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Practitioner Article

Through a Literacy Lens: An Interview with Nancy Frey

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ABSTRACT

This interview with Dr. Nancy Frey, Professor of Literacy at San Diego State University and prolific co-author with Douglas Fisher, explores pressing issues shaping literacy education across K–12 contexts. Conducted as part of the Georgia Association of Literacy Advocates' Literacy Learning Series, the conversation addresses declining reading volume among adolescents, the relationship between achievement and reading motivation, the role of close reading in building student success, and the opportunities and challenges posed by technology and artificial intelligence in today's classrooms. Frey also reflects on the conditions necessary for strong literacy instruction, including teacher collaboration, professional trust, and task design that positions students for meaningful success. Drawing on current research and her ongoing work in secondary classrooms, Frey offers practitioners a grounded, candid perspective on what it means to teach literacy well in contemporary schools.

KEYWORDS

reading motivation; adolescent literacy; close reading; artificial intelligence; teacher collaboration

As part of our work with the Georgia Association of Literacy Advocates, we, Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther, invited renowned author, educator, and literacy expert Nancy Frey, Ph.D., to lead a session for our professional development Literacy Learning Series. As a professor of literacy in the School of Teacher Education at San Diego State University, Dr. Frey has published extensively in highly reputable journals and through various book collaborations with co-author Dr. Douglas Fisher.

Because we wanted to dig deeper into ongoing issues impacting the field of literacy, we asked if she would also be willing to be interviewed. She graciously agreed, and what follows is the result of that conversation. In this interview, Frey reflects on the current state of literacy education across K–12 environments, drawing on her scholarship, her ongoing work in high school classrooms, and other relevant research. Frey discusses the role of technology and AI in schools, the importance of trusting both teachers and students, and, perhaps most notably, emphasizes the role of success in helping students to become more motivated readers. Frey offers a thoughtful window into literacy, framing the discussion through a literacy lens while emphasizing that these strategies and methods are applicable across all content areas.

The following conversation offers readers practical ideas and instructional approaches for contemporary K–12 classrooms.

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Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

In terms of literacy, what do you see as some of the biggest challenges currently facing educators across grades K–12?

Nancy Frey:

I think my answer is probably an expected one, in that we really have seen just a huge decline in the amount of reading volume that people of all ages are engaged in, adults included. And adult reading is, of course, tremendously influential on the amount of reading that happens for children and for adolescents as well. When they see reading around them, that certainly helps, but it's really amazing how the reading volume drops off in the middle years. Less so in early elementary, but a huge drop "off the cliff," for kids who are in grades 4 through 8. That has a cumulative effect over time. I mean, we all know "eyes on text" is what makes the difference, and when there's such a reduction in those habits and those dispositions around that, it makes having occurrences of that happen in the classroom that much more challenging.

Honestly, I think a lot of teachers are trying to compensate in the wrong way, with either not assigning reading because, you know, "the kids don't read," or teachers reading aloud to them as a replacement for students actually reading. There's good, strong evidence of the importance of interactive read-alouds at the primary level. The case doesn't hold when you're talking about older readers.

I was in a 7th-grade class not too long ago. It was identified as an honors class, and the kids were reading *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 2016), which is a good, solid book to be reading at that age, but by "reading," what I mean is they had a book in front of them. It was a paperback book, which I was happy to see. There was an audio narration of the book. The teacher pressed play. There was a kid at the front who used his finger to follow along on the projected text. I'm not sure what it was that the students were supposed to do with that, and I can tell you, from standing in the back of the classroom, that out of 30 kids, about four of them actually had their eyes on the text. That's not reading, and that's not effective.

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

There is a lot of concern about reading engagement and reading stamina, specifically with adolescents. We're even hearing and reading about schools adopting shorter texts or using more excerpts instead of reading whole novels. Have you seen this in your work, and what are your thoughts on this shift?

Nancy Frey:

With all due respect around the importance of being able to read whole novels, that's not actually what's in the standards. What's in the standards isn't that you read these particular texts, but rather that you're developing the skills, and you can use a variety of texts in order to do so. So, I have less of an issue with whether it's short text, or excerpts, or a whole novel, and my concern is always, are you actually using that to teach the skills and the concepts that young readers and writers need to understand? What is the best vehicle for doing that? Is it a whole piece of text? Selected excerpts? Or is it a combination of both? I

think the bigger issue is not the text's format, but whether the skills and concepts are actually being taught.

When it comes to reading for adolescents, the skill of reading across texts is not just vertical reading, but also horizontal reading. Can you read across texts? Can you engage in critical reasoning, especially when you have two pieces of text that disagree with one another? Being able to create those kinds of opportunities may, in fact, require that some of the texts are shorter pieces of text, and that some are informational, etc.

One of the things that we do at the high school where Doug Fisher and I teach is this: if there is a more complex target text that the teacher is going to be working with, and there are a range of other related texts that students can choose from, we actually arrange them into three categories, from "easier" to more complex. Students are engaging with a target text in class, but they're also required to write a literacy letter to their English teacher every week, and we have a format for that. So, every kid might be reading something else off the reading list, but they're responding, "Here's what's going on in the book that I'm reading right now." Let's say the particular focus for that week is setting. The second paragraph is about how the setting impacts the book the student is reading, and the third paragraph focuses on students' recommendations and thoughts as they are engaging in the reading.

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

What advice would you give to educators who are trying to increase students' reading motivation, both inside and outside of the classroom?

Nancy Frey:

I think that what's at the center of the difficulty is that many of us have it backward. Motivation does not predict achievement. Achievement predicts motivation. For students to achieve, they've got to feel success, which means you have to have regular doses of success that are happening again and again and again because that's what motivates you. Success is what motivates you; it doesn't happen the other way around. There's a really interesting longitudinal study called the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (Orri et al., 2021), and it's used time and time again. One of the major findings was exactly what I just said: success or achievement predicts motivation, not the other way around.

There's also been some really interesting work called the Remembered Success Effect (Finn et al., 2025). The researchers worked with 3rd graders and 6th graders, and so you can imagine you've got two groups. One group of students completed only the required grade-level math assignment. The second group completed the same 10 math problems, but they also began with three familiar review problems and ended with three additional familiar review problems. It turns out that the kids have, essentially, a "success sandwich," because they remember the success. "Hey, I did okay on these first three. That's achievement, that's success. Now I've got motivation to push through for the next 10 that we're working on right now, and I'm going to finish up with three more that are familiar." And here's how they tested it. Students were assigned 10 required math problems as their "must-dos." After finishing, they could choose to complete optional extension activities, or "may-dos," but those activities were not required. Students who experienced the "success sandwich" approach were statistically significantly more likely to choose the

optional extension activities than students who completed only the grade-level problems. It's achievement success that fuels motivation, not the other way around.

Think about that in your own life. What are you more likely to engage in? It's the things that you feel like you already do pretty well or that you've already had some success with.

Matthew Sroka:

I think about my own kids. My own kids pursue those activities, whether it's art or sports, that they're more inherently good at. That's what they want to spend their time doing. So what you said makes a lot of sense. It also reminds me of the classic book *Why Students Don't Like School* by Daniel Willingham (2021). Students need to be faced with a puzzle or a problem that is solvable, and I think sometimes you see this, and math is a great example, where if it becomes something where they can't really understand, they immediately shut down, right? So, it makes sense that it would happen in reading and writing, too.

Nancy Frey:

The work that Doug Fisher and I have done with close reading is an example of that. How do you build success from the beginning? In close reading, as you know, you're going after a shorter piece of text. Maybe it's a paragraph or something like that. But the questions that you ask start with: What does the text say? How does the text work? And then, what does the text mean? And that gets more complex, and those initial questions are literal-level questions, and I have seen this time and time and time again. The kids who like close reading the most are the ones who would otherwise be described as struggling readers, because we spend some initial time on literal-level stuff, and they start to feel successful. They feel like, I can do this, I can find _____ in the passage.

And then, moving into that second phase, we explore how the text actually works. Now we're going to get a little bit more complex. We're going to talk about text structures, and author's purpose, and those sorts of things. And then we move into the really complex stuff, which is, what does the text mean? Not what does the text say, but what does the text mean? And that's when you're getting into a whole lot of critical analysis. But in the meantime, the kids who are still participating are the ones who felt successful early on in the reading and weren't just left there in the dust, looking around, going, "Why does everybody else get this and not me?"

Matthew Sroka:

That's really true and interesting. It makes me think of John Strong from the University of Buffalo. He started the Read, STOP, Right program (Strong et al., 2025). I remember talking with him about this because he does the reading intervention, and they're spending so much time with one text, doing close reading. I said to him, "We want to motivate kids to read, and doesn't this over-teaching the text just kind of take the fun out of reading?", but he had the same argument. Students need to see success, and when they're successful with this text, they're more likely to go on and read on their own.

If all students have done in school is struggle or feel like they can't, then they're not going to be motivated to do it outside of school either.

Nancy Frey:

Definitely not.

Vicki Luther:

I talk about close reading in my classes with my undergraduate students all the time. I feel like a lot of times we, as educators, don't dig back down to the levels students really need, but when we do, they do find success.

Nancy Frey:

Absolutely. Taking in a longer piece of text and zeroing in from time to time on the more complex passages involved helps. And having that discussion, you warm up the text, and now they've got a really good ladder to be able to carry them through the next parts of the text. You definitely are not going to do that with every single passage, for sure. But again, success is what creates motivation, not the other way around.

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

How do you see technology currently shaping literacy, for better and for worse? What concerns or opportunities do you see in the rise of AI and its influence on our reading, writing, and thinking?

Nancy Frey:

I just spent two days at an elementary school. It is shocking to me, shocking!, how much time little kids are spending on devices. Literally, I don't know how to teach that way. Essentially, we're just outsourcing all the work that we do to computer programs that little kids are supposed to engage with. I also think that the loss of students talking to each other, having discussions, interacting with their teachers, and picking up a pencil and writing on a piece of paper is a tremendous loss for students. That's the downside of today's technology in schools.

I know AI is, of course, something that we all give a lot of consideration to. And AI, like any other technology, can be a positive and a negative in that regard. I think that one of the things we have to think closely about as a field is how we change our tasks to make them more AI-resistant. I mean, you can shake your fist and say, "These kids, they're just copying and pasting!" Well, guess what? They've been doing that for centuries. It's just different ways of being able to do it. For centuries, they've been doing that. We must change the tasks of what it is that we're doing.

Vicki Luther:

I agree, and it is so funny to me how we always hear about the pendulum switch.

Nancy Frey:

At my school, we use a grid that was published by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2025). And with each of the tasks that students do, the teacher scales it from 0 to 4. Zero is absolutely no AI: AI forbidden. This goes all the way up to 4, where students

must use AI in a way to complete this assignment. This grid shows students a scale for what is appropriate and what's not appropriate with AI usage.

For example, I was in an English class at school the other day, and students had to engage in a round of at least five "give and takes" exchanges with the chatbot on a particular topic they were learning, and that's what they had to submit. And what the teacher noted is, "I get to know a whole lot about what it is that kids know and don't know already, based on the quality of the dialogue that they've had with the chatbot." So, we have to think more creatively about how it is that we create tasks for students to do that are a bit more AI-resistant and help them to be able to utilize AI in ways that are ethically responsible.

There's a balance there. Absolutely. And, quite frankly, it is cheaper, because we know that public schools don't have the dollars that they should have. And it is cheaper in the long run to buy a program than it is to hire more instructional coaches. Where's the teacher support? And what is it that districts and states are able to do with the limited amount of public dollars that they have? They can't afford to hire all the instructional coaches and others like them that would really help to support teachers, so instead they buy more curriculum. A lot of that curriculum is push and play.

I will also kind of expand on something that you said, Vicki, and that was the idea of the pendulum. And I don't know if that is a perfect metaphor. I don't think that we really swing in that way. I think it's a lot more like a drill that goes around and comes around again and again, but every time that it comes back around, it also goes deeper. We'll know more the next time it comes around. And I think that we do know some things about curriculum and fidelity and those sorts of things, and we have learned. We've done a lot of learning in the last 20 years, but we don't necessarily have great solutions.

Teachers don't get enough support. I mean, they simply do not get enough support. Everybody wants to talk about Finland. Right? Look at Finland! Look what Finland is able to do. Look at how much support those teachers get. Even the notion that every day, you don't teach bell-to-bell, that you have not just a prep period, but that you have specific opportunities to be able to be in each other's classrooms, and so on. That's something that doesn't happen in the U.S. That simply does not happen. It's not available.

Matthew Sroka:

A little over three years ago, when I made the transition from teaching high school to the college-level, my mind was almost blown because I had a lot more freedom with my time, and that freedom was used to do research and also to interact with colleagues about my courses, and how I wanted to change them. And in high school, I felt like I was just living day-to-day, surviving, because of the nature of the schedule.

Nancy Frey:

Exactly, exactly. There was a really interesting study that came out of the UK, and it was 7th through 12th grade, specifically, and it was pretty complex, about not only what the principal's role and impact and effect on student achievement, but also the teachers' impact and role in student achievement (Burgess et al., 2023). And what they found was really interesting. They found there was a strong correlation, not causation. We know the difference between the two, but there's a strong correlation between the amount of time and the frequency with which teachers are in other teachers' classrooms. The same didn't

hold for principals. Principals being in other teachers' classrooms didn't have a direct impact on student achievement. Principals being in teachers' classrooms, super important to note here, are all these other things that happen from administrators regularly being present in teachers' classrooms. But it's not student achievement.

The impact on student achievement, or, correlatively, on student achievement, was the number and frequency of times teachers were in other teachers' classrooms. And to create that, we must look at school climate. Are we professionally generous? Do teachers have time to be in each other's classrooms?

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

What does strong literacy instruction look like in today's classroom? If you were to walk into a classroom, what would you want to see?

Nancy Frey:

First of all, at the school where we are, we always ask kids these three questions: (1) What are you learning about today? (2) Why is that important? (3) How are you going to know that you were successful? So, first things first, I want students to reliably answer those three questions in developmentally appropriate ways. Certainly, when you're talking about the littles in particular, they're probably not going to be able to articulate a really sophisticated answer like that, but they can show you. They can show you what it is that they're learning. So that's the first thing.

And the second thing is productive noise. I want to hear the productive noise that's happening. And you all know from being in and out of classrooms many times, you know the difference between productive noise and unproductive noise, right? Where it's just chaos, but when you've got that hum going on, you've got kids that are engaged in meaningful discussion with one another. I love it when I walk into a classroom, and I know whose classroom I'm walking into, and it still takes me a beat before I can find the teacher. Because the teacher isn't necessarily always standing at the front of the classroom. Now, there are times when that's exactly where the teacher should be, but I love being able to go into Haley's English classroom, as one example, and I often have to look around a little bit for her to be able to find out where she is, especially at this time of year, because that productive noise is happening.

And maybe I should say this too. I want to see kids writing, writing, writing! Writing on a regular basis and having regular opportunities to write. You have to have lots of short, constructed responses that you're going to engage in every single day.

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

What gives you hope about the future of literacy education?

Nancy Frey:

The people in the field; people who are entering teaching, as well as those who have stayed with it for a career, give me hope. The hope is that the educators who are involved, the educators, the leaders, the coaches, those who choose to come in, and those who choose to stay. That's our hope.

Matthew Sroka and Vicki Luther:

> What advice would you give novice teachers going into the field of education, especially literacy education?

Nancy Frey:

> The advice is to trust that your students possess the wisdom and creativity to learn. Trust your students. You know, sometimes teachers talk too much because they don't trust that their students can actually conceptualize where they need to go. And the best teachers we know are the best teachers that know how to "shushy-wushy." Let the students struggle and wrestle with an idea for a bit. They'll get there! So, trust your young people, trust the people that you're teaching.

The authors would like to thank Dr. Frey for her time and expertise. We left the interview session energized and hopeful for the future of literacy education.

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