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Read Alouds That Rock: Promoting Empathy and Positivity

By Patricia J. Murphy | Mar 11, 2024

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In this recurring series, we ask literacy experts in classrooms and libraries to discuss their techniques for selecting and sharing books to lead engaging storytimes for young readers of all ages.

With the growing number of books encouraging social emotional learning and inclusivity, young readers can see themselves reflected, walk in other children's shoes, feel all kinds of emotions—and even learn a lesson or two. *PW* spoke with three librarians who are choosing these kinds of titles to create storytimes that help promote greater empathy and positivity.

Billy Allen is a children's librarian and branch manager of the Whitney Library in Las Vegas, where he leads Tuesday storytimes. Allen's unique style of presenting read-alouds has visitors coming back each and every week to the library. It has also allowed him to take his "Adventures with Mr. Billy" storytimes on the road.

Allen said he carefully curates storytimes that are the right mix for his kids and their families. "My approach is to do stories that reflect my very diverse community and to choose books from diverse indie authors—and the more vibrant the better," Allen said, "so when my kids see the books later in the library or a store they'll say, 'Let's read that again!'"

Making sure that each storytime is distinct, Allen plays hip-hop tracks and other musical selections in the background to get things moving and grooving. "I like to incorporate lots of instrumentals," Allen said. "I may read a story to an Usher song to get kids, parents, and caregivers excited—to draw them in and to fully engage them."



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Billy Allen incorporates puppets in his storytime.

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Once he has his audience's attention, Allen might also add some poetic alliteration and exaggeration of the words to dramatize the story's language, the characters' problems, and the book's message. "I find this triggers their imaginations. They can visualize being a superhero or a magician, conquer the monster under the bed, and feel greater confidence," Allen said, "That's where the empathy comes in, because you have to put yourself in others' shoes." He also opens up the floor to conversation about the stories' topics and themes, and what kids may have noticed, learned, or felt. He hopes these discussions linger long after storytimes are over.

Some of the recent books he has used include *Alone Bird: A Book About Autism* by Amelia Peace, featuring a child with autism, *Young Black Boy* and *Young Black Girl* by Eugene Banks, celebrating Black joy, and *Mary Can!* by singer Mary J. Blige, about dealing with adversity and adapting to change. Allen believes these types of stories are a perfect fit for his community of readers.

"We have kids who are moving around all the time, having to meet new friends, and this can be intimidating," Allen said. "So, when we read books about kids dealing with all kinds of things, we can open up a dialogue about empathy and empowerment, create memories together—and at the same time encourage the love of books and reading."

Holly Brown is the school librarian and media specialist at Carver Road Middle School in Atlanta. Dubbed by one of her students "The Queen of Books," she is also known to have a book for every occasion.

"Our principal used to say that if anyone had a problem or needed a book on something, that I would have a book for that!" And if Brown doesn't have it, she knows whom to ask, and where to get it.

After she led a teacher book club on *Stamped* by Ibram X. Kendi, Brown got the idea to create the Empathy Book Challenge at her school. She chose seven books for the students to read and discuss. Thanks to a grant for Georgia school librarians from Read Something, Do Something, she was able to get five copies of each title for her challenge. Brown has also purchased additional copies of two of the titles and plans to hold a student book club with them.

"I started the challenge because middle school kids aren't known for their extreme empathy. It's all about them," Brown said. "It seems like we spend a lot of time teaching about kindness, but I think we need to teach more about empathy."

To join the EBC, Brown initially required students read one or all of the books and write about them. But then she decided against the requirement. "I didn't want them to do book reports," Brown said. "Now they can come see me and we can have a conversation. From talking with them, I can tell if they've read the book or not."

If students read all of the books in the challenge, she'll buy them McDonald's or throw a pizza party. So far, only one child has read all of the books, but she's hopeful that more students and teachers will check out the books and read them, join the challenge and the new book club, and develop greater empathy for the characters in the books—and people in real life.

After reading each of the books, Brown found that she's become more empathetic towards kids who have moved into the area from other countries, and LGBTQ students, among others, and is also keeping tabs on a student who shared with her that her mother had "Fat Rules" for her just like the main character did in *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps.



Holly Brown shares a book with students.

Brown believes this is all part of being a middle school librarian and media specialist. “It’s my job, my responsibility, to put books into kids’ hands that will increase empathy and make the world a kinder place for my students... and for all!”

Dr. Betsy Diamant-Cohen is a 25-year veteran librarian and the creator of the Mother Goose on the Loose storytime program for children up to three years old, and parents, librarians, and teachers. It is based on Cohen’s long-time colleague Barbara Cass-Beggs’s Listen, Like, and Learn program, which incorporates songs, puppets, hand movements, and more to teach the “whole child” taking into consideration their social, emotional, physical, and academic needs.



© Alon Diamant-Cohen

Betsy Diamant-Cohen leads a storytime.

Today, Diamant-Cohen travels the world teaching other librarians and educators about MGOL principles and best practices to help them create storytimes that encourage school readiness skills, empathy, plus a plethora of positive behaviors, and to model these for parents and caregivers.

One popular MGOL storytime involves a twist on The Itsy-Bitsy Spider song. Diamant-Cohen introduces her storytime group to the big brother of the Itsy-Bitsy Spider, who feels sad that no one ever sings about him. “I ask the kids, ‘Do you want to help the big spider feel better?’ and of course, they say, ‘Yes!’ ” Diamant-Cohen said. “Then, we sing his song with a deep voice and big hand

movements.”

With this sad-turned-happy spider, she said that they are learning empathy, the importance of sharing when something is wrong, and that librarians are safe adults. “We want the children to experience how good it feels if/when someone tells you something is wrong and you can find a way to help them,” Diamant-Cohen said.

Diamant-Cohen also pairs pictures, page turns, and elements of stories to create playful and joyful activities throughout the storytime. By using a felt board and a Humpty Dumpty character, she invites participants to help Humpty fall down. She said that this simple act gives kids a sense that they can do things, do them well—and in front of others. “We’re helping to create feelings that ‘I can do it!’ and ‘I am a smart and confident human being!’ ”

The Humpty Dumpty activity also offers an opportunity for each child to come up to the presenter to receive some kind of positive reinforcement. “We ask them, ‘Who would like to go first?’ They don’t have to raise their hands. They learn that they can come up when they want to, and receive a specific compliment for a job well done. This helps build confidence and self-regulation skills, including listening, following directions, and taking turns. It also offers motivation to try something new, work with others, and be a part of a community.”

While Diamant-Cohen sees firsthand how MGOL storytimes can help children unfold into the people they will become and get them ready for school, she believes they can also impact the world at large. “Storytimes in public libraries can be used to bring people together, to help create a more democratic society,” Diamant-Cohen said, “where we share what is common between us rather than what divides us.”

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