Please, don't commit 'readicide'

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If you have anything to do with introducing young people to the written word, please, oh please do not commit "readicide."

There are two big ways that schools practice this "systematic killing of the love of reading." Teacher Kelly Gallagher spells them out in his book Readicide, published by Stenhouse earlier this year.

First, schools don't give students enough time to read for pleasure. Certainly, children must be required to isolate and master certain skills. They must read for knowledge and tackle challenging works. Gallagher doesn't argue against that.

With all the demands put on the school day, and with pressures to raise standardized test scores, it's not surprising that many principals and superintendents have pushed mere pleasure reading off the schedule. But that tactic backfires. Gallagher makes a pretty clear case that students will be better able to reach educational goals if they are given regular opportunities to enjoy the fruits of all that instruction.

Why should little 5-, 6- and 7-year-olds struggle with the drill and practice of learning to read? So they can get to the good part - funny stories, exciting adventures, amazing facts.

We see this all the time inside and outside of classrooms. Children who enjoy reading do it for pleasure. Children who read for pleasure get better at it. Good readers do better in school and on tests. Students who do well in school go further. The further you go in education, the more employable you are and the more money you make. More education and higher income even lead to better health.

Sounds like a lot to lay on a kid sitting in school reading a graphic novel, a mystery, sports page or romance, but that's just the sort of activity that has underappreciated and lasting educational value.
In 38 of 41 studies, students who were given time to read whatever they want did as well or better on reading comprehension tests as those who didn't get that opportunity, Gallagher reports.

Mary Kay Bond, executive director of Read Aloud West Virginia, is fond of saying that teaching children to read but not making time for them to read for fun is like putting a basketball team through killer drills but not letting them play. Who would keep going to practice under those conditions?

The second problem that kills reading for young people is overteaching literature, Gallagher says. Think of your favorite movie. Would you have sat through it if someone stopped the film every five minutes and asked you questions, often about minutiae?

Yet, that's exactly how many students are expected to interact with some truly great works. Books are chopped into pieces and parceled out over weeks. Students are expected to recall minute details over this time and to analyze characters, themes, relationships and other aspects. Too often, Gallagher argues, such lessons emphasize the trivial at the expense of the meaningful aspects of these works. People who enjoy reading throughout life don't read this way.

Students should be required to read academic and even difficult texts, and they should read closely and analyze what they see, but in a way that doesn't break the flow of the stories and that doesn't kill reading in students' eyes.

Gallagher prescribes balance. He tries to balance giving students a freedom in their reading choices with holding them accountable enough to make sure they are reading. He tries to foster a close and deep reading of Hamlet, for example, without pushing fragile young scholars out of the world of challenging texts forever.

Gallagher offers examples of his attempts at balance in his own English classes. He uses news stories relevant to his students. He requires one-page forms to frequently prompt students to reflect on what they've read and to articulate their thoughts. He even shares the modern-day advice that his students culled from the passage of Hamlet that ends, "to thine own self be true."

He offers teachers and principals a thoughtful checklist to evaluate their own school's effectiveness in graduating life-long readers (and thus learners). Here's a taste:

- Our school "values" reading. Do we all agree what this means?
- Is it true that as our students progress from grade to grade their dislike of reading intensifies?
- Are the same students mired in remedial classes year after year?

The book is 150 pages, brisk, readable and worth a look from every serious educator.