Chapter 26
The “Little Readers’ Circle”: Infectious Love for Reading in a Middle School Classroom

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ABSTRACT
The “Little Readers’ Circle” was born as an attempt to encourage reading in a class of young adolescents. One of the authors worked in a middle school that served a socially and economically weak area in the North of Italy. The class, in its first year at the school, was composed of 11-to-12-year-olds. Over the course of a school year, one hour a week was spent sharing what had been read at home, presenting books that had been particularly loved, writing quotes on a dedicated poster, reading out favourite passages. Thanks to a well-organised school library and to enthusiastic support staff, all children could access books, some of them reading three books a month. Many even subscribed to the City Library to be able to continue reading over school holidays.

INTRODUCTION
The time of adolescence is crucial for many reasons. Teaching in a middle school is a delicate and demanding task. Often, it means having to find a way to “teach those who don’t want to learn” (Bagni, Conserva, 2005) and undertaking never to leave a pupil behind (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996). Amongst the many changes that happen to adolescents, there is a different approach to studying and, most of all, to reading (Bernardi, 2007). The risk, has been often observed, is that adolescents lose the pleasure of reading that they had acquired as children, and, with that, the desire to read.

Teachers’ daily experiences, as well as scientific evidence, tell us that students who read...
little or not at all have more difficulties in their school career and, in many cases, struggle to get to its conclusion. Conversely, “reading literacy … enables the fulfilment of individual aspirations – from defined aspirations such as gaining an educational qualification or obtaining a job to those less immediate goals which enrich and extend one’s personal life.” (OECD, 2006, p.45)

The high incidence of school dropouts is still a serious problem in Italy. The Book and Reading Centre (Centro per il Libro e la Lettura, 2011) tells us that in the last few years socio-economic and educational gaps have widened. Looking at who, and how many, the readers are in the country is very revealing on its long-lasting problems, first of all the serious social and territorial differences (ISTAT, 2011)

In Italy, where less than half of the population reads books (ISTAT, 2011), adolescents represent the highest percentage of readers (over 59%), with a peak of 64.5% amongst middle-school pupils (11 to 14-year-olds). Cause for rejoicing? Not quite. They are, in fact, mostly “weak readers”, who have read three or less books a year. This is hardly enough to maintain and increase reading competence: it has been long known that if poor readers do not read much, they will never become good readers (Allington, 1977). So, why do they read? Teacher and writer Daniel Pennac would say that they read because they have to, because teachers and adults ask them to, and often demand it of them. In any case, most of them don’t do it for pleasure. Yet there is a great, and growing body of research which highlights the importance of motivational factors in the development of children’s reading. For example, we know that ‘readers who become proficient are those who enjoy reading and who do it by choice as a voluntary activity in their leisure time’ (Ross et al, 2006, p.45). This point has been made even more compellingly by researchers such as Baker and Wigfield (1999), who found there is a significant link between reading motivation and (measured) reading achievement.

Apart from schools, what are the elements that can influence the reading habits of children and young people? ISTAT has no doubts: we can find more readers among the under-15s who live in homes with more than 200 books and have parents who read. We have here a vicious circle: the young person for whom books are not available at home tends to read less, or not to read at all. He or she will then become a non-reading adult and potentially a non-reading parent, and so the spiral goes on.

This mechanism was well understood by thousands of innovative teachers and headteachers who, since the unification of middle schools, and especially in the 70s and 80s, created and nurtured school libraries in many Italian middle schools. Today, more than 30 years later, both in Italy (MIUR 2011, MIBAC, 2011) and elsewhere in the world (IASL, 2011; Marquardt & Oberg, 2011), there is a new awareness of the central role school libraries have in the promotion of reading and in the all-round education of our young citizens.

A school with a good library, then, makes a difference.

I was lucky enough to work in one such school as a teacher of Italian in the school year 2008/9. The school library was functioning and well organized, thanks to the dedication and efforts of a small group of teachers, and this enabled me to set up the “Circolo dei Piccoli Lettori” (The Little Readers’ Circle) with a first-year class.

The middle school, where the experience took place, is in the town of Settimo Torinese, an industrial suburb around 11 kilometres from Turin. The town has a population of about 50,000 and was, until WWII, a rural place, where the main activities were agriculture and fishing on the Po River. From the 50s, however, the rapid industrial expansion led to a demographic explosion: from 11,000 people in 1951 to nearly 43,000 in the early 70s. It was a time of great population movements from the South to the North of Italy. Today, in Settimo, more than half the population was born in the south (Comune di Settimo, 2008). The process
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