

Education

Birth of a Bookworm

Santa Barbara Steps Up to Nurture Kids' Love of Reading



Vania Vasquez has read the Harry Potter series four times

HANNA SAARELA

BY HANNA SAARELA

THU DEC 26, 2019 | 8:10PM

A room full of second graders lounge on colorful cushions, about to dive into their chosen chapter books. They reach for worn bookmarks guiding them to where they left off, and they get ready to take notes on the group discussion which is about to follow.

This is Book Club, the latest classroom activity that Whitney Alegria, second grade teacher at Washington

Elementary School, has introduced to her students to plant a lifelong love of reading. "There's magic in the fact that students can sit down and share something they're excited about in a book," Alegria said.

Teachers, like Alegria, librarians, and bookstore owners in Santa Barbara are increasingly imparting their passion for reading onto young students. With their own experience and knowledge to draw from, book-loving adults create cozy but lively reading spots where children discover new authors, books, and

genres through activities like talks, clubs and summer programs.

Adult support is crucial, especially during the elementary school years, because a lifetime habit of pleasure reading develops early, even as early as 11 years old, researchers suggest. But young students are spending less and less time with their noses in books, recent research and survey results show.

A Fading Love

Scholastic, a publishing company specializing in young readers, released its latest "Kids and Family Reading Report" in March. The answers from more than 1,000 respondents, ages 6 to 17, show that the share of frequent readers has dropped 16 percent since 2010.

Last year, nearly half of elementary school aged respondents read books for fun five to seven days a week. But only two older students out of ten did the same. Two out of ten students never or very seldom read books for fun. Children also enjoyed reading books less in 2018 than in 2010, Scholastic's results illustrate.

Lauren Tarshis, senior vice president and editor-in-chief of the Classroom Magazine Division at Scholastic and author of the best-selling *I Survived* book series, shared her observations on why children are now reading less than before. "The competition for that child's free time, time they're not in school, has become fierce," she said.

Tarshis sees two forces at play that reshape the lives of children. The first is technology, "The access that children have to screens before they're even toddlers. And the second is sports, having practice after school and games almost every weekend, Tarshis said.

Hyperfocus on a child's future success may also suffocate their love of reading. Kids face increasing pressure to improve their grades and build a resume from an early age, Tarshis said. So, they end up

spending hours in tutoring and preparing for tests, which again leaves less time for reading for fun.

The testing culture in schools also has repercussions. Holly Broman, children's librarian at Santa Barbara Central Library, often meets children who read books only to pass a test. "Being told they have to read things often kills the love of reading, and that can be so sad to see," Broman said.

Children read more when they can actually choose what to read. Nine out of ten children in Scholastic's survey said their favorite books are the ones they picked themselves. Having easy access to books is also crucial. "Kids will pick up reading materials that are immediately available to them, but they won't go look for them," said Jeffrey Wilhelm, an author and professor at Boise State University. "There have to be these invitations. There has to be availability."

The top three locations where children find books they like are the public library, the school library, and the bookshelves in their home, Scholastic's results show. But kids, especially boys, sometimes have a hard time finding the right reads. "It's hard to find books that boys enjoy that really meet their interests," Tarshis said.

The Pleasures of Reading

Simple pleasure is only one of the direct benefits of reading. It also increases children's achievement in mathematics, their social mobility, and later educational success, Wilhelm said. But we have not really thought deeply about what pleasure is, he said.

Wilhelm divides the pleasures of reading into multiple dimensions in his award-winning book *Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want and Why We Should Let Them* that he co-authored with Michael W. Smith based on studies done with teenagers.

The authors noticed that "intellectual pleasure" got the most attention in classrooms. "Teachers focus



Whitney Alegria reads to her second-grade students at Washington Elementary School

HANNA SAARELA

on skills that are going to be tested instead of the pleasures that actually motivate people,” Wilhelm said.

The other pleasures, on the other hand, received far less attention in school, although they can be very powerful. Wilhelm gave an example of “social pleasure.” One girl in the study liked to think of herself as a *Harry Potter* reader – a person who has imagination and who is a good friend, similar to the story’s main characters. That also helped her connect with other *Harry Potter* readers. “Work pleasure” helped teenagers complete a functional task in the real world. “There was this shaping and rehearsing of being in the world,” Wilhelm said.

Ultimately, pleasure reading can be transformative as it helps in overcoming marginalization, Wilhelm said. “It’s pleasurable to develop your own capacities, your own identity, to become independent,” he said. But how, exactly, does a child become a confident, independent reader who enjoys all the pleasures of reading?

Becoming a Good Reader

Lindsey Moses, associate professor at Arizona State University, has studied reading development in first grade classrooms, especially in schools with a high number of low-income, multilingual families.

Moses discovered that educators tend to get too caught up in literacy achievement, which can actually lower a students’ chance of succeeding. “It creates this sense of being an outsider or not being smart enough,” Moses said.

The interventions Moses did in a low-income school had a clear goal—to help first graders in seeing themselves as good readers. “The more kids are motivated to read, the more they read, and the better they become,” she said. Students were allowed to choose their own reading materials, which built up their confidence, which inspired them to read more. As the school year ended, some of the first-graders were devouring up to ten books per week. Reading no longer felt like an assignment, Moses said. It was fun.

The change was visible in multiple ways. Children

used a positive tone when they talked about books and established favorite authors and genres. They also began to choose reading over other activities and included their reading experiences in their social interactions, Moses described. Similar positive developments are now being in Santa Barbara schools.

Renewed Reading Instruction

Going on three years now, Santa Barbara Unified School District has worked on adopting Lucy Calkins's "Balanced Literacy" model with reading and writing workshops in elementary schools, said Raul Ramirez, assistant superintendent of elementary education. A vast majority of teachers are already following the model, and more teachers are being trained, he said.

"I've sensed a lot of excitement and enthusiasm for the kind of motivation it has created in students and in teachers," Ramirez said. "But it is a very different way of teaching and engaging with our students and our learners. It's still coming together for us."

The Balanced Literacy approach focuses on skills that are needed to develop good literacy, but it also offers children a lot of choice and flexibility, Ramirez pointed out.

The district has made considerable investments in books that are available at specific students' reading levels in all classrooms, Ramirez said. "Our next point of emphasis is on bringing a much wider variety of authors that represent not only different genres but different topics and that also present different cultural and world perspectives."

At the same time, the district's partnership with the public library is also evolving. "I think the promise is in removing barriers for students to access library resources that can be beneficial to continuing their learning beyond the school day," Ramirez said. "Coupled with our Tech Equity initiative, which provides a device (iPad) for all students in grades 4-12, we believe this partnership adds tremendous value."

In her classroom at Washington Elementary,

Whitney Alegria follows the "Balanced Literacy" program. She was given an extensive classroom library at the beginning of the school year, but she needed more diversity in the materials to make her Book Club possible. So, Alegria applied for grants and looked for donations, which turned out to be very successful, she said.

Alegria's students love having reading partners, she said. "In their independent reading they get to find those little crumbs and bits to share with their partner later," she said. "And that's motivation for them to dig into those books."

Whenever Alegria introduces a new book in class, she does it with excitement and vigor, she said. "Getting excited about reading is contagious, just like smiling." Alegria strives to be a role model for her students, she said. "While I can't guarantee that at home they're going to be reading, I think the best way to get them there is through positive role models."

Books for All Tastes

Holly Broman, children's librarian at the Santa Barbara Central Library, has thousands of books—both printed and electronic—to recommend for young readers.

She encourages children to read about things they are interested in rather than sticking to their reading levels. "It's really been shown that reading and learning happens more so when a child picks up a book themselves," she said.

Helping children find books may take a bit of doing, Broman explained. So, she asks children if they generally like books with animals, princesses, adventures, or cartoons, for example, and then connects them with what they find interesting. Children also like to read what their friends are reading, Broman said.

Book talks, clubs, and summer reading programs are some of the social reading activities that the library offers to give a taste of a variety of books



HANNA SAARELA

for children. Last summer in Santa Barbara, 213 teenagers participated in the summer reading program, devouring 734 books in total. At the same time, 2,194 kids and early readers participated in the program, reading 715,841 minutes and completing 898 challenges.

This year's summer reading program, "Choose Adventure," ran through August 1. The Public Library challenged kids to read 1,000 minutes over the summer, and for every 30 minutes they spent reading, they could win prizes. Teens had their own challenges, and got a free book for every book they finished, Broman said, and were entered into prize drawings. Library staff handed out gift cards, event tickets, and other prizes lucky winners, making their summer reading experience even more rewarding.

Finding That Special Book

Diane Arnold and DJ Palladino, owners of The Mesa Bookstore in Santa Barbara, have roughly 12,000 used books available for customers of all ages. Arnold hopes

that the continuously renewing collection helps people find that special book, she said.

Palladino usually asks their customers if they've read anything good lately. "You can get a clue to what they like, and you can pick books you know are similar," he said. Arnold's favorite moments in the store are the spontaneous encounters between children who get to talking about what they're reading. "That's just the best," she said.

Santa Barbara's comic book store, Metro Entertainment, is a place of imagination where children can meet like-minded kids, said owner Bob Ficarra. For him, it's a work of passion that he has been doing for 28 years.

Every week, on Wednesday, it's like Christmas in the store as about 100 new releases arrive, Ficarra said. Ficarra is just as happy to see new readers finding comic books through word of mouth. "The store is a destination for people, so they'll bring other people," he said. "When they get excited, it's contagious."

The biggest annual event at Metro is the National

Free Comic Book Day on the first Saturday of May, which recently attracted about 2,000 visitors, Ficarra said. He and his staff take pride in introducing new authors and characters to young customers. "I think some of the shy kids want to find characters on paper or on screen that they can relate to, and it makes them feel more comfortable in their world," he said, and added that he was one of the shy kids himself who loved to read comics.

The Bookworm Thing

Vania Vasquez, 11, a sixth grader at Washington Elementary School, spends a lot of time at the library, where she muses she could live. "I'd wake up every morning just to the smell of books because I really like smelling fresh new books," she said. "It's like a bookworm thing, I think."

Vasquez started loving books when she was in second grade and now reads up to two hours per day, she said. But her mother is worried for her eyes and encourages her to spend more time outside. "So, I just take my books outside and start reading," Vasquez said, smiling.

Vasquez appreciates a variety of genres—fantasy, mystery, action, and romance—and carries a minimum of three books with her, wherever she goes. Some books manage to combine all four genres, like the

Harry Potter series that she has read four times.

At the moment, Vasquez is most captivated by graphic novels, especially by Japanese manga, but the library only has a small collection in the adult section. Luckily, the owners of The Mesa Bookstore just gave her two manga books to read.

At home, she always has her special books right next to her bed. "If there was an emergency, I'd just pick out my favorite books and run out," she said. She'd be alright, she said, as long as she had books.

Coleman Mortensen, 17, a Santa Barbara High School junior, is reading books about the professional fields that he's interested in, like law and medicine. There are so many interesting titles out there, he said, it can be hard to choose. That's why he relies on recommendations from friends and family.

Finding time for pleasure reading can also be tough for Mortensen, with lots of homework, sports, and other activities. "Right now, it's a pretty crazy time," he said. "I know in the future it may be busy, but I will definitely take that time to read as an adult."

For bookworms, it all comes down to finding time, books, and an ideal reading spot.

Reading can happen anywhere, in a hammock, at the beach, or in a tree, Alegria tells her second graders as they prepare for Book Club. "Get comfortable and find a great book to dive into," she said.