeful noise. But if we recognize the signal, the connection can be reestablished. However, (let's stay with the phone metaphor a while since the phone is where most middle schoolers live!), something caused the student's reading receiver to fall off the hook in the first place, so the reconnection must be made carefully.

To restore service, the right equipment with the right service technician must be utilized. Too much static and interference will result in another disconnection. Depending on how good the original connection was, new and better installation may be in order and stronger wires might be required. And probably, there needs to be a switch in long distance carriers. Let's start there.

Long Distance Carriers

If you are thinking that your students' reading connection is poor, then you might be doubting the long distance carrier you've been using. Perhaps that carrier service has not placed enough emphasis on its customers' needs and satisfaction. Attending to readers' needs means choosing a carrier service whose philosophy is to encourage the user to actively work to respond on a personal level as a way to forming stronger connections among the reader (person answering the phone), the text (the telephone), the caller

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

(the author), and the message (how the reader interprets the caller's words). For too long secondary school reading and literature pedagogy has embraced a carrier that put the telephone (the text) and the caller (the author) at the top of the priority customer list. With that carrier service, improved connections are the readers' responsibility as they are expected to listen harder to the caller, decipher the caller's words, phrases, and tone. If they don't hear the caller, or someone (the teacher?) says they got the wrong message, it is their fault and the carrier service recommends redialing and listening to the same recorded message again. With this service, after the call is finished, the listener checks his receiving ability by answering efferent questions and completing efferent activities.

The contributors to this book, *Into Focus*, subscribe to a different carrier service, a different philosophy, from the one described above. All the contributors in this text put the reader at the top of the priority list; we all believe that the strongest connections are made when the reader is an integral part of the loop, not an outsider listening in, but an insider, creating the message with the caller. Furthermore, we value the aesthetic response.

Purves et al. (1990) describe what happens to a student who responds aesthetically to a work:

- She understands what the words say to her.
- She translates the experience she has read about into her own context.
- She has a feeling about the experience.
- She has attitudes about the experience and the poem. She reaches conclusions and makes judgments (p. 48).

Purves (1990) explains that this reaction to a work is facilitated by a teacher who encourages response, encourages students to explain their responses, and encourages students to try new things. In a response-centered approach, teachers read aloud and then talk about their responses to what was read; they explain how they translated the experience on the pages into their own life's experiences; they explain their feelings when they read; they explain how they reached their attitudes, conclusions, and judgments about their reading experience.

The comments and actions of reluctant readers would suggest that moving students into the unconscious enjoyment of literature requires more than sharing books with them. Prior to their school experiences, sharing may be sufficient. At that time, the focus is generally on enjoyment, which leads to aesthetic experiences. However, once school has planted firmly the notion that reading is an efferent experience, reluctant readers may need more than exposure to good books to change their approach to reading. They may benefit from a literature program

Kylene Beers

Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No

- that recognizes that they are not comfortable sharing their responses in a group setting,
- that recognizes that what motivates them to read is different from what motivates students who like to read,
- that recognizes that they may prefer nonfiction over fiction,
- that encourages response-centered literature classes, and
- that recognizes that teachers must model for these efferent-oriented students how to read aesthetically.

Students with negative attitudes toward reading do have emotional responses toward reading: negative. These students do react to reading: negatively. They do believe their responses have value: none. Changing those perceptions, though difficult, is possible and is, to a large extent, dependent on what we as teachers do in the classroom. We must convince these students that their responses are important and valued. Katy, the nonreader who claimed she would never like to read, explained this point perfectly as she offered her advice for teachers. Her words are worth repeating—and remembering:

“So, Katy, what should I tell teachers to do so that they can help students like to read?”

“Tell them to ask the students what they thought. No teacher ever asked me what I thought. And when I start to tell them what I thought, they say, ‘We all have our opinions, but what does the story tell us?’ and you know what that really means? That really means what I think isn’t important. But maybe it is; maybe it was important to me.”

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Kylene Beers

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Kylene Beers

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