

UNDERSTANDING READERS, TEXTS, AND TEACHING

*Reading has always been
my sustenance,
my great joy.*

—ANNA QUINDLEN

Readers love books. They buy them, enjoy them, and treasure them. Books help readers understand their world and themselves. Our ultimate goal as teachers is to help each student in our schools become a reader who loves books and all they have to offer. Reading is more than basic decoding competency. It has the potential to nourish the intellect, the emotions, and the spirit. It feeds and replenishes the art and skill of writing. A child who lives a literate life in school and has pleasurable experiences with written language will make a place for reading and writing throughout life.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A READER?

Think of yourself as a reader. You carry books with you all the time, and you are constantly buying more. During a pause in your day, you are likely to pick up a newspaper, a magazine, even a piece of advertising. You refer frequently to books, borrowing the language you find there. You notice words in texts and sometimes search for printed words that fit, express, or extend your feelings.

Reading sustains you on long and tedious airline flights, bus rides, or train trips. You gobble up some books, tearing through them as quickly as you can. Others, you savor, reading a few pages at a time and then thinking and even talking to someone about the ideas you find there. Still others, you dip into for particular purposes, to get information or to learn a skill. When you share a whole text or a brief section of it with someone else by reading the words aloud, you modulate your phrasing to help your listener fully understand not only the text but also your own interpretation of it.

You visit bookstores frequently, not so much as a busy, task-oriented shopper but as a dedicated browser. You

always leave a bookstore with a few more purchases than you intended. Often you read a book simply because it is connected to something you have previously found interesting—the topic, author, or style of writing.

You are always on the lookout for a new book to love; you write down titles and authors generated by Internet searches. Sometimes you see a book and buy it instantly, without even looking through it, because you know and love the writer or a good friend found it wonderful. You know how to get information from books. You give books as gifts and like to receive books yourself. You have a library card (or at least you have fond memories of childhood days spent in libraries); you probably have a frequent-customer card from a bookstore. You always have unread books in your house that you are saving up for vacations. While driving, you listen to books on tape. There are books by your bed, by your favorite chair, in the kitchen, in your car. You converse with others about particular authors, titles, and genres. You see films based on books, but you always try to read the book first and usually like it better! You create visual images of characters in books; some, you feel you know. You have some favorite books; you reread them over the years.

You seldom think about your own reading process. To you, the print, the words, even the language, are almost transparent. You may appreciate language or notice interesting words, but the way you read allows you to connect directly with the ideas being conveyed. Books and other forms of written language are simply a part of your life. Above all, reading means using your mind: asking questions, challenging the status quo, absorbing information with a critical eye. You see that being a reader is a critical challenge and an essential responsibility in a democratic way of life.