

Career-Changing PD Books: District Librarians' Most Inspiring Reads

by [Marlaina Cockcroft](#)

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Sometimes, one good book can supercharge your professional development. That was the experience of these district librarians, who say they were motivated by particular titles to refocus their work or their advocacy.

Here are the books that inspired them and why.

Also read: "[School Librarians Create Grassroots PD](#)"



The Gift of Story by John Schu

Recommended by: Becky Calzada, president, American Association of School Librarians, and district coordinator, Leander (TX) ISD

Becky Calzada says that *The Gift of Story* reminds librarians about the power of books to help create human connection. Schu “really focused a lot on how stories can build empathy, how stories can build understanding about the world you live in,” she says. “Especially in the current climate, we hear about the negative and the vocal minority. And this book really spoke to how stories can change lives.

“This is one of those books that pays off for a professional in so many ways, because it reminds them of what books are all about, and what we are all about in libraries,” Calzada notes.

The book encompasses how literature and stories can heal, inspire, and have many positive impacts in addition to connection. As Calzada was reading it, she remembers pausing and thinking, “This is what’s missing in the conversation when we talk about book bans.” That’s why she references *The Gift of Story* so frequently.

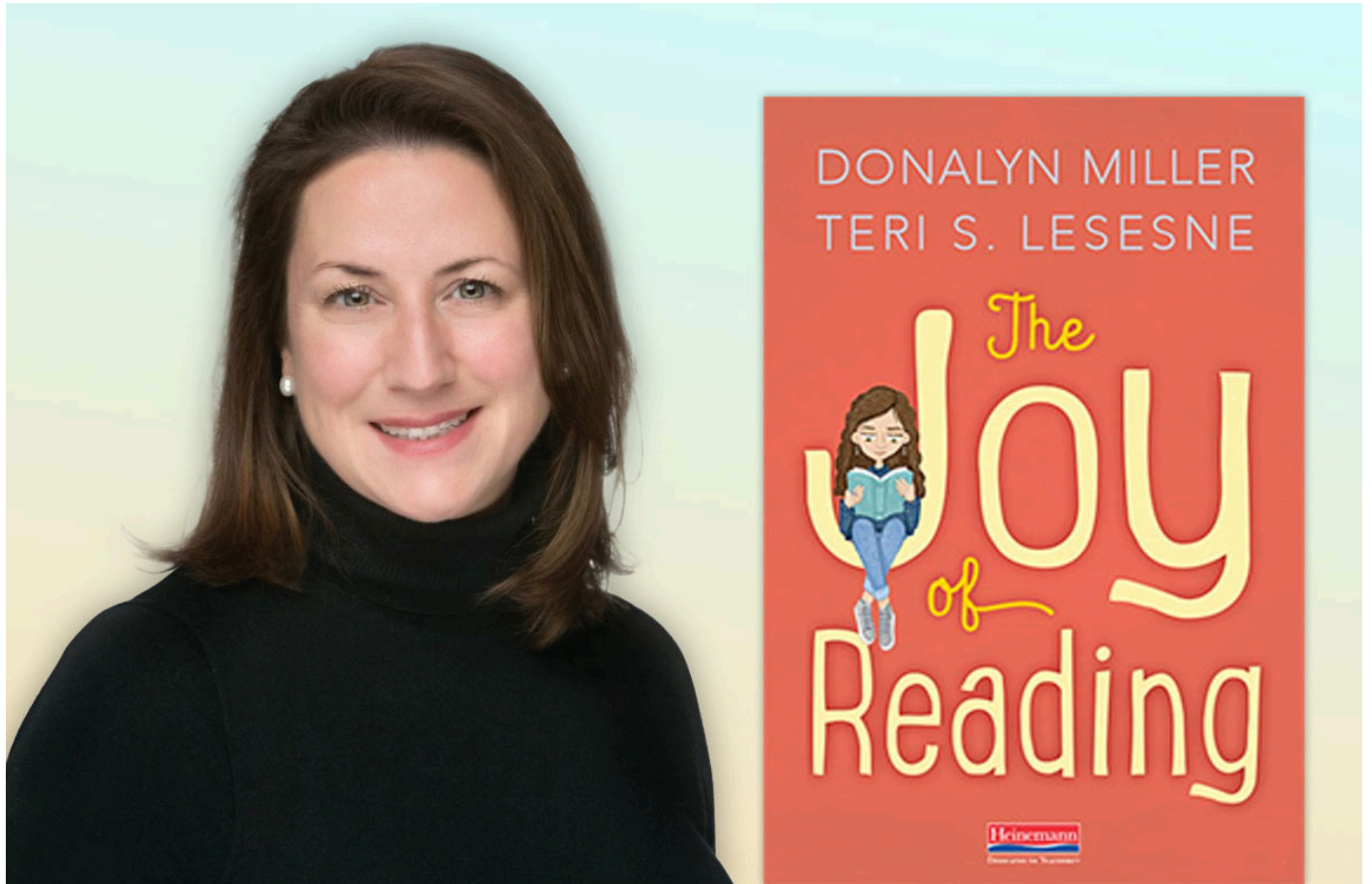
[Also read: "8 Professional Reading Titles to Help Librarians in the New Year"]

Calzada wishes that a book like this had been around when she was “a baby librarian,” since she didn’t see herself in a book until she was an adult and read *Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto to her first graders when she was 27. Calzada’s family also made tamales during the holidays, and she says it was “a powerful connection for me” and for her mostly Hispanic students. Reading can help someone build compassion for the society they live in and learn to navigate the world, she says. For Calzada, that potential is an important factor in selecting titles for a collection. “There are just so many great takeaways in [Schu’s] book, because it delves into that a little more deeply.”

The Gift of Story also shows librarians how to help children connect with books, Calzada adds. “When we have kids [who] are struggling and they say they’re not a reader or they’ve not found that just-right book, then it helps professionals to find that book of your heart,” she says—one “that leaves a heart print on their reading life.”

Schu’s work highlights “connector” books that build understanding, such as *Fish in a Tree* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, about a girl who overcomes her shame of having dyslexia. Readers can relate to the protagonist’s struggles, Calzada says. *The Dot* by Peter H. Reynolds, about a girl in art class who insists she lacks creativity, until a teacher provides encouragement, is “a world connector, through Dot Day,” she says, referring to International Dot Day, an annual global celebration of children’s creativity inspired by *The Dot*.

The Gift of Story also provides space for readers to write down their favorite titles, helping them deepen their experience by curating and reflecting on their reading life. New librarians get excited about *The Gift of Story* when Calzada shares it with them, because the lessons and book suggestions it offers “give you a starting place,” she says. “Every once in a while I’ll get another copy, and I’ll just give it away.”



School Libraries Supporting Literacy and Wellbeing and Librarians in Schools as Literacy Educators by Margaret K. Merga

Recommended by: Jonathan Hunt, lead coordinator of Library Media Services, San Diego County (CA) Office of Education

Inspiration from these books prompted Jonathan Hunt to intensify his advocacy efforts, especially in securing grant funding for his district. The work of Merga, an Australian literacy researcher, had a huge impact on him, Hunt says, especially in light of the recent focus in national school library standards on educational technology over reading and literacy.

"It was very empowering to see us described in the research," he says. He plans to cite data from both books as evidence when he applies for a grant.

California has made significant investments in literacy over the past five to seven years since receiving a federal literacy development grant for \$37.5 million, Hunt says. "I wish I had read both of these books five years earlier, because it really would've helped me advocate a little bit better for how specifically we impact literacy."

For example, among her research findings, Merga lists 40 literacy practices by teacher librarians that support literacy.

Hunt hopes that Merga's message and research reaches more librarians. He wants to "help get the message out about how teacher librarians impact literacy, and not just learning, which is super important; and not just technology, which is also super important. I feel like we have devalued literacy in general in education, and it was nice to be able to have that put front and center again."

Because literacy is Merga's focus, she understands that teaching kids to want to read is half the battle in teaching them to read, he adds.

Merga's work reaffirms what Hunt already believes, including that the education system focuses too often on functional literacy. "Can I get you from first grade to second grade? Can I get you from second grade to third grade? Can I prepare you for your life and the reading you're going to do, like reading emails, stop signs, and menus? That's a low bar," Hunt says. The point should be to embrace literacy as a lifestyle choice, "not just for information and entertainment, but because it fills the soul."



***The Joy of Reading* by Donalyn Miller and Teri S. Lesesne**

Recommended by: Kerry Townsend, library media coordinator, Columbia (MO) Public Schools

The Joy of Reading changed Kerry Townsend's view of librarians and books. "I think the most important thing is answering questions and information seeking—that's my lens of librarianship," she says.

"Reading is a part of that, but I think maybe *The Joy of Reading* made me think more deeply about the essential component of promoting reading that the librarian is doing that's unique.

"Books aren't just places to go get information. Books are, in and of themselves, essential to growth and development."

Townsend says that *The Joy of Reading* helps teachers and librarians encourage students to be readers. The book talks about needing abundant access and time for reading, providing readers choices, honoring readers' authentic responses, and having a supportive reader community. "These are all things that a library can do," she says. "That's why it's been so powerful for school librarians to read it—because it gives them ideas for concrete ways to develop a reading community."

Authors Miller and Lesesne also show how meaningful it is for teachers and librarians to discuss the books they love. "Getting teachers to talk about their reading lives is really good modeling for kids," Townsend says.

The book suggests a reading autobiography, meaning “having people reflect about books that were meaningful to them,” Townsend explains. “That has been a really simple, easy way to get people to talk about the impact reading has had in their lives, historically. Sometimes it takes them back to their youth, sometimes it’s college, sometimes it’s a meaningful professional development book in their career that changed the way they thought about things.”

She estimates that she has given away 50 copies of the book to administrators, librarians, and teachers in the district. “People weren’t talking about reading, and I feel like the social aspect of reading is very, very important.”

The “seven joys of reading,” another focus of the book, allow people to decide what kind of reader they are and what stories they like. Townsend’s district has done PD based on that concept. “It’s that introspection that has pulled people back into reading,” she says.

Townsend’s district teachers have been talking to their students about books so much, in fact, that they asked for a tool to help them do it. The district bought Beanstack to allow students to track what they’re reading. In addition, “[Beanstack] gives a teacher more information to have conversations about books with kids.”

The Joy of Reading offers other tools as well. The appendix includes a survey that teachers can use at the beginning and end of the year to track what students read for fun, how much time they spend reading, and how they learn about new books, among other topics.

Townsend says that the district library media specialists and teachers on the district literacy leadership committee used the book to work with Miller directly when she visited in 2023.

The Joy of Reading validates librarians’ hunches, Townsend says—for instance, that letting students choose their own books encourages them to read more. She also likes that it is written for both teachers and librarians, which helps them work together. “Professional development books don’t always understand the role of the librarian, and I think Donalyn totally gets it.”

Marlaina Cockcroft is a writer and editor with a passion for children's books.

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PD

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