

[00:00:00] Speaker A: I like to say restorative reading and writing and kind of bring Bolt in there. And really, for me, it's just the kind of reading and writing that makes you feel better, full stop.

It's the practice. It's. It's the practice of settling in to reading and writing. It's the practice of specific kinds of reading and writing that make you feel like you. That make you feel better, that make you feel good, and often the kinds of reading and writing that can spark you to act differently in your actual life so that it just keeps going full circle. So it's, it's reading and writing, yes, but it's just this beautiful, you know, restorative kinds of practices that just make you feel better, using tools that educators typically already know and love, but just harnessing them a little bit differently.

[00:00:58] Speaker B: We are happy to welcome Stephanie Afonito to the podcast. Stephanie is a beautiful soul who wants to share the power of literacy to nourish healthy regulation.

We discuss the power of reading and writing to help all of us educators and students to be healthy.

This is Sticky Hope.

One of the places that our stories overlap and not the actual kind of plot of our lives or the way that they went, is that this has been true for our own personal lives. And I know that you have quite a story about how you've just come to realize this with your own reading and writing life.

[00:01:42] Speaker A: Yes. So, like many listeners, I've been adoring books and notebooks for as long as I can remember. They have always been my friends. They have always been just a part of everything that I do. When I was a teenager, I actually got sick with a really long, pretty awful chronic illness. And I feel like that's where my love of reading and writing was cemented, because, number one, I couldn't do anything else. Reading and writing were literally the only things that were available.

But I realized even back then, even though I didn't know why or I didn't have a name for it, I did feel better when I read. And when I wrote, reading took me somewhere else. It kept me connected, it kept me with friendships, it kept me figuring out what a teenager is supposed to do when they actually get out of bed later.

And then the writing, oh, gosh, the writing just gave me a space to communicate everything that I was afraid of, everything that I was feeling creatively to pass the time.

So it really became so such a.

A part of my life just woven into everything that I did, which, of course, is why I became a teacher and specifically a reading teacher. And Then eventually a reading coach. And now I am a university educator working with people who want to become reading teachers. And I've loved that job. I'm starting my 20th year, at least at the university, which is just crazy to. To think about.

And my work typically focused around literacy coaches. Most of my articles on choice literacy are around literacy leadership and coaching, and I love that work.

And then fast forward, though, to Covid and the illness that I had as a kid just came raging back, right? Just a perfect storm of stress and health and Covid and all of the things. And so I went. I went back to my. My roots, so, so to speak. And I realized, okay, what worked before, what made me feel good before?

And it was actually a book that someone dropped off to me because they knew when I was a kid, I read voraciously from bed. That actually led me to a doctor and a diagnosis and a protocol that got me better. And so I thought, I need to do that again.

And I did. I went right back to my reading life. I went back to my writing life. But this time I wanted to know why I felt better.

I wanted to know what it was about reading and writing that actually really seemed to do the trick for me beyond finding new information that could lead me to the next thing.

I just felt better when I was doing it. And it was in that process of uncovering it for myself that I realized reading and writing are really the underdogs of the wellness space.

There are opportunities there for those two practices to make us feel better in ways that not a lot of us know.

And especially for educators who typically already like these things or teach these things and do these things, there's this whole untapped world that if we just knew about it, we'd probably give ourselves a permission slip to lean into our own personal reading and writing lives more, which of course then just spreads joy to the classroom as well. That was a really long answer. But that, that. That is how I got into this. This special neck of the education woods that I'm in.

[00:05:05] Speaker B: Well, it's a long answer, right? But a really beautiful answer. And I think it's the short version, like, of really of what. What is happening there. But then, as you're learning, you are so giving. So your website is full of book lists for teachers.

There's a community that we can join. You have your podcast, A Lit Life, where you're really chronicling the way that you're using notebooks and the way that you're using reading to help you as an adult who's going through life. And I just think it's such a great resource for teachers. Becca, I know you've had similar experiences, right, with books and writing.

[00:05:46] Speaker C: For sure. My childhood was filled with books and notebooks, just like you said yours was. And it really is how I got through through some really tricky times. And I've watched that transfer over into both my teaching career and my life in. In the foster care world, both for myself, but also the kids I work with. And your. Your story reminds me of one of my students a few years ago who looked at me at one point and said, Mrs. Burke, I just need to go to the books to feel better. And he, like, plopped down in the middle of the rug and sat down surrounded by his favorite books. And. And like, he had had a really hard morning and he took that time. And so hearing the power in your story really helps me hope to continue that power for my students. But, like, also, maybe that's something that they're starting to feel as well.

[00:06:40] Speaker A: Oh, that just warms my heart. Books are always there, they're always patient, and they don't judge like it is the best condition to make yourself feel better. Same with notebooks, too.

[00:06:51] Speaker B: But what a mantra. I just need to go to the books to feel better.

[00:06:56] Speaker A: I think a lot of us feel.

[00:06:57] Speaker B: That way right now.

Stephanie, you have this just rich background in teaching readers, and we're living in this time right now where there's. Where we know more than we've ever known before about how kids

learn to read.

And I think you have. I'd love to hear some more from you about how you're balancing that, teaching kids how to read and also teaching them why we read. Really. Becca has done so much. A lot of her work is around, like, just that identity that we're developing. And so I'm wondering, you know, just how does all. What does that make you think? What it, you know, when we're thinking about that, how and why and the identity that we're developing in readers and writers.

[00:07:45] Speaker A: Yeah, it makes me think a lot. It's something that I have thought about for long time. As a university educator, we're charged with the task of leading the way to help prepare teachers that are effective. They know how to teach literacy, but also so that the kids in their care want to learn literacy. And it is this balance, and as you said, we have more information than ever coming at us in so many different directions and not always in a positive construction, constructive manner that can leave teachers quite overwhelmed. And I have figured, figured out that makes me sound very pompous. I have figured out, but I really think I have figured out, you know, that the, the best way, at least in my world, to, to help that balance is to support the teachers in their reading and writing lives. When teachers feel good, when teachers feel better, when teachers feel calm, when teachers feel happy, right? And they understand that there is a lot going on in the world of how to teach children how to read.

But when they remember what power that gives kids, what agency it gives them, how literally that learning how to read can change the trajectory of their lives, I feel like that, that why just reminds us so much of why we do the work we do, which makes the challenging nature of sifting through what's the. The so called right way, because we know it just depends on the learners that are in front of us. But going back to that why and that love and prioritizing that for educators, for me, has been very successful. In my college classes, we read picture books every single class.

We have our literacy attendance via Debbie Miller. And we talk about what have you read since last class, what have you written since last class? And, and I show them, or at least I attempt to show them, that even in the basic activities of learning letter names, you teach a kid their letter names, you can teach them to change the world later. And it's that constant reminder of what we do is so big and so powerful. And so you need to remember that yourself for when times get really tough. And so a lot of my work focuses on supporting the teachers in this area. So, so that that then connects to the classroom.

[00:10:17] Speaker C: Stephanie, you just made a beautiful connection to a lot of the other work that Ruth and I do in supporting kids and teachers in navigating tricky behaviors. And the picture that you painted of supporting teachers is really the work that teachers do to support kids who are navigating tricky behaviors. Right. Like, if a child feels safe and loved and supported and seen, that's half the battle or more of being able to support them in finding success and nourishing healthy regulation in their world.

And it's beautiful that you're teaching teachers to do that by doing it with them. And I just love the idea of how you're doing all of those things alongside them.

[00:11:05] Speaker A: Oh, thank you. It makes classes much more fun, that's for sure.

[00:11:10] Speaker B: Well, and it's easy when we're, we're in the thick of it, right? Or when things are feeling really heavy, we're like, what, what do I do? And I think, like, you have some really practical ideas. About how we are building these communities that maybe would prioritize, be the right word, prioritize some restorative practices. So just read on a podcast earlier this last

summer, you were talking about a pause pile, right? Where, like, you're actually prepping yourself. I have this pile.

So there's these things. So I'm thinking about a teacher. We're heading back into the year, and I'm already feeling heavy. I already feel like there's too much to do. I cannot get it done. The year is just starting and I am already failing. Like, what? And now you're saying, hey, take some time to read and write, and I'm going to. What do you mean?

So can you just help me? Like this.

How? What. What do you mean? Because you're not meaning, putting your life on hold. Because I know you too well, Stephanie. Like you, you understand this grind and the pace that we're going through. And yet there's something very important that, that you know about our own practices as readers and writers.

[00:12:27] Speaker A: Yes, you only need six minutes.

So when I talk to people, I say six minutes of reading is all it takes to change your body on a physical cellular level.

Six minutes. Your heart rate slows, your breathing slows, your muscles relax.

Six minutes.

So it isn't, as you said, about throwing out other things and adding this to your to do list, but just starting with that six minutes and then slowly building from there. There's this really wonderful piece of research that shows if you read for 30 minutes consecutively, doesn't matter what you read or how you read it, although you do have to read it rather than listen to it. 30 minutes of reading has the same impact on our parasympathetic nervous system as 30 minutes of yoga.

And I joke, maybe not the same on our muscles and the stretching nature, but it does have that impact on our physical health, which in turn then leads to the.

The emotional and mental benefits where research has shown it is decreased anxiety, decreased depression, increased happiness, boosted empathy, even having an impact on our health systems. If we add in writing, those benefits just go through the roof and even have a strong impact on our immune system. So I feel like part of.

Part of my job is to help teachers, to help everybody understand the why. Because when you, when you know what the potential could be of just six minutes a day, you're better able to find those six minutes. And I, I always love saying when I talk to groups of people, everybody pick up your phone.

Let's go to the settings on the phone and look up that screen Time. I bet we could steal six minutes, six minutes back. So it's about being real and saying you don't have to, you know, add a bazillion minutes to your day, but starting with six. Understanding why, so that you, you, you have that rationale for yourself kind of becomes a permission slip to, to see what you might be able to shift or, or even, you know, just steal six minutes of, of those back.

Yeah.

[00:14:43] Speaker B: So there's a couple things that I just want to clarify.

Okay, so you say six minutes, and that's not just Stephanie pulling a random number.

[00:14:52] Speaker A: No, no, no.

[00:14:56] Speaker C: There.

[00:14:56] Speaker A: You can all Google it. Or I could send you the research.

Six minutes is the minimum it takes to kick start. Now, the more you read, the more those benefits come. But it does only take six minutes for your body to calm down. And it's because of our eye movements moving left to right, left to right, left to right, systematically, that after six minutes of doing that, that's why it doesn't matter what you read, but six minutes of doing that, you're literally lulling your, your body. And, and there's lots of science to prove it.

[00:15:26] Speaker B: There is fascinating science to, to prove it. I'm just so intrigued by it. You also mentioned the parasympathetic nervous system. So I just want to clarify because, like, we love brain research, right. And so it just is rolling off our tongues. But for, for not everybo.

Those who are just kind of getting into it, we're very familiar with fight or flight. Like, we hear that a lot. And that's our sympathetic nervous system. The other side of our atomic nervous system is a parasympathetic. And oftentimes we'll hear that as the rest and digest.

So what you're saying to us is as we read or write, we're actually kicking on that quote, rest and digest system where we're, we're slowing down a lot of. Just the, the constant churning that we feel.

[00:16:19] Speaker A: Yes, that's it.

[00:16:21] Speaker B: Oh, go ahead.

[00:16:21] Speaker A: Oh, I was just gonna say that's it.

[00:16:23] Speaker C: Exactly.

[00:16:23] Speaker A: And you can only have one on at a time.

[00:16:26] Speaker B: Exactly.

[00:16:26] Speaker A: So after that six minutes, when you kick into that rest and digest phase, you know, the sympathetic nervous system, that is that fight or flight, it, it can exist.

So anything we can do to kickstart that, and the more often we do it, we'll have this wonderful cumulative effect on our systems as well.

[00:16:48] Speaker B: Exactly. And when we don't, what can happen is we're just kind of stuck in fight or flight all the time. And even in our Breathing, we can, we're very like adults oftentimes breathe very shallow instead of from our bellies. Like it's, it's all that. And we're like, wait a minute, what does this have to do with education or with teaching? And I think the three of us would say, hey, it has everything.

[00:17:12] Speaker A: Everything.

[00:17:15] Speaker B: When you're talking about 30 minutes of reading anything, does that

include scrolling?

[00:17:22] Speaker A: Oh, that's a good question.

So here's the thing. When you scroll, your eyes aren't going left to right, typically they're going up and down as you are going through that feed. You may have little pockets of left to right, but it's typically viewing. So. So the research shows that it is that left to right movement of printed text. And I say printed text, maybe I need a different word. So a physical book or an ebook, because your eyes need to move in that movement. And there's always a lot of questions asked of me, of, well, what about listening to books? That's real reading. It absolutely is real reading. But when adults are listening to books, they are typically multitasking. They're doing the dishes and walking the dog and doing all the things that is not allowing your body to set into a parasympathetic state. So I don't have the research on it, but I would say if you're listening and you're sitting and your hands are nicely relaxed and you're doing some deep breathing, then sure, that could kick it into, into gear. But it does need to be text where your eyes are moving left to right. So if you have a physical book or you have an ebook, it doesn't matter what you're reading to get those physical effects. But I would go a step further and say it does matter what you're reading if you want to get those extra mental and emotional benefits, because what we read matters, right? The media, we surround ourselves with matters. And reading books is one of those things. And this is where we could really geek out on the, the brain science. But it, it's because of the mirror neurons that we have in, in our brains. Like when we witness something happen to someone, the same neurons that would be firing in their brain are firing in ours. Mirror neurons, not nearly to the same extent, but they're there. That's why when we see something happy, we can feel happy. When we see something devastating, we can feel it in our hearts.

And so if we think about what we read, research shows that those mirror neurons fire. Whether we're watching it happen in real life, if we're watching it on a movie or if we are reading about it. So if we want to feel a certain way, then we need to read a certain thing, right? If you're trying to get nice and relaxed and cozy, you're not going to pick up, you know, the murder mystery of the day.

If you are wanting to feel, you know, better about something in your life or trying to work through a challenge than choosing books where the characters are doing that thing or have done that thing, or as you said, Ruth, have a. Have a pause pile ready, which is basically a pile of inspiring text to get you out of a rut.

You're firing certain mirror neurons for yourself, literally paving your subconscious way to feel the way that you want to feel. And so that's like the second layer of, I would say, benefits that comes from. From reading. The first is the physical benefit of whatever you read. And then the second, on top of that is if you're strategic and intentional about what you read, you can boost those mental and emotional impacts even more.

[00:20:34] Speaker B: Thanks for just lingering in that a little bit.

You know, we. We live in this world where it's just like everything seems so definitive. Like, if you do this X, Y, and Z in this exact lockstep way, then kids will read. If you do X, Y, and Z, then you can teach. And where I know in my life, it's just not that. It's way messier than that. And when I think about the stress and when I think about trauma that kids experience and trauma the teachers experience and just the anxiety, the loneliness, all of these things that we have, it's not always lockstep. That it is, hey, I'm going to take six minutes. I'm either I'm going to read or there's lots of research to writing, to journaling as well. It's this consistent practice. So I think the other thing that is just important for me to remember, that I need to remember for myself, is, is it's not just enough to do it one day that it's a consistent discipline that I'm trying again and

again. So we were in a writing retreat, all three of us together, and we were using the book of Alchemy. Stephanie, you are so familiar with this book that I've been following. So it's 100 journaling prompts written by a hundred different people. And I've been following it along, right? So I'm on, like, day six, seven, or eight today, and I was just reminded of the consistent practice that it takes. And we, I think so often we're looking just for this magic wand, like, let me do something once, and everybody's gonna behave and read and it's gonna be beautiful. And it. I just don't know that when we're focused, like, of course we're focused on helping kids learn to read, but what you're saying is, let's also focus on creating a community that can be restorative. So in the classroom, what does that kind of look like?

[00:22:34] Speaker A: Yeah. So in. In my book, Leading Literate Lives, I talk about three pillars, three elements of. Of a framework for developing a strong literate identity in both teachers and students. And that framework is habits, hearts, and communities. Right. That we have to have those habits in place where we know when we're going to read and write, we know what we're going to read and write about. We have those things around us to help us be successful. The hearts piece we just mentioned, we want to read and write things that matter to us, that help us meet whatever our goals are, that help us feel better. And that third piece is the community. To have people that are around you to talk books with and to write with, but in addition to that, to just feel part of a literate community.

[00:23:24] Speaker C: Right.

[00:23:24] Speaker A: That's why with my. My college students, we. We do literacy attendance every class. And that's basically okay, since the last time you've been here, what have you read, what have you written, what have you watched, what have you done? And. And part of it is in getting new book ideas and getting new journal ideas. But it's the community that forms around those things that matters. You start to get to know each other as people through the books we read, through the things that we write, and in that process, you realize you are in it together, you are not alone. And when you have that community, not only does that feel good, and there's all sorts of research that shows when you get to the end of your life, what's the one thing that makes people happy? It's meaningful relationships. When you feel supported, you act differently, you do things differently, you set yourself up for success, you are more proactive, you are kinder to yourself, you are kinder to. To others when you are less alone. And books and notebooks can be the threads of how that starts in the classroom.

[00:24:31] Speaker B: It's definitely true in your classroom, Becca.

[00:24:33] Speaker C: Yeah, my brain is firing all over the place right now, but I'm fascinated at the idea. I've known or learned about mirror neurons in the context of healing and regulating kids in trauma responses, typically. And I've been fascinated by the power of mirror neurons. But I'm sitting here wondering about how mirror neurons have helped to form these literacy identities in my classroom in the last decade.

And some of what we do is like, it's just who we are. Like, we're the kind of people who sit and read together, we're the kind of people who sit and write together. And like, it just becomes this community because it is what we do every day. It's the daily practice, it's how we do things.

And. And they go on to continue and carry on those identities.

[00:25:21] Speaker A: And.

[00:25:21] Speaker C: And I think they really do find. Well, I know they really do find themselves being grounded almost in the practices of reading and writing amidst whatever's happening

around them, even, like, when hard things have happened in our world. There was a really hard tragedy in our community a couple years ago, and I was anxious going back into, like, schools were shut down for a few days to handle the situation. And I was anxious to go back because I didn't know how we were going to talk about it with 5 year olds. And my kids knew exactly what to do. And they immediately wrote thank you letters and found stories of hope and they knew how to ground themselves in literacy before I could even get there in my brain. And that just speaks to the power of the identities that they had formed. Right. And it was because it's just who we were from the start of school. And like, these are kids who a lot of them come not knowing their letter names and letter sounds. And they still identify at the beginning as like, we are readers and writers. And so I'm excited to dig into the brain research of the mirror neurons and how they. They play roles in other ways than regulating and in trauma responses. But also I'm just like, grateful for the power that they've held in all of what we're doing.

[00:26:35] Speaker A: I love what you're talking about because when often when we talk about identity in readers and writers, we're talking about an individual, right? If a child feels that they are a reader or writer, if a teacher identifies as a reader, as a writer.

But what you're talking about is this collective identity, and that's the power in the community.

I want to go sit in your classroom.

Oh, thank you.

[00:26:59] Speaker C: It's pretty wonderful.

[00:27:00] Speaker B: It is pretty wonderful.

I always love talking with Stephanie.

There's so many just things that I'm jotting down from that conversation with her.

[00:27:16] Speaker C: I know it was one of my first times, like, getting to really talk to just her. I've gotten to write with her in different ways in the past and I found myself taking so many notes. And one of the things that she talked about and has released recently her own podcast about is this idea of a pause pile. And it's like this collection of books and other texts that are short and quick to read, but give you about six minutes of time to read. And it really works to regulate your body and your autonomic nervous system.

And so you and I are talking about building our own pause piles. And I was just thinking about the idea of like, I'm going to need a pause pile at school and at home, right? Like when I'm feeling dysregulated at school, I'm. I could go to my pause pile and, and then I'd for sure will need one at home too. And so, like, how to build that differently.

[00:28:18] Speaker B: You could have a pause pile that you use while you eat your lunch that you're packing for yourself each day.

[00:28:24] Speaker C: Yes. That will help me meet that goal, won't it?

[00:28:31] Speaker B: When I think about my pause pile, I really, I've been thinking about like some different picture books that I can put in it. You used to read picture books all the time. And that's just something that I've not read as much of recently. And I thought, oh, that'd be a really great thing to put there because they, they tend to be short and if they're not, I can just put a bookmark in it and come back. It would make me excited. So I've been thinking about like, what

would make me excited to go into the pause pile. So I have a book just about creativity that as one that I could dip in and out of.

That'd be great in the pause pile.

So we are inviting people to make pause piles and to share that. To tag Stephanie to share it with Sticky Hope. Becca, you're going to be posting pause piles, right?

[00:29:23] Speaker C: I'll put our piles on Instagram. And I was just thinking like, how fun it would be.

One of a different goal I have this year is to connect with like the greater school community. And so maybe when kids find a picture book that they think I would enjoy, like, they could add it, they could give me recommendations for the pause pile. I'm getting excited.

[00:29:46] Speaker B: Some days are rough. Maybe you've had a day complete with a capital D in your classroom.

We understand.

We've been there too, and we want to help.

The best thing on a rocky day is a good old fashioned care package.

At first that seemed impossible, but then we remembered Walt Disney said it's fun to do the impossible.

So we rolled up our sleeves and put together a soul soothing care package for teachers.

We call it the Sticky Hope Kit and would love to send it to you.

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