
MUSINGS ABOUT WILD READERS AND THE SCIENCE OF READING CLASSROOM OF TODAY: WHERE HAVE ALL THE READERS GONE?

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Abstract

Contemporary Science of Reading initiatives have strengthened literacy instruction by emphasizing evidence-based practices that support foundational skill development and equitable access to reading. However, these measures alone offer limited insight into whether students develop identities as motivated, lifelong readers. Drawing on reflective practice and Donalyn Miller’s concept of wild reading, this essay argues that effective literacy instruction must attend not only to cognitive skill acquisition, but also to reading motivation, classroom environment, student agency, and teacher beliefs—factors that shape not only how students learn to read, but how they engage with the world as readers. Through narrative reflection, classroom examples, and connections to literacy scholarship, this paper examines how access to texts, student choice, and meaningful relationships support the development of reader identity and the transfer of reading skills into sustained engagement. It offers a conceptual perspective that connects Science of Reading–aligned instruction with the development of reader identity, positioning these as interconnected rather than competing priorities. It further contends that wild reading is not a discrete, scheduled activity, but a student-centered philosophy that fosters motivation, ownership, and enduring reading practices that extend beyond the classroom and into the broader social world.

Keywords: wild reading, science of reading, reading identity, motivation

Award-winning educator and free-reading advocate Donalyn Miller writes in *Reading in the Wild*, her 2014 companion to *The Book Whisperer*:

While students’ standardized test performance, fluency checks, and use of comprehension strategies indicated whether they mastered basic reading processes, none of the data tell me whether my students are readers beyond a school-based definition. I can prove students’ reading levels, I can prove whether they have mastered the reading standards I am required to teach, and I can prove their ability to read strategically. But I cannot prove whether my students will be avid readers in the future. And no one asks me to prove it. (p. xviii)

Miller captures a central tension in today’s literacy landscape—one that feels especially pronounced within the current Science of Reading initiative. Contemporary literacy reform has rightly emphasized evidence-based instruction in foundational skills such as phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Petscher et al., 2020). These practices are essential for ensuring that all children, particularly those historically underserved, gain access to the code of

written language. Yet while these efforts help determine whether students *can* read, they offer far less insight into whether students *choose* to read—a distinction closely tied to motivation and engagement (Wigfield et al., 2016).

This concern is not isolated to U.S. contexts. A growing body of international research indicates a decline in students' reading for enjoyment across countries, alongside strong evidence that reading engagement is a critical driver of reading achievement and broader academic attainment (Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024). In fact, differences in reading engagement account for substantial variation in performance, often exceeding differences attributed to gender and demographic factors, underscoring the central role of motivation in literacy development (Wigfield et al., 2016). Students who read more frequently and with greater enjoyment develop stronger vocabulary, comprehension, and overall academic outcomes over time, as sustained engagement increases reading volume and opportunity to learn (Allington, 2011; Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024; Wigfield et al., 2016). In this way, students who read for pleasure are more likely to experience cumulative academic advantages and sustained engagement in learning across the lifespan (Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024). The development of “wild readers,” therefore, is not peripheral to academic success—it is foundational to it (Miller, 2014).

Literacy research consistently demonstrates a strong relationship between reading motivation and comprehension; however, students' motivation to read—and their engagement with reading—often declines across the school years (Wigfield et al., 2016), highlighting a concerning disconnect between what supports reading success and how reading is experienced in classrooms. This pattern suggests that the challenge is not only developing readers but sustaining their motivation to read across advancing grade levels. When instruction prioritizes skill development without attending to motivation, students may learn to read without developing the habits that support ongoing engagement (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020).

This tension resonates deeply with my experience as both a former PK-12 teacher and current teacher educator. I can document reading levels, analyze assessment data, and demonstrate fidelity to evidence-based practices; however, these indicators do not reveal whether students see themselves as readers or carry reading beyond the classroom. Increasing emphasis on assessment, pacing, and fidelity to scripted instruction—while grounded in legitimate concerns about literacy outcomes—can unintentionally narrow opportunities for meaningful engagement with text. What is often missing is the connection to reading that fuels sustained engagement.

For the purposes of this paper, wild readers are defined as individuals who demonstrate intrinsic motivation—a self-driven desire to engage in reading—alongside sustained engagement and the ability to independently select, reflect on, and value reading beyond school-based expectations (Miller, 2014). Building on this definition, wild reading is conceptualized not only as the development of this reader identity, but also as the classroom conditions and instructional approaches that support it.

Central to this conceptualization is reading motivation, defined as the combination of beliefs, values, goals, and interests that shape individuals' engagement with reading and their willingness to persist over time (Wigfield et al., 2016). Reading motivation influences whether students choose to read and continue reading over time and serves as a precursor to reading engagement—the behavioral and cognitive involvement students demonstrate during reading—which in turn supports reading achievement (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020). Students who engage in more frequent and sustained reading experiences tend to demonstrate stronger reading outcomes over time (Allington, 2011; Wigfield et al., 2016), a finding reinforced by international research linking reading enjoyment to academic success across contexts (Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024). Wild reading, therefore, extends beyond skill proficiency to include how and why individuals choose to engage with text across contexts and throughout their lives.

The implications of this shift extend beyond academic outcomes. Engagement with reading provides opportunities for individuals to encounter diverse perspectives, interpret others' emotions, and make sense of the world through sustained interaction with text (Louie, 2005). Research suggests that reading—particularly engagement with narrative texts—supports the development of empathy and perspective-taking by allowing readers to experience the thoughts and feelings of others. When these opportunities are diminished, the effects are not limited to literacy achievement, but extend to how individuals understand, relate to, and engage with others in a diverse and interconnected society. These concerns are particularly significant for students from historically marginalized communities, for whom access to diverse and representative texts plays a critical role in the development of identity, belonging, and engagement as readers (Bishop, 1990). Ensuring that all students have opportunities to see themselves reflected in texts—and to encounter perspectives beyond their own—is essential to fostering both individual growth and collective understanding. In this way, the question *Where have all the readers gone?* is not only about declining engagement, but about what may be lost when reading no longer serves as a bridge between individuals, communities, and ways of understanding the world.

Classroom Environments Where Wild Reading Lives

I think about the classrooms I have walked into over the years—some filled with energy, conversation, and curiosity, and others quiet, orderly, teacher-driven, and efficient. In which of these spaces does reading truly take hold? In classrooms where reading thrives, conversations about books are a natural part of the day. Children view themselves as readers, eagerly offer suggestions about what to read next, and engage with texts in ways that extend beyond assigned tasks. In these spaces, reading is not contained within a lesson—it is lived within the classroom community.

These differences point to the role of the classroom environment in literacy development, more specifically, to what DeVries and Zan (2003) describe as the sociomoral atmosphere of the classroom. The sociomoral atmosphere reflects the norms, relationships, and shared expectations that shape how individuals interact, participate, and make meaning within a learning community. In literacy contexts, this atmosphere influences not only how students engage with texts, but how they come to see themselves and others as readers.

From a constructivist perspective, learning is inherently social. Drawing on the work of Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1978), DeVries and Zan (2003) argue that classrooms should be structured to support autonomy, collaboration, and mutual respect, positioning children as active participants in their learning. Within this context, student agency refers to students' capacity to make meaningful choices, take ownership of their learning, and actively shape their engagement with texts and classroom experiences. In such environments, students are not passive recipients of instruction, but contributors to a community of learners—one in which dialogue, perspective-taking, and shared inquiry are central.

At the beginning of the school year, the teacher plays a critical role in establishing this sociomoral atmosphere; however, this influence is intentionally fluid. As students assume increasing responsibility—through structures such as the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983)—the classroom becomes increasingly their own. It evolves into a space where students take risks, learn from one another, and engage in meaningful conversations about texts and ideas.

This perspective aligns with Miller's (2014) assertion that when we teach and assess reading, we cannot overlook the emotional and relational dimensions that sustain lifelong reading. Yet these elements are often minimized in instructional decision-making, in part because they resist easy measurement.

Adults intuitively understand this connection: when we feel unsafe, disconnected, or unseen, our ability to focus diminishes. For children, the classroom environment becomes the primary space where belonging, safety, and engagement are either cultivated or constrained (Vygotsky, 1978; Wigfield et al., 2016). While Science of Reading initiatives ensure access to foundational skills, the sociomoral atmosphere of the classroom shapes whether students take up those skills in meaningful ways—whether they participate, persist, and ultimately see themselves as readers (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020; Wigfield et al., 2016).

Miller (2014) reminds us that while standards and learning targets define what must be taught, teachers—alongside their students—construct the classroom environment. Interactions between teachers and students shape a climate that supports both academic learning and social-emotional development. This insight is especially relevant within Science of Reading–aligned classrooms. Structured literacy does not require sterile environments; rather, it is most effective when implemented within spaces that invite risk-taking, discussion, and curiosity. Reading development emerges through the integration of skills, language, and context—not through rigid or decontextualized instructional approaches (Seidenberg et al., 2020).

When classroom environments prioritize compliance over meaning, opportunities for authentic engagement diminish—what Gallagher (2010) describes as “readicide,” or the erosion of students’ motivation and engagement with reading. In contrast, classrooms grounded in a strong sociomoral atmosphere position students as capable, valued participants in a community of readers. It is within these environments that wild reading becomes possible—not as an isolated practice, but as a natural extension of belonging, agency, and sustained engagement with text.

This perspective directly informs my own approach to teaching. While Science of Reading initiatives provide essential guidance on what to teach, teachers play a critical role in shaping how that instruction is enacted in practice. The sociomoral atmosphere should not be an add-on, but a foundational component of learning. In this way, effective literacy instruction is defined not only by what is taught, but by the environments in which learning is made possible.

Wild Reading as a Philosophy—Not a Time Slot

If classroom environments shape whether reading lives or fades, then the question becomes not only what we teach, but how we position reading within the day. I find myself wondering how reading has become something we schedule rather than something we live. In many classrooms, extended literacy blocks are filled with carefully sequenced tasks yet offer limited opportunities for authentic engagement with rich texts, student choice, voice, or the joy that emerges from meaningful connections to what is read. When did reading shift from a lived, meaningful experience to something contained within instructional routines only?

This distinction highlights an important misconception in literacy instruction. Wild reading is not a discrete activity or time slot, but a broader philosophy that shapes how reading is positioned within the classroom (Miller, 2014). Rather than being confined to a designated block, wild reading reflects the conditions under which students experience reading as meaningful, self-directed, and connected to their lives beyond school.

This shift raises an urgent question: are we preparing students to read within the classroom, or to read beyond it—into what Miller (2014) describes as reading “in the wild”? The International Literacy Association (2018) warns that reading as a leisure activity may “virtually disappear” if these trends continue (p. 2). While Science of Reading initiatives have strengthened foundational skill instruction (Petscher et al., 2020), they do not, on their own, ensure that students develop the desire to read independently. Without intentional attention to access, choice, and engagement, we risk preparing students to read without cultivating lifelong readers.

Within Science of Reading conversations, wild reading is sometimes positioned as enrichment—or even as a distraction from explicit instruction. Miller (2014) challenges this

framing, urging educators to examine whether reading initiatives support or hinder the development of wild reading habits. Students must learn to make their own reading plans, reflect on their accomplishments, and find personal reasons for reading—otherwise, they will not become wild readers.

From this perspective, wild reading is best understood not as a scheduled block of time, but as a classroom-wide approach that shapes how reading is experienced (Miller, 2014). Rather than standing in opposition to the Science of Reading, it represents a natural outcome of effective instruction. Students must first learn how reading works (Petscher et al., 2020), but they must also develop reasons for engaging with reading beyond instructional contexts (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020; Wigfield et al., 2016). This distinction reinforces the role of motivation and agency as essential components of reading development—not as add-ons, but as outcomes that support sustained engagement. In this way, wild reading is not something extra we make time for, but something that emerges when the conditions for meaningful engagement are intentionally designed.

What resonates most strongly is Miller’s modeling of herself as a reader. By openly sharing her reading goals, challenges, and evolving preferences, she invites students into her thinking (Miller, 2014). This “living out loud” positions the teacher as a more knowledgeable other, modeling reflection, persistence, and authenticity. In doing so, students learn not only *how* to read, but *why* readers read.

This kind of modeling extends beyond formal instruction and is often reflected in small, meaningful interactions that shape how students experience reading. I am reminded of a moment from my own childhood. One summer, I received a postcard from a teacher recommending a book she thought I would enjoy. I remember the feeling of being seen—not as a student completing an assignment, but as a reader with preferences and interests that extended beyond the classroom. I sought out the book, read it, and loved it. This simple gesture reinforced that reading was not confined to school but lived in the spaces between—in moments of curiosity, connection, and choice.

These experiences highlight an important consideration: if wild reading is shaped by how reading is positioned within the classroom, it is equally dependent on whether students have access to the texts and experiences that make reading possible.

Reading in the Wild: Access, Libraries, and Equity

I think back to moments in my classroom when a read-aloud didn't end with the final page but instead sparked something more. I found myself sharing my own excitement about the story—talking about the author, wondering aloud what might happen next, and inviting students into that curiosity with me. Students leaned forward, asked for more, and began to seek out similar books on their own. It was in these moments that reading extended beyond the lesson—when curiosity and enthusiasm took hold and students began to carry reading with them.

These moments highlight an important truth: access to texts alone is not enough—students must also be invited into reading in ways that spark curiosity and sustained engagement. At the same time, access remains a critical foundation. Research linking access to texts with reading achievement is substantial (Allington, 2011; Wigfield et al., 2016). Without access, the conditions necessary for meaningful reading experiences cannot exist.

Yet well-organized, inviting classroom libraries are increasingly rare in many classrooms (Allington, 2011; Gallagher, 2010; International Literacy Association, 2018). Books are often stored rather than curated, and opportunities for self-selected reading are limited. Teachers frequently report having limited time for both independent reading and read-alouds, positioning these practices as enrichment rather than essential components of literacy instruction. As instructional time becomes increasingly constrained by content coverage and standardized test preparation, these

foundational experiences are often pushed aside—despite the International Literacy Association’s (2018) assertion that they are essential, nonnegotiable components of every child’s right to read.

These patterns raise important questions about who has access to meaningful reading experiences—and under what conditions. This question carries significant equity implications. For many students—including those from historically marginalized communities—access to books, time for reading, and opportunities to engage with meaningful texts are not guaranteed outside of school (Allington, 2011; International Literacy Association, 2018). When classrooms do not provide these experiences, disparities in both reading achievement and reading engagement are likely to widen.

Bishop (1990) reminds us that books serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors—allowing readers to see themselves, encounter others, and step into new perspectives. Without access to diverse and representative texts, students may struggle not only to develop as readers, but to see reading as relevant to their lives and identities.

In contrast, wild reading—supported by rich classroom libraries, intentional read-alouds, and opportunity to read whole books—creates more equitable opportunities for students to engage deeply with connected ideas, topics, and genres. These experiences not only build background knowledge but also foster motivation and engagement (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020; Wigfield et al., 2016), supporting the development of readers who not only *can* read, but *choose* to read.

And yet, even in classrooms where books are present, readers do not always emerge. Access creates possibility, but it does not guarantee engagement. The critical work, then, lies in how access is activated—through invitation, interaction, and the intentional design of reading experiences that position students as participants in a community of readers. This raises a central question: what does it take to move from access to experience—to foster readers who not only can read, but choose to read?

Becoming—and Teaching—Wild Readers

I find myself returning to a question that feels both personal and professional: would the students in my care become wild readers because of what I do? If I am honest, the answer is uncertain. When I consider my own development as a reader—shaped so deeply by experiences beyond formal instruction—I wonder whether today’s classrooms create similar conditions for the students I teach.

My love of reading did not emerge from instruction alone, but through experiences that allowed me to explore, make choices, and develop a sense of ownership as a reader. Miller (2014) identifies choice as central to cultivating wild readers, emphasizing the importance of discovering preferred authors, genres, and topics. I recall the excitement of discovering books that stretched me as a reader—experiences that were not structured or assessed, yet deeply formative. I felt seen by teachers who recognized my interests and guided me toward texts that both reflected and expanded who I was as a reader.

As a classroom teacher, I have intentionally worked to recreate these kinds of experiences by embedding literature into meaningful, integrated contexts. When stories are introduced with elements of mystery, props, and opportunities for retelling and reinterpretation, engagement deepens. Over time, I developed these text sets—collections of intentionally curated, thematically connected texts and materials—to connect stories, materials, and opportunities for inquiry in ways that invite students into active meaning-making, long before I had a formal name for them. One of my favorite examples is a fairy tale unit that begins with a mysterious letter from a Giant. Each week, new materials and texts are introduced, inviting students to revisit and reimagine familiar stories. These are the experiences students remember—the moments when engagement deepens and reading becomes meaningful. These experiences also shape how I support teacher candidates in

designing literacy-rich environments that extend beyond skill instruction to foster engagement and reader identity.

Yet these reflections point to a persistent tension: despite significant advances in how reading is taught, reading outcomes remain inconsistent at a national level, as reflected in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). When reading is framed primarily as a technical skill—something to be mastered through strategies and assessments—it risks losing its sense of wonder. Students may learn to perform reading, but not to live as readers. This tension reflects broader concerns in literacy research regarding the gap between skill acquisition and sustained reading engagement (Wigfield et al., 2016).

This issue raises an important consideration: will students' reading extend beyond the classroom or remain confined to school contexts, positioned as something to complete rather than something to carry with them? For educators, this question is not simply philosophical—it is instructional. It asks us to consider not only how we teach reading, but how we design experiences that invite students to become readers in ways that endure beyond the classroom.

Reader Identity, Relationships, and Teacher Practice

I think back to the teachers and the books that shaped me—not just what was taught, but how those experiences came together. Teachers who noticed my interests guided me toward books with rich characters and diverse settings—stories that stayed with me, expanded my understanding of the world beyond my own borders, and, in turn, deepened my understanding of myself as a reader. I find myself wondering: who would I have become without these experiences?

This reflection highlights the role of relationships in shaping reader identity. Miller (2014) emphasizes that students' preferences provide a starting point for building meaningful reading relationships. By offering texts aligned with students' interests, teachers build confidence; over time, deeper knowledge of students allows educators to extend and challenge their reading identities.

This idea resonates deeply with my own development as a reader. While my parents encouraged reading, it was a fifth-grade teacher—Miss Firestone—who truly changed my trajectory. I was a strong but quiet student. Although I performed well academically, it was in her classroom that I felt genuinely seen. She took the time to know me not simply to build a relationship, but to teach me—to stretch me, challenge me, and guide me beyond my comfort zone. After her class, I believed in myself in a way I had not before.

This experience continues to shape how I understand relationships in schools. Relationship-building is often emphasized, yet it can become superficial when disconnected from instruction. Relationships matter not as an end in themselves, but as a foundation for responsive teaching. When teachers understand students' motivations, interests, and learning patterns, they can design environments and experiences that foster both growth and engagement (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020; Wigfield et al., 2016).

Seen through this lens, reader identity develops at the intersection of motivation, meaningful relationships, and engagement. Reader identity can be understood as how individuals perceive themselves as readers—including their sense of competence, value for reading, and beliefs about their engagement with texts over time (Wigfield et al., 2016). When a teacher takes the time to recommend a book based on a child's interests, the message is clear: you are a reader, and your preferences matter. This positions students as active participants in their learning—a shift that is central to the development of wild readers (Miller, 2014).

These ideas also connect to teacher identity and reflective practice. Miller (2014) argues that effective teaching is grounded in core beliefs and that reflection must serve as a tool for recalibration rather than compliance. Similarly, Thøgersen (2009) describes personal norms as deeply internalized

obligations shaped through reflection. When teachers act in alignment with these beliefs, they experience coherence and professional agency; when they do not, dissonance emerges.

In the context of literacy instruction, this disconnect has become increasingly visible. As educators navigate Science of Reading initiatives, they may perceive that their beliefs about relationships, engagement, and child-centered learning must be set aside in favor of structured, evidence-based practices (Petscher et al., 2020). For many, this is not simply an instructional challenge, but a question of professional identity.

However, this perceived divide presents a false choice. Science of Reading initiatives provide the essential foundation for literacy instruction, ensuring that students develop the skills necessary to access text (Petscher et al., 2020). At the same time, a “reading in the wild” philosophy attends to the development of the whole reading self—centering motivation, identity, and the conditions that sustain engagement beyond the classroom (Miller 2014; Wigfield et al., 2016).

When viewed together, these approaches are not in opposition but mutually reinforcing. Science of Reading builds the skills necessary for reading; however, without attention to the whole reading self, those skills may remain unused or disconnected from meaningful engagement. Opportunities for choice, meaningful text experiences, and responsive relationships create the conditions in which reading is not only learned, but lived (Miller, 2014; Wigfield et al., 2016). In this way, fostering wild readers is not an alternative to Science of Reading, but an outcome of it—one that depends on intentional attention to both skill development and the environments in which reading lives.

For teacher candidates and practicing educators alike, fostering wild readers requires more than implementing strategies—it requires clarity about one’s beliefs about children, reading, and the purpose of literacy instruction. In this way, the development of reader identity is inseparable from the development of teacher identity.

Ultimately, the promise of the Science of Reading is not only that students learn to read, but that they come to live as readers. When skill development is paired with attention to motivation, identity, and meaningful engagement, literacy instruction moves beyond proficiency toward purpose. When opportunities for meaningful reading are diminished, the implications extend beyond literacy outcomes to how individuals understand and relate to others in a diverse and interconnected society. Reclaiming this balance may be one of the most important steps educators can take—not only to support literacy development, but to ensure that reading endures as a meaningful, humanizing practice in the lives of students—and in the society they will shape.

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