

What Your Colleagues Are Saying...

“In this wonderfully honest book, Justin Stygles shows how our traditional ways of teaching reading—our use of scores, labels, interventions, judgments—are shame-inducing for many students, who retreat to avoidance behavior (“reading is boring!”) or learn to fake it. Stygles is open about how, for a time, he went along with these practices but broke free to pay attention, build relationships, ask questions, become a model, and provide the support students need. It’s a stirring journey.”

—Thomas Newkirk

Professor emeritus, University of New Hampshire
Author, *Embarrassment: And the Emotional Underlife of Learning*

“*I Hate Reading’: Overcoming Shame in the Reading Classroom*, based on Justin Stygles’s years of teaching, narrates the author’s journey into helping students understand themselves as readers, including the why behind their choices of books, avoidance through fake reading, and how they perceive themselves as readers, thinkers, and learners. Rich in diverse ways to get to know students, how to use writing about reading to reveal each student’s feelings and reactions to books, and techniques and questions that can help students construct positive reading identities, Justin continually models the importance of being honest yet nonjudgmental while interacting with students. It’s the powerful stories about individual students and sample conferences between Justin and a student that breathe energy, passion, and deep meaning into his teaching suggestions, inviting you to return to them to reread and re-experience the honesty and pain expressed by students and how Justin responds. An essential guide for teachers in all grades, the book is compelling because it’s written with love and honesty and based on Justin’s teaching and learning journey as well as grounded in research. You’ll return to parts again and again as you strive to create a safe environment for students and give them all the time they need to shift from hating and avoiding reading to choosing to become a reader!”

—Laura Robb

Author, *Guided Practice for Reading Growth* and
Read, Talk, Write: 35 Lessons That Teach Students to Analyze Fiction and Nonfiction

“Justin Stygles *sees* his students. He acknowledges the layers students bring into a classroom, from trauma, poverty, and negative self-perceptions to the perfectionist who performs for others. He is conscious of how shame permeates the lives of his students and how they have become disconnected from reading. Through building an interpersonal bridge with students, he is able to construct a space where students do not fail but rather discover who they are through reading. Stygles’ pedagogy gives merit to the power of relationships; students not only develop a stronger sense of self but also emerge as authentic readers. *‘I Hate Reading’: Overcoming Shame in the Reading Classroom* delves into why many students loathe reading and gives tangible, student-centered methods that generate intrinsic motivation in our students to treasure reading. To demonstrate his approach to students and reading, Stygles incorporates ample student examples with each strategy outlined. This book changes the way we have traditionally tried to engage students and asks educators everywhere to pause and think about the individual, the student, the reader.”

—Laura Mewa

Assistant Principal

“*‘I Hate Reading’* looks closely not just at what reluctant readers do but also how they feel. When we uncover and acknowledge shame, we create the context for students to experience other feelings as readers, such as joy and pride. Thank goodness Stygles brings his years of experience as a teacher and a scholar to help us all ask a different set of questions about the student readers we support. Full of research, relatable vignettes, and concrete tools to try, this book will change the way you view the student readers who keep you up at night.”

—Gravity Goldberg

Author, *Teach Like Yourself* and
Mindsets and Moves

“Justin Stygles’s book offers new insight into finding connections and reaching our students where they are. We all know teaching is about building relationships, but Stygles looks at the intersection of years of established reading pedagogy and everything we know about building relationships and then takes a step backward to focus on the barriers to both, which are rooted in shame. He then offers practical solutions for breaking down those barriers. My students are in high

school, yet the dysfunctional behaviors Stygles attributes to shame are still apparent at that level—perhaps more so. The research in this book offers hope that it is not too late to discover and eliminate those barriers and to instill a love of reading in my most reluctant learners. This book is a thorough examination of the ways in which shame holds our students back, an honest look at the role we may play in perpetuating the shame cycle, and a guide to inform our actions going forward as we continue in our efforts to build resilient readers.”

—Stephanie Fearn

Literacy coach, secondary English teacher,
and adjunct professor

“As much as we’d like all students to associate reading with joy, often students come to our classrooms with negative perceptions of themselves as readers. In his powerful self-reflection, Justin is brave enough to unpack his instructional practices that have had unintended negative consequences on his students. I’ll admit it: At some points, it was hard for me to read Justin’s words as he stirred up my own shameful memories of when I had failed my own students. But ultimately, this book pushed me to understand how to better connect to students for whom reading does not equate with joy. Full of candid conversations and classroom resources, this book helps us transform reading shame into reading pleasure.”

—Molly Ness

Author, *Every Minute Matters*, and
Think Big With Think Alouds, Grades K-5

“Justin Stygles has done what no other author has done: He’s discussed students’ reading identity in relationship to the delicate subject of shame. Justin gives teachers a means to help students grow their ability and passion to read while guiding their emotional growth and development as learners. This book provides a path for teachers to take to heal students’ emotional selves and also develop their passion as readers. The tips for assessment and instruction focus also work well in classrooms where students may be learning to work together in groups and where students are becoming part of a reading community.”

—Nancy Akhavan

Author, *The Big Book of Literacy Tasks, Grades K-8*

“This book is a labor of love. Justin Stygles unequivocally gets to the heart of what our students need. This is a must-read by all educators who want to grow and refine their practice as literacy teachers. What matters the most is that all our students are successful, accepted, and embraced in all classrooms, regardless of reading levels.”

—Kara DiBartolo

Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Innovation
The Sherman Public Schools, Sherman, CT

“Justin’s book cuts through the competing agendas within schools to remind us that our job as educators is to improve the lives of our students.”

—Talya Edlund

Assistant Principal, 2016 Maine Teacher of the Year

“Justin’s passion for engaging his learners and his clear descriptions of how to attain solid literacy development are encouraging and refreshing. It warms my heart as an experienced school administrator that he has worked diligently to get his message out to other educators and parents on proven practices to improve literacy. My hope is for Justin to continue teaching and share further professional development on how to develop student confidence and security in their reading and writing.”

—Ken Spinney II

Special Education Director

"I Hate Reading"

"I Hate Reading"

Overcoming Shame in the Reading Classroom

Justin M. Stygles

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FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12
China Square Central
Singapore 048423

President: Mike Soules
Vice President and
Editorial Director: Monica Eckman
Director and Publisher,
Corwin Classroom: Lisa Luedeke
Senior Content Development
Manager: Julie Nemer
Editorial Assistant: Nancy Chung
Project Editor: Amy Schroller
Copy Editor: Deanna Noga
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Lawrence W. Baker
Indexer: Integra
Cover Designer: Rose Storey
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Visit the “*I Hate Reading*” companion website at
resources.corwin.com/ihatereading
for these downloadable resources.



PREFACE



Hi. My name is Deven Johnson. I know you don't like me. You're always upset with me because I "never do anything," especially reading.

Remember last Thursday? You were mad at me because I didn't write a response during test prep. You snapped at me this time. That was new. I told you I wasn't interested in what I read, so I didn't answer the question.

You said, "That's unacceptable! You're better than that."

I am, though? Really?

Then you looked at me with that disappointed look you always give me. You know the one where you know you can't "fix" anything about me, even though you want to?

Remember last week? You said I reminded you of you when you were my age?

You said that you didn't have a dad much growing up.

You said that you went to school looking scrappy, with cigarette-scented clothes?

You talked about how you overcame it, and I could, too, if integrity mattered to me. (What's integrity anyway?)

You said something funny like, "If you hold yourself to a high standard, despite what is happening in your life, you will rise above."

It sounded stupid, and I don't know what you meant.

Here's what I do know. Every other teacher tried being nice to me, but I know they only did it because they felt bad for me.

Remember last month? You caught me reading the same picture book again? I said I left my book at home. Again. Actually, I don't know where it is. You'll say I lost it. You've also never been to my house. Worse, I hate it when you catch me. It's like you're "targeting" me.

Even though every other teacher was nice, why can't you ignore me like they did? Don't you have a favorite you can go smile with and leave me alone?

So what if I left my book at home? Don't people expect that of me? I always do it, then they say, "It's ok, just try to remember it tomorrow." I try. I just don't remember. (You're probably going to think I don't care.) And also, why is it my fault that I can't think of anything I'm interested in reading?

Why do you even ask me if I have time to read? Everyone tells me where I need to be and what I need to be doing. After that, I find myself all alone. My parents are on their phones; my brother is playing his games. And if I start reading, I'm going to be told I'm supposed to be doing what they said. I don't even know what it is!! I'm so tired. I hate myself because I can do nothing right, and I (feel like I) get in trouble for it all the time!

Imagine you live in a world where the only thing you do is go home and play video games and watch movies. I don't go anywhere! You always talk about going to Portland. I've never been there!

You know what else? I know you hate that you actually kneel next to me and try to "understand the way I think." I'm dumb. Everyone gets it but me. And there you are again. You never go away. I hate that you're not brushing me off. You said something like, "Accountability is compassion . . ." and then something like, "If you expect something of me, it's your responsibility to be right alongside me," something stupid like that. Something teachers are supposed to say.

That's why you're so annoying. You try to be nice to me. You expect me to "become someone," as you say. I'm just glad you don't say something like "GRIT" or use a "growth mindset," whatever that means, like some of my last teachers. Am I supposed to be inspired by you saying words to me? Do you think I'm actually in control of my life? Why do you think I'm smart? No one else does! That's what none of you get. No one cares about me! Sure, they say they do, when I have to read aloud as they show me how bad I am as a reader.

And I'm not done! Next, you say that you "get me." Even though I want to disagree, I wonder, "Why do I half think you know my secret?"

Think of the possibility of not knowing what to do or who you are because all those who you rely on dictate your existence? Moreover,

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Thanking people is hard. Saying thank you is one thing. Truly conveying that sentiment is another. Sometimes you simply cannot express the appreciation felt so deep down inside.

First off, I owe this book to Penny Kittle. She pulled out a cell phone in the middle of my conference session one sunny September afternoon in Portland to call Lisa Luedeke, who would become the most patient and supportive project manager. Over 9 years, and so many ups and downs, Lisa remained faithful to this project and helped me in so many capacities. Lisa, you are a true friend, not just for the book, but also for your humanity. Without you, this book would not survive, nor would my aspiration to contribute.

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I hope you understand.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Justin M. Stygles has served readers as an intermediate and middle-grades teacher for 19 years. For many years he taught Grades 4-6 in rural and coastal Maine schools. His other experiences include working in summer literacy programs in rural, suburban, and private schools. He currently teaches fourth grade in Portland, Maine. Justin is from a military background and gradu-

ated with an associate's degree in harness racing before becoming an educator. He's served on committees with the International Literacy Association and National Council of Teachers of English. Previous publications include articles in *Literacy Today*, *Voices from the Middle*, and *Hoof Beats*. "*I Hate Reading*" is his first professional book.

To Rhiana
It's not your fault.

INTRODUCTION



What would you do if you could answer the question, “Why do kids stop reading by the end of elementary school?” Gallagher (2010) brought this to our attention in his seminal text, *Readicide*. What if we could find the answer:


- ▶ Not by looking at cognitive abilities, but affect—the child’s physical response, emotions, and perceptions—rather than by traditional means, like reading comprehension scores?
- ▶ With compassion—through a long-term investment with readers and by using relationships, or the interpersonal bridge, to rectify self-perception and build competence and mastery so students become truly independent, lifelong readers because reading matters to them?
- ▶ By questioning our practices—what if the answers to why kids stop reading don’t come in test scores but merely by looking into their eyes and listening to their story?

I found myself asking these questions about 7 years ago after life forced me into a deep self-reflection. When I began studying books like *Shame: The Power of Caring*, by renowned shame researcher Kaufman (1993), I saw more than myself on the pages, I saw my maturing readers. My students, subjected to traditional reading pedagogy, manifested the shame-based behaviors I was reading in those pages. I continued to read, drawing links between shame research and education literature about reading instruction. The connections were alarming. Following years of self-reflection and instructional adaptations, I developed my own theories, many of which are presented in this text.

This book is an attempt to reconsider and reexamine reading joy, reading achievement, and affective processes. It is intended to help educators understand and implement the practices I discovered that mentor students through a process of becoming engaged in their reading development. In this book, educators can consider the isolation or abandonment readers may feel as a result of many current practices


in the teaching of reading. What I am talking about here is shame—the internalized sense of inadequacy, faultiness, contempt, rejection, and the loss of personal integrity—those readers may feel. By the end of this book, educators will know how to lift students out of the dejection they may associate with learning to read.

This book is an attempt to reconsider and reexamine reading joy, reading achievement, and affective processes.



In a world consumed by data-driven practices and the quest for external affirmation promoted by social media, students are more vulnerable than ever to “rejecting” themselves in favor of developing an appearance they believe is more favorable to others. Yet from the research and our knowledge of child development, we know the driving forces that support maturing children are competency, agency, and self-efficacy. In other words, students need and deserve a strong sense of self that allows them to develop resilience or embrace the “gift” of who they are from within. This includes reading instruction that promotes a healthy sense of self. We have an opportunity, today, to reverse a trend in literacy education where the child is the receiver of teaching and is “told” who they are. We can embrace this goal of self-efficacy and actualization and truly help our students become lifelong readers with a strong sense of who they are as readers.

We know the driving forces that support maturing children are competency, agency, and self-efficacy. In other words, students need and deserve a strong sense of self.



How Can You Approach This Book?

Up front, I will say that some of the content in this book will challenge you. What is presented here comes from actual classroom experiences. These stories are from a variety of settings including

classrooms, intervention settings, and summer programs. These environments are rural, suburban, and urban communities in which I lived and worked. Every single teaching environment I've worked in was 50% free- and reduced-school lunch or higher. Most of my students live within the profound impacts of poverty, be it financial, emotional, or generational (Payne, 1998). The stories I share are tales of the errors I made and the shifts I needed to make to encourage students to assume reading into their lives. I am hoping by sharing my vulnerability, it will help you outgrow your current self as an educator.

However, some of the terms used might cause you to recoil a bit. I don't like to use labels. However, at times you will see terms such as *struggling reader* or *dumb*. These are the definitions readers apply to themselves, not the labels I place on them. I cannot change the internalizations or self-perceptions that students bring with them into the classroom. I can only help show them a more promising future where they have the tools and the power to change their own narrative. Sometimes that means I have to forsake agendas like data-driven aspirations to "roll up my sleeves" and put the reader before myself.

As you read each chapter, I hope you will find yourself on a journey. First, we start with what *shame* means. From there we learn about the reader's narrative through assessments. Next, we look at ways to bring students into reading, how to manage their reading lives, and how to help them develop a reading process. Finally, we look at data-based interventions and how to invite students to define their reading legacy through writing about reading.

If at any point you find yourself challenged or overwhelmed, please take time for yourself. It took me nearly a decade of self-reflection and baby steps just to reach this point. I encourage you to pause and reflect when you need to. Just remember, this book is based on what I've experienced in nearly 20 years of teaching. I'm sharing my perspective to support your classroom, to help you to continue evolving as an educator at a time when students and readers need us most.

At the end of each chapter is a section titled Reflect and Act. The purpose of this section is to give you an opportunity to process what you have read. As we know, shifting our practice takes reflection and time. The great news about teaching is that every day we can start fresh. Within the framework of this conversation, I encourage you to think about what can be done tomorrow, or next week, or even what you will do differently in the coming school year.