

Kylene Beers

# WHEN KIDS CAN'T READ

## WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO



*A Guide for Teachers 6-12*

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## *A Defining Moment*

I approach writing this book with fear and conviction. The fear comes from worrying that, though I bring to this task twenty-three years of teaching experience and about twelve years of direct work with struggling readers, somehow I'll get it all wrong. I worry that I'll write something inaccurately, leave out the single most important strategy we should all know, misrepresent a student, mislabel someone's comments, or be so boring that you'll set the book aside. Putting those fears into words, actually confronting them, doesn't make them less daunting and certainly doesn't make them go away. So I summarized them onto an index card that I taped to my desk beside my computer when I began writing. It said simply, "Get it right."

The conviction comes from my absolute certainty that, first, teachers want to help the struggling readers who sit in their classrooms; second, those students want to be helped; and, third, the right instruction can make a difference. Many of us who are secondary teachers (I'll use that term throughout this book to describe teachers in either middle or high school) never anticipated needing to help students learn to read when we first entered this profession. Many of us with secondary certificates had nothing more than a content area reading course (if that) in our teacher-preparation courses. So, for some of us, recognizing that we can help those students requires time; understanding how to do that takes even more.

Those kids who struggle with texts were not the children I'd planned on teaching. My goal as I finished my degree at the University of Texas in 1979 was to be a twelfth-grade AP literature teacher. I'd expected to walk down polished hallways of a well-ordered high school to arrive in a small, cozy classroom that held well-read volumes of the great works of literature, thus giving the room that slightly musty smell of a small-town library or a used bookstore. I anticipated moving down the school halls

(holding my steaming cup of coffee in one hand and a stack of brilliantly written essays in the other) only to be constantly stopped by students wanting to know if they could drop by after school to continue our discussion of *The Great Gatsby* or *Native Son* or *My Antonia*. I thought I'd be the sponsor of the grammar club, where we'd celebrate the triumph of traditional grammar over transformational grammar, and debate the finer points of *that* and *which* and the serial comma. It never entered my mind that some of my students would not know how to read; I presumed they would embrace books with the same passion I did. They would mourn the moment when our class would end and they would have to leave the world of Dickens or Ellison, Poe or Hughes to reenter the corridors of our school.

And then I got my first teaching job.

During the last semester of my senior year at UT, I began to search for a teaching position. It appeared I was not alone in my desire to teach twelfth-grade AP literature. Furthermore, I soon discovered that once that position was secured, that teacher never left. In other words, the inn was full. Finally, I had an interview with the Alief School District. I didn't know what an Alief was, or where it was, but I did have a postcard saying they would be happy to meet with me. As I walked into my interview, I heard the two men who would be talking with me say, "All these women, they all want to teach high school English." The other agreed and said, "Sure wish someone, anyone, wanted to teach middle school."

Now, it's important to note that I didn't know what a middle school was in the spring of 1979. I grew up in a small town in east Texas in the days of the junior high, and although I had done my student-teaching in a junior high, I had never even heard the term *middle school*. It's also important to know that as I walked into that interview, I was carrying in my purse a letter from my dad. It said, "My darling daughter—get a job."

So, with those tender words of advice, I walked into that meeting. The men didn't even look up. One said, "What's your name?" I told him.

The other said, "And what do you want to teach?"

I paused, took a breath, and boldly proclaimed, "I want to teach—middle school!"

Both men looked up simultaneously and then asked in unison what is perhaps the single most important question I've ever been asked in my career: "Why?"

I muttered something about it being a challenge. Little did I know how right that was! I left that interview a short time later with a teaching job at a middle school in Alief.

My first goal was to find Alief (it's a large school district with 42,000+ students located in the southwest part of the Greater Houston Area Metroplex). My second goal was to figure out what a middle school was. I quickly discovered that it was sort of like a junior high, only with sixth grade added. My assignment was to teach seventh-grade language arts, which didn't daunt me at all. My plan was still to teach twelfth-grade AP literature, just to do it with seventh graders. Needless to say, that plan didn't last long.

That first year of teaching is etched in my mind with a clarity that I sometimes wish would fade. If not for my two teammates, I doubt I would have returned for year two. These women, veteran teachers, took this "rookie" (as they loved to call me) under their tutelage and began to teach me how to be a teacher. Our school was an open-concept school, so the social studies teacher, the math teacher, and I shared a huge open space—along with the 153 students we saw throughout the day. We taught six periods of the seven-period day. I had fourth period off so I could serve as lunch monitor.

Within the first few days of school, I made some important discoveries, the most important being that my vision of how schools run was some sort of warped blend of *Room 222* (some of you reading this won't have a clue what that references and thus we learn the first lesson in the importance of background knowledge), the classroom Opie attended in that idyllic town of Mayberry, and personal memories of my own twelfth-grade English classroom, which really *was* filled with wonderful musty-smelling books and essays that at least my classmates and I thought were brilliant.

I should have been thinking *Welcome Back, Kotter*.

My students, precious though they were, overwhelmed me. There were *so* many of them. Student-teaching one class of twenty-eight students with the cooperating teacher sitting at the back of the classroom was so much easier, so much more manageable. Plus, the assistant principal at our school, a woman named Anne Black, whom I respected and admired, had given me all the wrong students. I explained to her after a few weeks of teaching that I had wanted the *literary* ones. Instead, she had given me students who didn't like to read. Well, that's not entirely true. Some were inveterate readers, and I latched onto them like a drowning swimmer clutches a buoy. But as many as half of my students didn't like to read, and half of those *couldn't* read. These were most certainly not the students I had in mind while studying literature, composition, and grammar in the English department at the University of Texas.

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As I patiently explained all this to Anne, she merely nodded her head, peered at me over the tops of her half-rimmed glasses, and then replied simply, “I’ll make a note.” She didn’t change one thing.

If I was confused by students who *didn’t like* to read, then I was absolutely confounded by those who *couldn’t* read. I had no idea why they couldn’t read. I also had no way (or perhaps “no interest” is a more honest statement) to systematically uncover what their reading difficulties were. In all my years of study at UT, I did not have one class in reading. If I had wanted to teach reading, then I would have pursued an elementary degree and looked for a first-grade teaching position. So, I began a chant that I repeated to all who would listen: “These kids can’t read.” With that simple phrase, I relegated my students who couldn’t decode to the same position as students who could say the words but couldn’t make sense of what they had read. Equally frustrated by both groups, I took care of the problem by placing the blame squarely on my students’ shoulders: these kids can’t read. With this refrain, I removed myself from responsibility.

Then, in October of that first year, something happened that has guided my path as a teacher ever since. Anne called me into her office one afternoon and asked me to come in early the next morning. It seemed that George’s parents had requested a conference with me.

George was a student in one of my classes. Though he tried hard, George couldn’t read. By that, I mean there were many multisyllabic words George couldn’t decode and plenty of single-syllable words that caused him to stumble. When he did manage to get through a story, he’d stare blankly at the page as I asked questions. His favorite response to any comprehension question was, “I dunno,” said with a shrug of the shoulders and a raise of the eyebrows that said, “Stop asking me questions.” I thought of George’s slumped posture, messy notebook, stubbled pencil, and hooded eyes as Anne repeated that his parents wanted to meet with me.

“Whatever for?” I asked, suddenly fearing my first parent-teacher conference.

“You’re his language arts teacher. They want to know why he can’t read and what you’re going to do to help him.”

“But Anne,” I pleaded, “I don’t know why he can’t read. He can’t read. That’s it. He just can’t read.” Anne peered again over those half-rimmed glasses and told me I had the night to figure it out.

I spent that evening going through the one book I had from my college days that I thought would come closest to helping me understand George’s reading problems: *The Norton Anthology of Short Stories*. But no, nothing in those hundreds of onion-thin pages gave me any insight into

George's difficulties. So, the next morning I walked into the school for what was not only my first parent-teacher conference but a conference in which I had nothing to say. George's father, mother, and Anne sat there, waiting.

George's father began: "We are here today to discuss with you George's reading problems." I nodded. He continued. "What we want is for you, his teacher, to tell us what those problems are." I kept nodding. Slowly, reluctantly, I began to speak.

"Well, George's problems, which are problems in reading, are therefore identified as *reading* problems." I paused. "These problems, reading problems to be specific, are problems in . . ." and suddenly, I knew the answer. Like it was delivered to me on a platter, I knew what to say. "They are problems in comprehension." Surely that was the answer. *Comprehension* is a somewhat technical term most often linked to discussions about reading. And the answer seemed to work. George's father began to nod his head. George's mother nodded her head. Anne nodded her head. I most certainly nodded mine.

Then suddenly George's father announced, "We know that." All heads stopped nodding.

"What does that mean?" he asked, none too happy.

I was undaunted. I could answer this question, for surely he just needed a synonym for comprehension. "That would mean," I responded, "that George has a problem with understanding." I stopped. Not a single head nodded.

I have no recollection of what happened next. I don't know what Anne or George's parents said. I don't know how we concluded the conference or how we exited the room. That memory is a blessed blank. What isn't a blank, though, is the absolute humiliation I felt sitting there in that room with those parents. It was apparent to all there that I had been hired to do a job—teach their son—and I didn't have a clue how to do that. I have carried that humiliation with me all these years, to every time I tell George's story, to this moment as I write these words.

The year moved on toward May. George continued to show up every day, to sit in that front desk behind the overhead projector, to sleep more than not, to draw intricate pictures on the margins of every paper, to occasionally attempt whatever task I put before him, only to be more sullen when that little effort resulted in yet again another low grade. So, at the end of the school year, I failed him. I don't mean I retained George; I wasn't smart enough to contemplate such a move or wonder what retention might or might not accomplish. I mean I failed him in the truest way a teacher can

fail a child: I never taught him anything he needed to acquire the literacy skills necessary for success in school, or in the world. I failed that child.

But George didn't fail me. George did what I have come to believe is one of the most powerful things an adolescent who struggles with literacy can do: George just showed up. Every day that year, George came to class. Yes, he certainly seemed disengaged from most of what we did, and it's true that he seldom brought his book to class or did anything that would prepare him for class, but he showed up. And occasionally he'd look at me with a look that asked if today would be the day that *I'd* get it right, if today would be the day that I'd say something that would help him make sense of text.

I've come to see that gesture of just showing up as a strength of character that continually amazes me. These students who struggle with reading know they struggle with reading; they know that they lack the single most important tool for success in school—the ability to read and make sense of texts—and they know that in not having that ability, they are open to ridicule from peers and from teachers. They do what I think is a last gesture at self-esteem: They choose to act as if reading doesn't matter. They sit slumped, heads on desk, or leaning back—far back—with arms crossed, sweatshirt hoods over their heads, sweatshirt sleeves stretched down over their hands, a look of disdain on their faces. They do anything they can to distance themselves from the place and the people who will remind them once again that they can't read. I don't blame them.

I can think of nothing that I do 186 days out of the year, in front of my peers, that I know I will consistently do poorly. Be honest. Can you think of anything *you* do that qualifies? I gave up tennis because it was too embarrassing to constantly run to that adjacent court and retrieve my errant ball. I stopped aerobics class, for I never could understand that grapevine-turn-around-dip thing, and I got tired of the instructor standing directly in front of me, shouting, "Cross-over *now*." Yes, I certainly understand that if I had perhaps put in more effort, I'd have become a better tennis player, better aerobics student. But the embarrassment I'd have suffered while getting better outweighed my expectation for improvement, so I gave up.

Students who can't read also give up. At first, they give up trying. Eventually, many of them give up on school. They sit in our classrooms disengaged, disinterested, and sometimes defiant. These students would prefer to get in trouble with us for not doing their work rather than be embarrassed in front of their peers for doing it wrong. They give us the most they can: they show up. I believe we must celebrate the courage required to walk through the doors day after day of a place that is designed to reward those

who can read when you know you are one of the ones who can't. Make no mistake. These students do not reach middle school or high school unaware that reading is a problem for them. They *know* they can't read; they've known it for years.

I don't know what happened to George. In that first year of teaching, I was more concerned about finishing the year than I was about tracking students over time. I can only hope that somewhere in his remaining years of school, some other teacher did what I failed to do and helped George become a member of the literacy community. Maybe that teacher already understood what I now understand—that when kids give up and drop out, they perpetuate the vicious cycle in which their offspring grow up in an aliterate environment and become the next generation of struggling readers whose teachers might chant: “These kids can't read.”

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Now, more than two decades later, I find myself ready to answer George's parents, to discuss what can be done when kids can't read. I do not claim to know all the answers, but over the years some have emerged. I'll share two critical ones here. First, there is no one answer to understanding why an adolescent struggles with reading. For there to be only one answer, there would have to be only one cause, and for there to be one cause, all students would have to be alike, learn alike, have had the same experiences. Instead, there is no single template for the struggling reader. Second, while there is no *single* answer, there *are* answers. My chant of “These kids can't read,” wasn't the wrong chant—they *couldn't* read. What *was* wrong was using that as an excuse for not teaching them. Once I was willing to add the question, “They can't read, so what am I to do?” then answers—not one, but many—began to emerge.

*When Kids Can't Read* explores those answers, offers direction for those of us who stand before students like George, who sit in small rooms with parents who wonder how we'll help their son or daughter, who know the consequences of failing a child. The fear I face in writing this book pales in comparison to the conviction I hold that we can make a difference. Guided by both, let's begin.