

Reading, School Culture, Libraries, and a Three-Legged Stool

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Note: Before reading this reflection, read Brian Goodman's research review article "Culture, the 'Secret Sauce' of School Improvement" at <http://www.mcrel.org/product/379> (check the table of contents).

COWS, STOOLS, AND MILK

Many years ago, growing up on a dairy farm, milking cows in the morning and in the evening, I would often sit on a three-legged stool behind the cow to attend to the new-fangled milking machines to see that all was in order. The task was not unpleasant, but if the cow was irritated at all, she would swat me in the face with a tail often layered with unmentionable substances. Words alone were insufficient to describe the irritation.

Later, during the past decade or so, various governmental bodies have become those cows' tails. Dissatisfied with NAEP scores, irritable flicks have cajoled, whipped, and demanded that reading, along with other practices, needs to be instituted. To the government's dismay, success rates have been mixed at best. There is no clear national solution declaring that the "right way" to teach reading has been discovered. No silver bullet. Just a nagging, flicking tail.

During my agricultural period teaching at the University of Arkansas, we had a family cow named Bones. No milking machine here. Just hands. Seated on the three-legged stool one morning,

I was caressing the milk into a bucket when one of the legs on the stool broke, sending me sprawling backward. Annoyed, Bones lifted her leg and stepped directly into the full bucket of milk. It would be dry cereal for the kids that day.

GOODWIN'S FINDINGS

I am impressed with Goodwin's research findings because they provide the elements of two strong legs of a reading school community. The first conclusion is that there are many basic principles for teaching reading that have been discovered over the years—something like a set of good ingredients that could be combined to make a delicious salad. We can label these as best practices aligned with data-driven decision making—a strong prescription for what is most likely to work.

Goodwin's second research finding is equally strong. Without a school-wide positive sense of culture, best practices fail. He arrives at this conclusion by citing a number of studies that compare successful schools against failing schools. In failing schools, the culture is negative, discouraged, overwhelmed, dissatisfied, and full of faculty who has just plain given up. They face every new "solution" with the same attitude: "this too, shall pass." Nothing anyone suggests is received with warmth, let alone enthusiasm. However, when the culture is positive, a second strong leg joins the first as a major indicator of success.

WHAT OF THE WEAKEST LEG?

And now to that third leg of our stool—the weakest leg that could break at any moment in our quest for success. It is the tipping point or crack that needs careful attention that can turn weakness to strength. Consider the following. Add your own.

- The loud voice of nay saying replaced by louder voices of optimism and determination.
- "One-size-fits-all" replaced by individual accommodation and attention.
- "That's the way we have always done it" replaced by flexibility, change, progress, and vision.
- "There is one right way" replaced by differentiation focused on success.
- Holding a job replaced by engaged professionalism.
- Powerful over powerless replaced by advocacy.
- "Don't make waves" replaced by leadership.
- Status quo replaced by passion and caring.
- Despair replaced by hope and vision.
- Yesterday's solutions replaced by today's progress and experimentation.
- "No one understands what I do" replaced by moving to the center.

Teacher-librarians have always been in a position to integrate best practices with a positive school culture and opportunities to mend cracks in the fabric of the entire school. The research advice is very clear: There can be milk in every cereal bowl today.