

# “I don’t read at home anymore”: Breaking Down One Student’s Reading Barriers Created by Covid-19

By Marie Putnam Harvan

The goal of independent reading, as an instructional practice, helps habitual readers build conscious reading identities (NCTE, 2019). As a routine, independent reading develops reading stamina, vocabulary, background, and good reading habits. This matters for students, as those with strong reading habits carry them outside of the classroom and become lifelong readers (ILA, 2019). As real-world readers, students need experiences that are peer and teacher supported, enveloped in an environment that extends their thinking (Howard, 2009). Yet, students’ perspectives of themselves as literacy learners are facilitated or deterred by the context of the classroom (McCarthy, 2001), and before students can become engaged readers, they have to see others enjoying the experience of reading (Commeyras, Bisplinghoff & Olson, 2003).

To that end, just as independent reading opens up opportunities for students, it also allows teachers to have authentic conversations about how readers read. In coaching individual students or small groups, teachers can deepen strategies and skills to encourage the transfer and continuation of habits and routines of reading (ILA, 2019). However, in order for students to identify as thoughtful, proficient readers, they need instructions that explicitly state what, why, and how readers read. When asking students to practice and discover the work of real readers, we are inviting them to do the type of work they will encounter in the real world - the things independent readers do in real life. In supporting the real-life reading of our students, we are preparing them to stay motivated and engaged when an adult is not there, commanding them to drop everything and read (Miller & Moss, 2013).

Furthermore, independent readers are those who choose their own books, make time to read, and engage in reading. Being a reader should not be limited to teacher-selected texts and teacher-led tasks. In order for student reading to extend outside of the classroom, teachers need to build readers with conscious reading identities (Shaffer, et. al., 2019). In supporting independent reading habits, time spent

reading leads to discovering favorite topics, genres, or authors, which is important for students’ reading lives beyond the classroom (Springer, Harris, & Dole, 2017).

## Marilyn’s Story

The Covid-19 global pandemic impacted the independent reading lives of my students in various ways. For some, myself included, reading became a distraction from the constant change in the world. Books provided a safe haven and a form of escapism. For example, a student explained to me, “When we were home. I started to read to my younger sister everyday. We read books that used to be mine and we still do it together.” For them, the pandemic created a time to read together and establish a routine that they have maintained. This was not true for all of my students, however, as I discovered in the case of my fourth-grade student, Marilyn (pseudonym).

Instead of diving deeper into the joys of reading, she was faced with reading barriers that had not previously existed. As her father took on more hours at work, her after school routine and recreational reading habits were impacted. For her, instead of uninterrupted time at home after school, she found herself spending more time in the car, which broke up her typical schedule. Marilyn explained, “When I get home, I do my homework and my mom cooks dinner for my dad and then we drive it to him at work. That’s when we see him. I don’t have time after I finish my homework. If I can’t read for very long, I don’t do any of it. I don’t have the time anymore.”

Understandably, her altered routine, combined with a global pandemic, presented her with challenges, and she found herself pushing reading aside. She wanted to read, and expressed disappointment in not being able to engage with it as she had before. I wanted to help her regain a sense of control over her independent reading and wondered if focusing on missed opportunities within her schedule would be



effective. To address this dilemma, I decided to work with her to fit in reading time, which she was having difficulty with. This article describes a short-term intervention that focused on increasing her reading volume outside of school.

My purpose was twofold: 1) To support her reader-to-reader through real world work; and 2) To establish a new reading routine that responded to her current situation.

### Bringing the Task Down to Size

In order for literacy to be meaningful to students, teachers need to be mindful of creating situational interest in extremely concrete ways. One way is to link reading to students' personal experiences, to highlight the relevance of reading that occurs in everyday life (Guthrie, McRae, & Klauda, 2007). Reed, Schallert, Beth, and Woodruff (2004) encourage teachers to develop learning environments that are autonomy-supportive, where students are enabled to direct and control their literacy. Reeve (1996) explains autonomy support by referring to the amount of freedom the teacher gives to the student, while respecting their agenda and providing learning activities that are relevant to their personal goals and interests.

Providing support for students' self-efficacy in reading is crucial. Without this belief in themselves, students in upper elementary and middle school grades abandon reading. It is also beneficial for self-efficacy to assist with setting realistic goals for reading. In doing so, students gain the belief that they can be successful in reading (Guthrie & Barber, 2019). For Marilyn, the first step was to set aside five minutes at the beginning of the daily reading workshop to confer and best support her needs through an intervention. Since each meeting was meant to discuss her goal of increased independent reading, our time together was very focused and intentional.

Next, I wanted to visually represent (see Figure 1) the goal of increased reading time and ensure that Marilyn knew that our focus would be on increased independent reading. This served as an agenda when we came together and created a familiar routine. When we conferred, I made a point to revisit the purpose of us coming together, as I wanted her to know that each day, we would only focus on this goal.

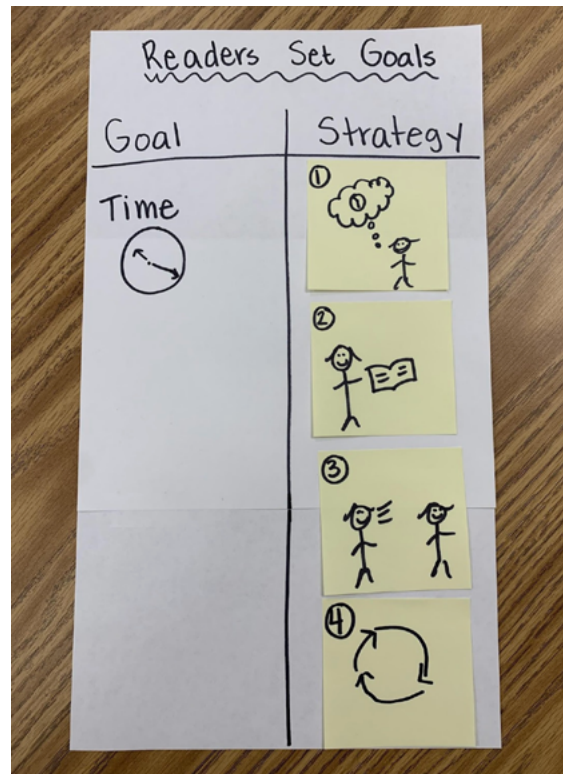


Figure 1. Readers Set Goals

### Providing Support Reader -to- Reader

Learners who lack input for decisions feel powerless and unmotivated. In providing support to identify small pockets of time throughout the day, I was equipping Marilyn with the tools to read in the real world and manage her time (Cambourne, 1995). Nicholas (2006) explains, through thoughtful planning, explicit instruction, modeling and purposeful talk in a highly supportive environment, students can take the next step and affect the way they live within the world. Through the scaffolds, students are learning the habits that will enable them to think and speak on their own. Through thoughtful planning and conversations, the thinking continues to grow and transfers into independent practice, which enables our students to read, think, and talk about their own thinking. Over time, this teaches students to have purposeful conversations, even when they are thinking alone.

To enhance Marilyn's thinking about opportunities to read outside of school, I focused on times during the day where she found herself waiting with little to do, such as being in the car on the way to drop off dinner to her father (see Figure 2). Being responsive to her current schedule turned out to be powerful, as I was not asking her to carve out additional time, but working with the current schedule

she was struggling with. This level of differentiation helped me respond with instructional moves that best supported her. In our daily reading conferences, Marilyn successfully articulated her desire to read, as well as reflect on what went well and what needed further work.

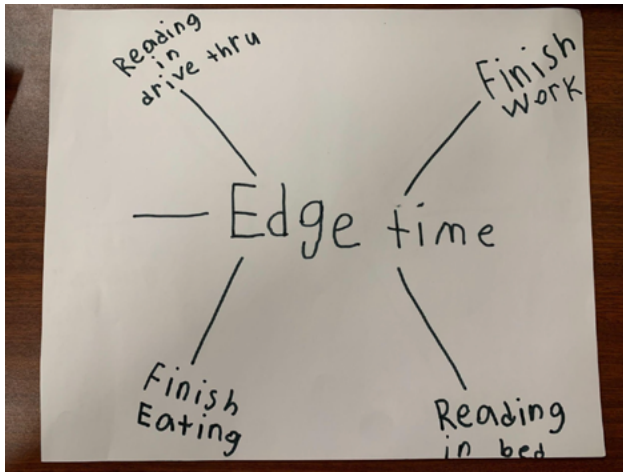


Figure 2. Edge Time

The following is a conversation about her out-of-school reading times:

*Teacher: Do you ever find yourself waiting without anything to do?*

*Marilyn: Yes, we bring dinner to my dad every day and I go with my mom.*

*Teacher: What do you think about taking a book with you today? That way while you're in the car, you can pull it out and read.*

*Marilyn: That's not very much time. It's only fifteen minutes.*

*Teacher: That's perfect. Let's start with that and squeeze in a few minutes.*

*Marilyn: I'll try it. I usually watch YouTube videos in the back of the car. I'll bring a book this time.*

As we worked together to support her goal, I came to value the time we spent reader-to-reader and making adjustments. In conferences, Marilyn began to view the car as her opportunity to read and began to exclusively lean on this location for additional reading time. For example, she explained how she began leaving a book in the car, as she noticed that she forgot to bring it several times. This led to her making sure that the book she kept in the car was her back-up book for reading emergencies when she forgot the book she meant to bring. In finding a solution, we celebrated that problem solving together. She later

admitted, "Reading in the car is a good idea because my mom takes forever and I have to wait a lot." Our conversations began to take on a deeper meaning, as she no longer seemed as frustrated and enjoyed sharing times when she worked towards her goal outside of our conferences.

### Establishing a New Routine

In revisiting Marilyn's goal and making adjustments as needed, real world reading experiences were emphasized. Camber & Castle (1994) believe it is important to consider a students' attitude to foster lifelong reading habits and to tailor instruction. To that end, our conferences shifted toward additional opportunities to read while at home. Since Marilyn was now reading while accompanying her mother to visit her father, I wanted to help her find success in other areas. To temporarily document this time, I leaned on a bookmark version of Miller's (2013) reading itinerary to help Marilyn notice patterns and center our attention on other locations and time accumulated while reading (see Figure 3). This bookmark was used as a tool for reflection during our time together to further highlight her reading habits. It is important to note that this strategy differed from a reading log, as the purpose was to reflect on Marilyn's daily reading habits, not to reward her for minutes read or to criticize a lack thereof. Therefore, while using this tool, our time together focused on literacy engagement.

Figure 3. Bookmark

For example:

*Me: Were you able to read at home yesterday?*

*Marilyn: No, I tried to in the car, but it was too loud. There was music on and talking. I tried though. It just didn't work out.*

*Me: That's great that you tried. (Pulling out edge time graphic organizer) Let's take a look at another opportunity you have to read.*

*Marilyn: (Looking over graphic organizer) I tried to read in the car and that didn't work out. Maybe I can try to read in bed. I'm never tired when it's time to lay down.*

*Me: Okay, Let's try that tonight and then we will talk about it tomorrow. I understand what you're saying, I never seem tired when I first try to go to bed. Reading helps me relax.*

Marilyn could expand her reading life beyond the car, which seemed to be problematic at times, and I needed to encourage her to feel successful with other locations. As a result, the next day, Marilyn reported that before bed, it was very quiet and this worked well for her. She was able to read for fifteen minutes before she felt tired and needed to put the book down. In doing so, she explained, "I was able to read one chapter last night of my book. It wasn't loud at all. I think I'm going to try my front porch next."

As there is no one right way to read at home, rather than assign the next location, I encouraged her to experiment and share during our conference so I could notice patterns and best support her goal. After accumulating several locations such as her front porch, bedroom, car, and backyard, I continued to listen as she became comfortable with reading in locations other than her car. I listened to Marilyn explain that while her mom was cooking dinner one afternoon, she had time before she had to take her father dinner, and went into the backyard to read. However, the backyard was very loud, as a neighbor's barking dog cut through the silence she hoped to find. Instead of giving up, she simply moved to her bedroom and continued reading for ten more minutes until her mom called for her. She was then able to continue reading in the car and proudly explained that she read for a total of twenty-five minutes that night. This type of reading was not occurring prior to our work together, as she previously viewed reading as an all-or-nothing activity. However, each day's responses allowed me to

determine additional support to guide and support her reading goal and move her towards independence.

Nicholas (2006) reminds us that as talk begins to reflect stronger thinking, we must consider how to keep building conversation. As we met, Marilyn and I began to expand her understanding of reading when opportunities presented themselves, even in small bursts of time. She began to feel successful, which fueled other conversations. The level of support significantly decreased, and my role shifted from coach to fellow reader in order to foster deeper thinking. I began sharing personal reading challenges and moments when reading did not work out for me. One conversation focused on a Kindle I recently purchased to carry with me for reading emergencies. Usually when reading, I often skip to the last chapter to find out what happens and then go back to read. However, I was not doing that while reading with the Kindle, which made the book more suspenseful, instead of knowing the ending right away. She appreciated my confession and shared that when reading at home, she would skip to the end to see if she wanted to continue reading. The ending would determine if she abandoned the book or continued reading. We found each other's approach interesting and continued to focus on our literate lives instead of just understanding the text.

### **Final Thoughts**

The purpose of this work was to implement an intervention that would support Marilyn in being successful with reading. As I coached her, I focused on providing as many successful experiences as possible for her to draw from and reflect on. Although very tailored to her, this work reiterates the importance of having time to support the talking and thinking of all readers. Reading is inherently a social act. As real-world readers, students need experiences that are peer and teacher supported, enveloped in an environment that supports and extends their thinking (Howard, 2009).

I envision using this strategy to better prepare for students who say they do not have time to read at home. More importantly, this work reminded me to seek out opportunities to cultivate behaviors of lifelong independent readers. As I continue this work, I am reminded of Gallagher (2010), who calls us to promote the type of thinking that will enable students to become literate, well-informed adults.

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