

The Reader's Bill of Rights: Analyses, Issues, and Insights

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Literacy teachers and teacher educators are currently under close scrutiny for their teaching methods, philosophical orientations, and the educational outcomes of their students. In this era of accountability and standards, many teachers find themselves struggling to reconcile what they believe about literacy learning and teaching with what legislators, the public, and the media advocate. Literacy educators often find themselves caught between two worlds as they read professional journals and attend university courses that support student-centered approaches to literacy education on the one hand, while they encounter back-to-basics approaches in the popular press on the other hand. In this politically charged time for literacy education, it becomes critical that educators discuss their beliefs, carefully analyze their reasons for these beliefs, and share their experiences and rationales with those beyond their own schools, colleges, and universities. In short, literacy educators must advocate for sound, meaningful, relevant literacy education for all students.

A highly literate society requires readers who not only can read, but who choose to read. In his book, *Better than Life*, Daniel Pennac (1999) describes how his own son went from being an avid reader who loved books to an adolescent who avoided and disliked reading. Pennac shares anecdotes and hypothesizes what factors might have contributed to his son's move away from reading and books. Based on his insights and experiences, Pennac offers a list of ten rights that

he believes will prevent other children and adolescents from developing the same negative relationship with reading that his son did. The Reader's Bill of Rights states that readers have:

1. The right to not read.
2. The right to skip pages.
3. The right to not finish.
4. The right to reread.
5. The right to read anything.
6. The right to escapism.
7. The right to read anywhere.
8. The right to browse.
9. The right to read out loud.
10. The right to not defend your tastes. (Pennac, 1999, pp. 170-171)

Colin Harrison (1997) responds to Pennac's Bill of Rights by explaining, "Teachers have many responsibilities: to their students, to parents, to their employers, and ultimately, in a democracy, to the government" (p. 12). As teachers attempt to address these important responsibilities, coupled with the rights of readers, they must balance what they know about how children learn to read with the standards, expectations, and goals of stakeholders in education.

The Reader's Bill of Rights is deceptively simple upon first glance. After more in-depth analysis and discussion, its complexity becomes more evident. The authors of this paper facilitated a Problems Court Session at the 1999 American Reading Forum Conference, and evidence of this complexity became even more pronounced after conversations among the facilitators and the Problems Court participants. This paper seeks to address three main purposes: (1) to provide results of a survey related to the Reader's Bill of Rights; (2) to discuss the outcomes of the Problem Court Session; and (3) to examine critical issues related to the Reader's Bill of Rights.

The Study: Methodology

Using Pennac's Reader's Bill of Rights, a survey instrument was developed (See Appendix). This survey was given to 268 teachers enrolled in literacy education courses at three universities in the midwestern and southern regions of the United States. Surveys included demographic information about each respondent's gender, professional position or goal, degree being sought, grade level (if currently teaching), and years of teaching experience. The remainder of the survey was divided into the following two sections: responding to the Reader's Bill of Rights about oneself and responding to the Reader's Bill of Rights about one's students. Responses were analyzed to determine frequency distributions and means. T-tests were also run on the data.

The following two research questions guided the study:

1. What are preservice and inservice teachers' views about the Reader's Bill of Rights for themselves as readers?

2. What are preservice and inservice teachers' views about the Reader's Bill of Rights for their students?

Results

The respondents to the survey were primarily female preservice teachers seeking a B.A. or B.S. degree in elementary education. Table 1 provides a breakdown of survey respondents in terms of gender. The majority of respondents were female (92.5%). Only 7.1 percent of respondents were males, and one respondent did not indicate gender.

Table 1

Gender of Respondents

	Number	Percent
Female	248	92.5
Male	19	7.1
No Response	1	0.4

N = 268

Most of the respondents were elementary teachers (62.3%), followed by middle school teachers (11.6%), special education teachers (10.4%), and other (10.4%). Only 4.9% of the respondents were secondary teachers. Table 2 provides information about the professional position or goal of respondents.

Table 2**Professional Position or Goal of Respondents**

	Number	Percentage
Elementary School Teacher	167	62.3
Middle School Teacher	31	11.6
High School Teacher	13	4.9
Special Education Teacher	28	10.4
Other	28	10.4
No Response	1	0.4

N=268

Most of the respondents were pursuing baccalaureate degrees (59.3%). A moderate number of respondents were pursuing master's degrees (29.9%), and 8.6% of the respondents were pursuing doctoral degrees. Table 3 shows the degrees sought by respondents to the survey.

Table 3

Degree Sought

	Number	Percentage
Certification	1	0.4
BA or BS	159	59.3
MA or MS	80	29.9
EdD or PhD	23	8.6
Non-Degree	4	1.5
No Response	1	0.4
N=268		

Table 4 shows the breakdown of respondents who teach at each of the grade levels from K-12. It should be noted that since the majority of respondents were preservice teachers, the “Not Teaching” category was the most common response.

Table 4

Teaching Assignment

	Number	Percentage
Not Teaching	144	53.7
Pre-K	5	1.9

Kindergarten	9	3.4
Grade 1	15	5.6
Grades 2-3	20	7.5
Grades 4-5	13	4.9
Grades 6-8	24	9.0
Grades 9-12	15	5.6
Other	22	8.2
No Response	1	0.4

N = 268

Table 5 shows the years of teaching experience for the survey respondents. Again, since the majority of the respondents were preservice teachers, the most common response was “0 years of experience.” Newer teachers with one to three years of experience also comprised a substantial percentage of respondents (16.0%). The next largest group of respondents was teachers with four to ten years of experience (15.7%).

Table 5

Years of Teaching Experience

Number

Percentage

0 years	148	55.2
1-3 years	43	16.0
4-10 years	42	15.7
11-15 years	10	3.7
More than 15 years	24	9.0
No Response	1	0.4

N = 268

Table 6 shows the average ratings for each of the rights. The first column reflects what the respondents believe for themselves. The second column reflects what the respondents believe for students. The third column shows T-tests comparing the two. Significant differences exist on all of the rights except for “the right to reread” and “the right to read out loud.” On all of the remaining rights, teachers afforded themselves the rights while they tended to reject that their students should have such rights. In other words, teachers felt they had the rights to “choose not to read,” “skip pages,” “not finish,” “read anything,” “read for escapism,” “read anywhere,” “browse,” and “not to defend their tastes,” while they were less sure that their students had these same rights.

A number of possible explanations can be posited; however, they are just speculations since the survey did not ask for respondents to explain or support their responses. First, as adults, respondents may feel they are entitled and capable to make choices about reading, not reading, or choosing what to read. Furthermore, since respondents answered about their own students,

they may have focused on academic reading – meaning that students in their classrooms do not have these rights when it comes to academic reading within the classroom. These hypotheses need to be confirmed by future research that specifically asks respondents to explain their responses and the contexts surrounding them.

Table 6

Respondents' Views of Reader's Bill of Rights for themselves and their students

Right	Teacher M (SD)	Student M (SD)	<u>T</u> (266)
1. Choose not to read	2.09 (1.11)	3.52 (1.02)	-17.70**
2. Skip pages	1.89 (.92)	2.95 (1.01)	-15.41**
3. Not finish.	1.81 (.84)	2.89 (1.05)	-15.63**
4. Reread.	1.22 (.44)	1.22 (.50)	.12
5. Read anything.	1.38 (.73)	2.38 (1.21)	-13.76**
6. Escapism.	1.65 (.81)	1.88 (.94)	-5.17**
7. Read anywhere.	1.60 (.87)	1.91 (1.02)	-6.00**
8. Browse.	1.35 (.54)	1.45 (.60)	-2.95**
9. Read out loud.	1.80 (.95)	1.81 (.96)	-.42

10. Not have to defend taste.	1.46 (.74)	1.78 (.93)	-6.56**
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(1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Uncertain; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree)

N = 268, ** $p < .001$

Table 7 shows the significant differences between elementary preservice and inservice teachers and middle/secondary preservice and inservice teachers in relation to the rights of their students. Those teachers who identified themselves as “special education” or “other” teachers were not included in this analysis since it was not possible to identify the grade level(s) of students they taught. The elementary teachers tended to disagree that their students’ had rights “to choose not to read,” “skip pages,” and “not finish” more so than secondary educators. Perhaps this difference can be explained by the emphasis on learning to read in the elementary grades and reading to learn in the middle/secondary grades. In addition, the older ages of middle/secondary students may be a factor in acknowledging their rights more so than the rights of young children in the elementary grades.

Table 7

Elementary and Middle/Secondary Teachers’ Beliefs of Rights for Their Students

Right	Elementary Mean (SD)	Middle/Secondary Mean (SD)	F (1,209)
11. Choose not to read	3.65 (.93)	3.31 (1.12)	7.08**

12. Skip pages.	3.13 (.96)	2.68(1.03)	12.73**
13. Not to finish	3.06(1.04)	2.61(1.00)	11.96**

(1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Uncertain; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree)

N=211, ** $p < .001$

Discussion

Surveys offer strengths and limitations when used in research. The main limitations of this study are related to the design of the survey. First, the survey did not elicit information to support or explain the respondents' thinking when answering questions on the survey. Second, the relatively small number of inservice teachers in the pool of respondents made it difficult to make comparisons between preservice and inservice teachers to see if differences do exist. In addition, the surveys were administered by the researchers in their own classes and colleagues' classes. Since the surveys were given during class sessions, respondents may have answered based on what they thought was expected by the professor, or they may have responded based on academic reading rather than including recreational reading in their considerations. In addition, only three universities were included in the study; a broader range of respondents across the United States would provide a more comprehensive view of the Reader's Bill of Rights. In addition, follow up interviews or focus groups with a sub-set of participants would allow for clarification or explanation of the responses and the related issues. Finally, student voices are missing from the present study. Including students in grades 4-12 in future research will provide greater insight into the Readers' Bill of Rights and related issues from students' perspectives.

Discussion of Issues Raised at Problems Court Session

The researchers presented the results of the survey, along with the survey instrument itself at a Problems Court Session. Approximately a dozen educators attended the session in addition to the six researchers. After sharing the results of the study, the researchers elicited comments, questions, and insights from participants. The goals of the Problems Court Session were to (1) share results of the study, (2), critique the design of the study and the survey instrument, and (3) to examine key issues, assumptions, and challenges related to the study and the Reader's Bill of Rights. Some of the major issues from the Problems Court session are discussed in the following sections of this article.

Reflection for Teachers and Preservice Teachers

The researchers noted that the survey respondents typically wanted to engage in discussion after completing the survey. While the researchers reported that such conversations occurred, these conversations were not considered as part of the data of the study. Problems Court Session participants suggested that such discussion and reflection might be considered an extension of the survey, leading to a focus group wherein researchers could collect narrative descriptions of the respondents' thoughts, feelings, and insights related to the Reader's Bill of Rights. In addition, several participants suggested that the Reader's Bill of Rights appeared to be a powerful tool for promoting reflection among teachers, beyond its use as a survey.

Reading Contexts

The issue of reading contexts was raised as the most significant question still remaining about the Reader's Bill of Rights. In other words, would respondents answer differently if

academic or recreational reading contexts were specified for themselves and for their students?

In addition, would specifying the types of texts (e.g., textbooks, literature, self-selected texts, electronic texts) influence responses?

Rights for All or Conditional Rights?

Participants raised the issues of whether the rights applied to all readers regardless of age and competency. This issue aligns with the results of the survey in terms of the greater likelihood for middle/secondary teachers to afford students the right to choose not to read, skip pages, and not to finish than elementary teachers. One participant raised the question of whether a first-grade child should have the same right to choose not to read as an adult? Others asked if the rights should differ in school contexts and out-of-school contexts? Another key issue focused on whether a teacher who believes children learn to read by reading can reconcile this belief with a reader's right to choose not to read. The general consensus among the Problems Court participants was that the rights were conditional in terms of age and reading context, and they must be balanced with responsibilities.

Range of Respondents

The present study included preservice and inservice teachers only. Clearly these individuals can provide important and interesting insights into the Readers' Bill of Rights; however, student voices were noticeably absent from the study. Participants suggested included students in grades 4-12 to gain insight into the rights they believe they have. In addition, participants suggested including librarians, parents, and the general public in the survey to provide a broader view of the Reader's Bill of Rights and related issues.

Standards and Curriculum

Participants raised issues about the current focus on standards in education and how this might influence respondents on the survey. Because of standardized curricula in an increasing number of schools, teachers have fewer choices about what to do in their classrooms. As a result, many participants felt teachers and students may not truly have complete control over the rights inside their classrooms. Participants tended to feel that students should have all of the rights when outside of the classroom, but they suggested that some of the rights (i.e., right not to read, right to skip pages, right not to finish the book) did not mesh with the goals and expectations for students during the school day.

Engagement

Participants suggested that future research on the Reader's Bill of Rights should address engagement. They argued that students often become disengaged because of the texts educators require them to read and the types of reading provided for them in school, as was the case with Pennac's son (1999). One participant noted, "if teachers believe all students must read, the questions should be: What can teachers do to engage their students in reading? How can teachers make their students choose to read and want to read?" Another participant noted, "the word 'choose' makes me think teachers need to give students more choices."

Controversy and Censorship

Some participants raised issues of controversial readings and censorship and how these fit into the Reader's Bill of Rights. One participant noted, "when kids find something they really like such as Harry Potter, adults try to take it away." What does the right to read anything really

mean? Certainly social norms come into play regarding types of reading materials that are out-of-place in schools (e.g., pornography, hate literature), but does this also apply to popular culture texts (e.g., comic books, teen magazines)? Participants felt the reading context was the bottom-line in making such decisions, with more rights afforded to the reader outside of school than in the classroom. Session participants then struggled with the teacher's role in the classroom in terms of guiding students toward quality reading. While the group was split on how much teachers should intervene and control student selection of texts, all participants agreed that as teachers, we must provide support and guidance to students, including in text selection. The form that support and guidance should take was viewed as variable, taking into consideration the age/level of the student and the reading context.

Considerations for the Classroom

Several of the participants posed questions about how K-12 classrooms would change if the Reader's Bill of Rights was acknowledged in all classrooms. Others asked how preservice and graduate education courses would change. At present, most teacher education programs are very prescriptive in terms of the classes, experiences, and competencies required. The question was then posed about what this type of prescribed program models for future teachers. Participants queried whether there was a way to give students the rights but also to help them develop and fulfill responsibilities that accompany rights. For example, is it viable for a teacher to tell students, "If you choose to not read the text, that's your choice. You'll still be responsible, however, to meet the outcomes."

Critical Theories

Critical theorists advocate status for the reader and the provision of authority of choice (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993; Shor & Pari, 1999). Accepting choice and readers' rights also begs the argument for a child's right to choose not to read. One could argue that there are many ways of knowing (Leland & Harste, 1994) and different ways to come to know. Furthermore, one can think of texts more broadly beyond just the textbooks and required readings in school. Thus choosing not to read does not necessarily mean loss of knowing or does it? Can a teacher who believes that education is a form of social justice (Ayers, Quinn, & Hunt, 1998) support students' choices not to read (Edelsky, 1996)? Participants described the tensions between what they believe as educators and what they feel they must do as teachers. This tension is not uncommon as teachers begin to examine fundamental educational questions such as "what is worth teaching?" and "who has the right to make this decision?"

Participants argued that educators must consider the rights of the child in life vs. the rights of the student in the classroom. In other words, while children may have all of the rights described by Pennac (1999), they may not have all of the rights while in the classroom. The struggle between authority and rights is a major dilemma for all educators who seek to empower and give students choice, while still providing sound literacy instruction.

Closing Thoughts

Based on the findings of the study and the Problems Court Session, the authors argue that additional research is needed to examine the Reader's Bill of Rights more fully. This research must consider the contexts for reading and provide opportunities for respondents to explain the

reasons for their answers. In addition, by including student voices, librarians, parents, and the general public, more insights can be gained on how these various stakeholders in literacy education view the issues surrounding the Reader's Bill of Rights.

Many fundamental questions still remain regarding the rights and responsibilities of readers and literacy educators. The Reader's Bill of Rights articulated by Pennac (1999) provides one way to look at the rights of readers, but many questions remain, such as: Do other important rights exist? Who determines the rights? Do the rights come with responsibilities? While surveys and conversations such as the Problems Court session described in this article may help educators begin to examine their beliefs and practices related to the rights and responsibilities of readers in their classrooms, such dialogues must continue long after the conference has ended.

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Appendix

Reader's Bill of Rights Survey

1. **Your gender:** A. female B. male

3. **Professional position or goal:**

A. elementary teacher

B. middle school teacher

C. secondary teacher

D. special education teacher

E. other (specify) _____

4. **Degree being sought:**

A. B.A. or B.S.

B. M.A. or M.S.

C. Ed.D. or Ph.D.

D. None

5. If a teacher, what grade do you currently teach?

A. Pre-K

B. K

C. 1st

D. 2nd or 3rd

E. 6-8

F. 9-12

G. other (specify) _____

5. Teaching Experience: A. 1-3 years B. 4-10 years C. over 10 years D. over 15 years

Daniel Pennac, in his book, *Better Than Life*, proposed the Reader's Bill of Rights. The researchers would like to know your thoughts and feelings about these proposed rights.

For the first ten statements, how much is each of the ten phrases like you (e.g., does it describe you as a reader?) Darken the corresponding circle on your answer sheet.

For the next ten statements, to what degree do you as a teacher agree or disagree that students should have the rights listed? Darken the corresponding circle on your answer sheet.

As a reader, I believe I have:

	Strongly			Strongly	
	Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Disagree
1. The right to choose not to read.	A	B	C	D	E
2. The right to skip pages.	A	B	C	D	E
3. The right to not finish what I read.	A	B	C	D	E
4. The right to reread.	A	B	C	D	E
5. The right to read anything.	A	B	C	D	E
6. The right to escapism.	A	B	C	D	E
7. The right to read anywhere.	A	B	C	D	E
8. The right to browse.	A	B	C	D	E
9. The right to read out loud.	A	B	C	D	E
10. The right to not have to defend my taste.	A	B	C	D	E

As a teacher or prospective teacher, I

believe my students should have:

	Strongly			Strongly	
	Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Disagree
11. The right to choose not to read.	A	B	C	D	E
12. The right to skip pages.	A	B	C	D	E
13. The right to not finish what they read.	A	B	C	D	E
14. The right to reread.	A	B	C	D	E
15. The right to read anything.	A	B	C	D	E
16. The right to escapism.	A	B	C	D	E
17. The right to read anywhere.	A	B	C	D	E
18. The right to browse.	A	B	C	D	E
19. The right to read out loud.	A	B	C	D	E
20. The right to not have to defend their taste.	A	B	C	D	E