

SPOTLIGHT



Nicole Craine for Education Week

Adrian Galvan, left, is a bilingual paraprofessional at Lyman Hall Elementary School in Hall County, Ga. He is part of program that aims to recruit teacher-candidates who reflect the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the student population.

RELUCTANT READERS

EDITOR'S NOTE

Educators are working to help grow confident readers and assist struggling ones. In this Spotlight, learn about how writing practices can improve reading skills, how educators are boosting reading comprehension, and what classroom methods educators are using to grow readers.

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Ava Newton, a student in Ashley Palmer's kindergarten class, points at the projector screen during a reading comprehension lesson.

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More Than Phonics: How to Boost Comprehension for Early Readers

By Sarah Schwartz

MATTHEWS, MO.

What do you do when you hear a word you don't know? In Ashley Palmer's kindergarten class, you stop. And you talk about it.

Palmer, a teacher at Matthews Elementary School in Missouri's New Madrid district, was telling a story about a family of toy lions during one morning lesson when she got to the word "lass."

"That's one of our vocabulary words," she told the group of children sitting cross-legged on the rug. Then she led the students in clapping out its one syllable, then segmenting the sounds: /l/, /a/, /s/.

"It's another word for 'girl,'" Palmer said. "Sometimes when I line you up for bathroom break, instead of saying girls, or ladies, I can say, 'If you are a—'"

"Lass!" the students shouted out, as some sat up on their knees. "If you are a—lass—you can line up," Palmer finished.

The whole process is deceptively sim-

ple—it took less than 60 seconds—but this kind of embedded vocabulary instruction is a key piece of Matthews' overhauled early reading program. Just five years ago, only about 14 percent of the school scored proficient on the state's annual assessment. The numbers have grown steadily to the point where this year, 80 percent of the students met the standard. In 3rd grade, the numbers reached 95 percent.

In the literacy world, there's a perennial concern that focusing on foundational skills will come at the expense of giving kids opportunities to practice language and enjoy stories. But researchers and educators say that it's not only possible to teach useful vocabulary and meaningful content knowledge to young children—it's necessary.

A body of research has shown that once students can decode, their reading comprehension is largely dependent on their language comprehension—or the background and vocabulary knowledge that they bring to a text, and their ability to

follow the structure of a story and think about it analytically.

Before students can glean this kind of information from print, experts say, they can do it through oral language: by having conversations about the meaning of words, telling stories, and reading books aloud.

At Matthews, an explicit, systematic approach to phonics instruction has helped drive the big jumps in student achievement—but it's only one part of the equation, said Angie Hanlin, the school's principal. The school took on a complete restructuring of its reading program, which included changing the way teachers planned and taught vocabulary and reading comprehension.

"Putting a phonics patch on a reading program or on a school is not going to teach all students to read," Hanlin said. "It is not going to fix it, and it's not going to drive up the data."

This is the premise behind the Simple View of Reading, a framework for comprehension first proposed by researchers Philip B. Gough and William E. Tunmer in 1986, and confirmed by later studies.

The simple view holds that reading comprehension is the product of decoding ability and language comprehension. Kids who can't decode words won't be able to read, no matter how much vocabulary they know, or how much they know about the world. But the opposite is also true: If they don't have this background knowledge, children won't be able to understand the words that they can read off the page.

Engaging With Rich Content

"Decoding has a really outsized role on reading comprehension in the early grades," said Gina Cervetti, an associate professor of education at the University of Michigan, who studies the role of content-area knowledge in literacy. "But as students consolidate their decoding, very quickly that equation shifts."

As students progress into 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades, texts become more challenging—there are bigger words, harder concepts, and more assumptions about what students already know about the world.

Kids need to start engaging with rich content early on, so that once they are

The Push and Pull of Student Learning

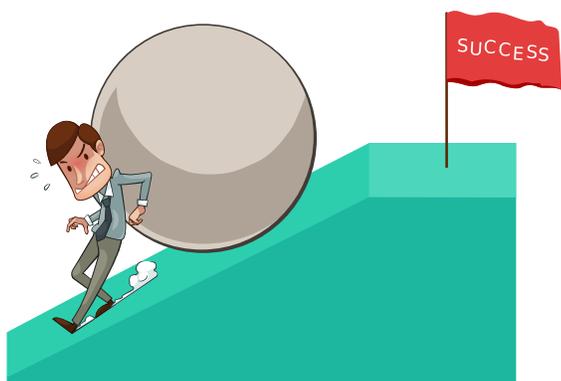
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By Ray McNulty, President of Successful Practices Network

Teaching Is Challenging!

There are many times, at the end of the day, when exhausted teachers wonder if they are making any headway in moving a reluctant student toward success. Having to repeat safety procedures, reminding students to replace their tools, or tutoring a student for the third time on multiplying fractions can create the unsettling feeling that learning is impossible. The Greek legend of Sisyphus comes to mind as an apt metaphor for this kind of frustrating teaching — endlessly pushing a boulder up a hill, never making any progress.



The boulder could well represent some of our students, who require considerable effort to push them to the place where we hope they will be, on the mountain of educational achievement. The mental image of the weary teacher and a massive, student boulder is not a healthy one for teachers or student learning.

Stop Pushing and Start Pulling

Working with reluctant learners can feel like trying to push a student across the finish line of passing a course. Maybe in place of thinking of teaching as a "pushing" exercise requiring considerable effort, reimagine it as pulling. Your immediate reaction might be, "Wow, pulling an object up a hill is even more challenging than pushing." However, rather than thinking about an external pull of you trying to pull the boulder uphill, think about using an internal pull. Shift the mental model of the teacher working externally to push students toward a learning goal to one of facilitating the student's internal pull toward that goal. This is the push and pull of student learning. Teachers pushing students to learn is exhausting and frustrating.

In contrast, when the student feels an internal pull to accomplish a learning goal, the feeling is very different. Setting up an internal pull still requires effort, and teachers may exert more time planning and facilitating learning. Still, the results are more rewarding for students and teachers.

What Drives Our Students?

How can teachers create an internal pull to motivate students? In his book **Drive**, Daniel Pink describes the three internal motivators that pull people toward a goal.

Pink points out that it is not rewards and punishment that drive people; it is a shared purpose, frequent measurement of mastery, and the ability to make autonomous choices. These motivating principles apply to students as well.

The Foundations of Pull Learning

1. Adopting a clear goal or objective and sharing that purpose with others we care about provides intrinsic motivation.
2. Measuring and quantifying gains in proficiency through frequent recognition, feedback, or self-reflection drives continual practice and improvement.
3. Giving students greater autonomy in what they do and when they do it increases their drive.



As Motivation Builds, Learning Gains Momentum

A great way to think visually about push vs. pull learning is to use the Rigor/Relevance Framework™. The framework categorizes high and low levels of rigor and relevance. Low rigor/low relevance learning is what teachers have to push students to complete. When students are challenged with real-world problems of high rigor and high relevance, solving that problem becomes a pull student motivator.

In these pull teaching situations, students will work to acquire the foundation knowledge of skills needed to construct the solution to completely solve the problem. High rigor/high relevance aligns with Pink's three human motivators. These real-world problems usually involve teams working toward a common goal; students have choices in completing the tasks along the way and mastery is only achieved when the solution works in the end. Think about your teaching. The more you can include pull learning into your work with students, the more motivated they will be.

Push Learning

Require reading, viewing, or listening in case students need it later on

Prepare for a required state academic exam

Take a course required for a diploma

Working alone

Memorizing lists now for future use

Teacher-centered instruction

Delay feedback until project completed

vs.

Pull Learning

Engage students in reading, viewing, or listening for something that is needed right now

Take a required course in the student's chosen pathway

Provide students options for demonstrating proficiency

Design a project that relates to a personal passion

Work with a team to complete a task

Give students frequent feedback

Teach for high rigor and high relevance learning

Ray McNulty Bio

Mr. Raymond J. McNulty has been an educator since 1973, as a teacher, principal, and superintendent, as well as Vermont's education commissioner. In addition to serving as President of the Successful Practices Network and National Dropout Prevention Center, Mr. McNulty is a senior fellow to the International Center for Leadership in Education. He also was a senior fellow at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where he worked on improving the nation's high schools. Mr. McNulty is past president of ASCD and author of *It's Not Us Against Them — Creating the Schools We Need*. He is committed to raising performance standards and building solid connections between schools and communities.

expected to read it on the page, they understand what's going on. If they haven't developed that foundation, it's hard to catch up quickly, said Cervetti.

"To learn words well, you need to encounter them again and again," said Margaret McKeown, a senior scientist at the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh, and an expert in vocabulary instruction. As very young children learn words, they start to form connections in the brain—links that join synonyms together, or relate words that are used in similar situations. This gives bigger, harder words a place to land when students learn them, McKeown said. "The concepts aren't new," she said. "They're just more sophisticated or refined ways to describe similar things."

At Matthews Elementary, teachers meet once a week to go through their foundational skills lessons and read-aloud books. The curriculum they use identifies vocabulary words that can be embedded in lessons. But the teachers also look for words in the text that their students specifically might struggle with.

In this week's kindergarten class, one of those words was "living room." Palmer had introduced the word earlier that week—a lot of her students didn't have a space in their homes that they called by that name. In this day's lesson, she asked students to recall it, asking questions: What kind of room has a couch? A chair?

Matthews is in a small, rural county, where the majority of students receive free and reduced-price lunch. Hanlin said that a lot of books, even for young readers, assume life experience her students don't have. So teachers build on the knowledge that students do have. For example, Hanlin said, students might not know the word "cathedral." But they do know the word "church."

It's important to do this kind of planning ahead, said Tanya Wright, an associate professor of education at Michigan State University, who studies oral language, vocabulary, and knowledge development.

Before a teacher reads a text to or with students, she needs to read it herself, Wright said. "You're going to know where you need to stop, where you need to explain." Ahead of time, teachers should plan child-friendly definitions, or figure out how they might use props or movements to demonstrate the word.

But this kind of planned vocabulary instruction may not be happening

in most schools. In a study published in 2014, Wright and her colleagues observed the way teachers discussed vocabulary in 55 kindergarten classrooms. They found a general lack of planned and purposeful instruction—most teachers weren't talking about a word more than once or selecting words in any systematic way.

There are ways to draw out more conversation about vocabulary words, McKeown said. One strategy comes from an unlikely place: improv comedy groups.

In improv, comedians are taught to say, "Yes, and ..." to build off of the scenario that their fellow performers create. The same framework can help kids build related vocabulary. Take the word "cautious," McKeown said.

52% of teachers believe students can understand written text with unfamiliar words even if they don't have a good grasp of phonics.

SOURCE: Education Week Research Center

A student asked to use the word might say that he had to be cautious, because someone was riding a bike fast near him. The teacher can agree, and then expand on that same idea: "You had to be careful because it might be dangerous if someone hit you with their bike."

"You're always adding more words that are associated with the [main] word, demonstrating a greater context for words," McKeown said.

In a read-aloud that afternoon, Palmer's kindergarten class heard another story about a lion—this time, one that had escaped from the zoo and befriended a little girl. As the lion curled up for a nap in the girl's house, Palmer paused on the words "lions sleep a lot." She turned to give the students on the rug a puzzled look.

"Is that true?" she asked. She referenced a nonfiction book the class had read the day before, about lions in the wild. "They like to sleep and lie around 20 out of the 24 hours!" Palmer said.

As she continued to read, she made more links back to the nonfiction text, explaining as she went what was real and what was make-believe, adding in extra details that the nonfiction book hadn't covered. She made these implicit connections explicit for her students.

Still other schools are turning to curricula that are purposefully structured to build knowledge—diving deeply into specific content areas, even in the very early grades. These curricula are based on the theory that all students need a similar foundation in core domains—like literature, the arts, science, social studies, and history—so that they have the knowledge base to support comprehension.

Building Knowledge

Educational theorist E.D. Hirsch is widely credited as the originator of this idea. His 1987 book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, argued that schools need to expose students to the body of knowledge that authors and

speakers will expect them to have. This idea has seen a resurgence in popular conversation more recently through author Natalie Wexler's 2019 book, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System—and How to Fix It*, which criticizes U.S. schools for prioritizing skills-based instruction over the teaching of content.

The notion that background knowledge informs understanding isn't very controversial. But proposals about exactly what knowledge schools should prioritize definitely are. Many teachers reject the idea of a shared literary canon, for example, arguing that it upholds a Eurocentric approach to American education that privileges the knowledge and histories of white Westerners at the expense of people of color.

But Jared Myracle, the chief academic officer in Jackson-Madison County schools in Tennessee, sees providing this kind of background knowledge as an equity issue.

Students from low-income families often don't come into school with the same depth of academic language that students from higher-income families do, limiting their ability to make meaning from what they read, he said. In Jackson-

Madison county, the data bore out this divide: Schools where the vast majority of students received free and reduced-price lunch were trailing the district when Myracle started there in 2017.

Now, students spend an hour every day doing basic skills instruction—like naming and writing letters, practicing phonological awareness, and learning phonics—and an hour on what’s called “listening and learning.” These lessons teach topics through conversation and read-alouds—in kindergarten, they learn about plants, 1st grade is early civilizations, and 2nd graders cover systems of the human body.

Kristin Peachey, an instructional coach at Pope Elementary School in the district, said that talking about complex topics lets students engage at a higher level than they would through text at this early age.

A coherent unit of study also provides opportunities for teaching comprehension, said Cervetti, the University of Michigan professor. “You can’t really reason about things in very sophisticated ways unless you know something about them,” she said.

Students should have the opportunity to discuss questions that are open-ended, without a single answer, during read-alouds, said Wright. “If we’re telling kids to think quietly and only be listeners and not participants in the read-aloud, then that’s not optimal for their learning.”

At Pope Elementary, teachers plan and talk through the questions they’ll ask during read-alouds, said Peachey. Take a recent 2nd grade lesson about Greek mythology, she said. After teachers read the story “Atalanta and the Golden Apples,” students were asked to reflect on characters’ motivations: Why would Atalanta only marry someone who could beat her in a footrace?

Imparting a deep understanding of subject matter, and teaching children to think analytically—that takes time, said Myracle. “It’s pretty easy to see gains on the foundational skills side, once you implement a systematic [phonics] program,” he said. Knowledge-building is a longer process.

Myracle believes that the payoff will be worth it. But he worries that some districts will try on a content knowledge focus like a passing fad, dismissing it before they have the opportunity to see any effects.

“My biggest fear is that districts that are starting to do some of this work to build knowledge in early grades, that they won’t stick with it,” Myracle said. “The

gains are going to be longer in coming.” ■
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‘Decodable’ Books: Boring, Useful, or Both?

By Sarah Schwartz

To really learn a new skill, you need to practice. That theory drives much of Katie Farrell’s reading instruction.

In her 1st grade class at Bauer Elementary School in Hudsonville, Mich., Farrell teaches students phonics—how letters on the page represent the spoken sounds children hear.

But for some kids, the learning only really clicks once they practice these patterns in decodable books. These short texts are written with a high proportion of words that are phonetically regular—meaning they follow common sound-spelling rules—and mostly include words with phonics patterns that children have already learned.

“When you can make that match ... that’s where the power lies,” she said.

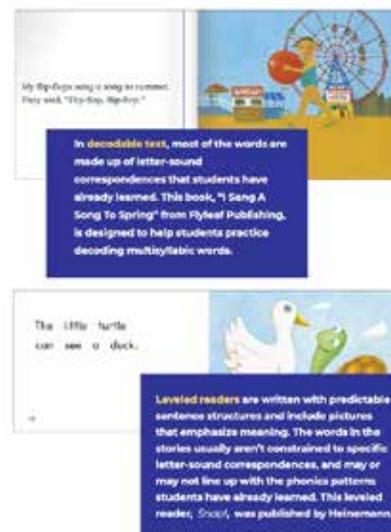
Research has long shown that teaching early elementary students phonics is the most reliable way to make sure that they learn how to read words. And much of the current debate around reading instruction has focused on phonics teaching, as many schools don’t currently follow research-based best practice in this area.

But text plays a big role in the reading classroom, too. Decodable text, specifically, is a “crucial learning tool,” said Wiley Blevins, who has written several books on phonics and currently works as a consultant training teachers.

Even so, teachers are divided when it comes to decodable books.

In Education Week’s recent national survey of early reading teachers, only 23 percent said that beginning readers should be using these texts most often. The majority, 61 percent, said that students should be reading books with high-frequency words, predictable sentence structures, and pictures that emphasize meaning. Often called leveled books, these texts are rated on a difficulty scale. Teachers aim to match students with books at their level.

Decodable vs. Leveled Books: A Comparison



There’s also a common criticism that decodable books, because of their inherent language constraints, are boring and stilted. Why subject students to these contrived stories, the argument goes, when they could be reading something more engaging?

But many experts agree that kids need that targeted practice. “When you are teaching phonics, the way to get that learning to stick is to apply it in connected text,” said Blevins.

“It builds the right strategies,” said Farrell. “They’re not reading books that they’re not ready for, and using the pictures to guess.”

Still, decodables aren’t the only books that young students should read. Most experts suggest a varied text diet. And, decodables are ultimately a stepping stone.

Eventually, Farrell says, “I want them in that authentic text using the strategies that they practiced when they’re using the decodable books.”

Building Strong Habits

Researchers agree that decodable text is meant to be used during a short

window, when students are first learning to sound out words.

Studies have shown some benefits for early readers. When kids read decodable books, they're more likely to try to decode—to sound out the words. Some studies have found that they're also more likely to read words accurately.

But other research suggests that it may not matter what kind of text students read, as long as they're getting strong phonics instruction. In one 2004 study, two groups of struggling readers in 1st grade received one-on-one phonics tutoring. One group read books that were mostly decodable; the other read books that were mostly not decodable.

There wasn't any significant difference in the word reading or comprehension of the two groups at the end of the study.

Still, there's more research on decodable text than on other types of early reading materials, like leveled readers, said Heidi Anne E. Mesmer, a professor of reading at Virginia Tech.

She suggests that decodable books be used like “a set of training wheels on a bicycle.”

“If you think about the amount of time that children learning to ride a bike use training wheels, it's not long,” she wrote in an email to Education Week. “Also, not all children need training wheels.”

These “training wheels” help students practice their phonics skills in a controlled environment. But just as importantly, they teach students to try to sound out words, Blevins said.

He pointed to a 1985 study by researchers Connie Juel and Diane Roper-Schneider, which found that the texts students were exposed to early on could affect how they tackled words.

In the study, students who read decodable text tried to sound out words more often than students who read text that prompted students to use other cues.

When students are mainly reading leveled text with predictable sentence structures, “they're undervaluing and underusing their phonics skills,” Blevins said. “This creates a really bad habit. Every book they pick up, their first strategy is, try to look at patterns, look at pictures, memorize.” Decodable books encourage the right strategy of sounding out the words, he said.

'Boring and Stupid'?

In Claudia Margaroli's 1st grade class, decodable books help remind students that they should be focused on

sounding out the words.

“This year, I've been trying to be more specific with teaching sounds in a sequential order,” said Margaroli, who teaches at Charlotte East Language Academy in Charlotte, N.C. She teaches sound-letter correspondences explicitly in her phonics lessons, and then students practice in decodable books.

“They know—and I make them say it and verbalize it—that these are sounds they've been working on, these are words they can read,” Margaroli said.

Decodable books should follow the progression of a phonics program, focusing on new sound-spelling patterns and “folding in review and repetition,” said Blevins.

But some teachers balk at the idea of using these books, even for practice of key skills, said Blevins, who does train-



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HEIDI ANNE E. MESMER
PROFESSOR, VIRGINIA TECH.

ing with schools. Why? He remembers one group of teachers who were especially blunt about decodables: “They're boring and stupid,” they told him.

Margaroli says it's true that some decodable books “just don't have a storyline.” She looks for decodables “that you can actually use for comprehension,” she says, “rather than a weird story about a cat and a mat, where at the end nothing happens except that cat is on the same mat.”

How did we get “weird” stories about cats and mats, with thin plots and stilted language? Researchers trace the trend back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Texas and California both required decodable texts in their reading program adoptions. The states set decod-

ability thresholds for texts: In Texas, 80 percent of the text had to be sound letter correspondences that students had already learned; in California, the number was 75 percent.

In response, publishers got competitive, each trying to make the book that was the highest percent decodable, Blevins said. Irregular words, like “the,” often disappeared, even though they're highly common in the English language.

But there isn't evidence to suggest that a 90 percent decodable book is more effective than one that's 75 percent decodable, or 60 percent, said Timothy Shanahan, professor emeritus at the University of Illinois Chicago. There's no “magic level,” he said.

In the rush to fill texts with only decodable words, the number of unique words per hundred in these books also increased during this time, said Elfrieda H. Hiebert, a reading researcher and the president and CEO of TextProject. So instead of seeing the same word multiple times throughout a story, students would see different words that all had the same spelling patterns.

To clear the high decodability bar, publishers started using sentences that English speakers wouldn't say or write under normal circumstances, said Blevins—like, “Let Lin dab a lip.”

“The problem is, these stories made no sense,” he said. “These books aren't Shakespeare, but they should be good stories that children enjoy reading.”

There's also value in repeating some of the same words throughout the story, said Hiebert. Decoding the same word several times helps kids link the sound to the spelling in their minds, Hiebert said, and can lead to more fluent reading. “There has to be a really strong component of consistent data that kids are getting,” she said.

What Makes a Good Decodable?

Hiebert looks for a few criteria when she's evaluating decodable books.

She wants to know if they're exposing students to “highly consistent and prolific patterns” in the text, getting practice with letter-sound correspondences that they can apply to other texts.

She also wants to know if the texts make sense as stories, and are building student knowledge. What are they teaching students about the world? A lot of decodables still fall short in this category, she said.

But when a decodable book has a sto-

ry, it doesn't have to be relegated just to sounding out practice, disconnected from the rest of the lesson, said Blevins. He suggests that teachers have rich conversations about the stories with students, asking comprehension questions to demonstrate that reading is about meaning. Students can also write about the books.

In Margaroli's class, students do just that, writing responses to questions about the text. Still, reading and writing about decodable text is only one part of Margaroli's literacy block.

Her students also listen to read-alouds, have conversations, and read books from their class library.

There are no research-based rules on how much time beginning readers should spend with decodable text, said Shanahan. It would be "very reasonable," though, to spend some portion of phonics instruction on practice, he said. This includes decoding individual words, spelling words, and reading decodable books.

Shanahan, Blevins, and Mesmer all said that decodable books aren't the only kind of text that students should have access to in these early elementary years. And though Margaroli's students practice in decodables, they have other time in the day to read books of their choice from the class library.

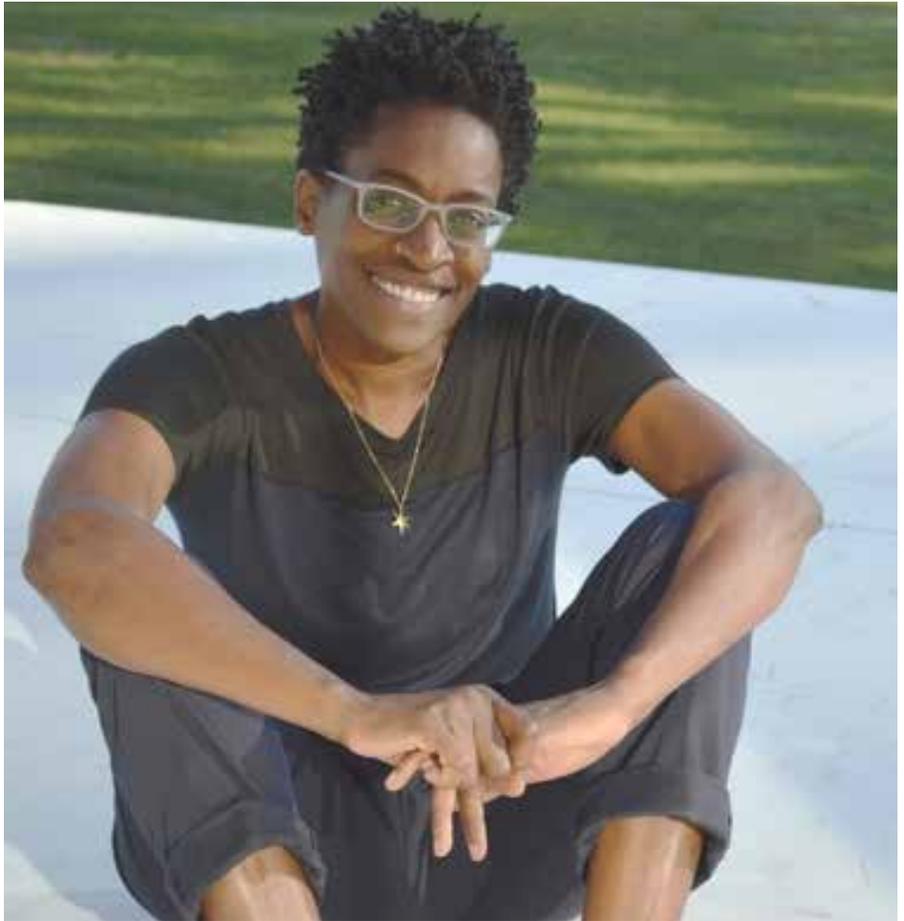
This kind of diverse reading diet is important for students because it exposes them to a broader representation of the English language, said Shanahan. Decodable books are usually constrained to phonetically regular words. Letting kids read books without those constraints can give students some experience encountering words that don't follow normal patterns, and help them "figure out the statistical properties of the language," he said.

How can teachers know when students are ready to take the training wheels off, and stop practicing on decodables altogether?

Farrell, the 1st grade teacher in Michigan, watches how students are segmenting and blending words as they read.

Once they can consistently apply the skills they've learned in their phonics lessons, "that's my first clue that I think we're ready to move on," Farrell said. It shows her that, with her guidance, students could apply the same strategies when they read more authentic text, she said.

By the spring of 1st grade, "almost no one in the class is using decodable books," said Farrell. "I love them, and then we get to a point where we just don't need them anymore." ■



Juna F. Nagle

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Stop Using the Label 'Struggling Reader,' Author Jacqueline Woodson Advises

By Brenda Iasevoli

In January, author Jacqueline Woodson was named National Ambassador for Young People's Literature by the Library of Congress. She designed her platform—Reading = Hope x Change (What's Your Equation?)—to spark conversations about how reading can help young people create, as she puts it, "the world they'd like to live in."

Woodson is a four-time Newbery Honor winner, a two-time Coretta Scott King award winner, and was named the 2015 Young People's Poet Laureate by the Poetry Foundation

for her memoir-in-verse *Brown Girl Dreaming*. She is the sixth author to take on the two-year role as the nation's premier advocate for young people's literature. The first National Ambassador, in 2008, was Jon Scieszka, followed by Katherine Paterson (2010-11), Walter Dean Myers (2012-13), Kate DiCamillo (2014-15), and Gene Luen Yang (2016-17).

Woodson talked with Education Week about how she plans to use her new platform. (The Q&A has been edited for length and clarity.)

You have said that you'd like to use your platform as ambassador to

steer people away from using labels like “struggling reader.” What do you see as the harm in these labels?

Woodson: Any kind of qualifier can be harmful because who we are is not static. Our abilities are constantly changing. What does it mean to be a struggling reader? I know if I was raised in this day and age, I would have been labeled a struggling reader. But what I know now is I was actually reading like a writer. I was reading slowly and deliberately and deconstructing language, not in the sense of looking up words in the dictionary, but understanding from context. I was constantly being compared to my sister who excelled, and it made me feel insecure. What gets translated is ‘you are not as good,’ and that gets translated into our whole bodies. That’s where the danger lies.

So it’s not what you read, or how fast, but what you get out of reading?

Woodson: First and foremost, young people should be passionate about reading. In the 6th grade I still enjoyed reading picture books. It informed me as a writer. Even now, I tell people that if they want to understand how a novel is structured, look at a picture book. It’s all there.

Another part of your platform is to show kids who might be anxious about the future how books can help them to remain hopeful. How can reading help them do that?

Woodson: What you see when you read is people who have survived. It could be contemporary survival, like surviving middle school, or it can be historical survival, shown in the story of the Underground Railroad, the civil rights movement, or the Women’s March. We can turn to books for the hope we need in the moment.

Is the “We Need Diverse Books” movement part of that hope?

Woodson: Yes, one of the first steps is to give young people access to relevant literature. If they don’t have access to books that speak to them, then we are already failing them. Young people are diverse, and I’m not just talking about racially or economically, or in terms of gender or gender preference. There are just so many ways that young people are different from one another. It is so amaz-

ing that this renaissance is happening, when all these different kinds of books are becoming available.

When you were a kid, was it difficult for you to find books that inspired you?

Woodson: We lived at the public library. We had to go there after school and wait for my mom to pick us up when she got off from work. We had limited classroom libraries, but I still was able to find Mildred Taylor and Virginia Hamilton. I grew up in the age of Judy Blume and I loved her. Looking back, it would have been nice to have more options.

Where will your term as Ambassador of Young People’s Literature take you?

Woodson: I want to go to a lot of rural places in Mississippi and Alabama, where typically young people might not get the chance to meet authors. I want to visit prisons and juvenile detention centers. Of course, I also want to get to as many libraries as I can. So it’s just about getting out there to as many venues as possible and spreading the gospel of reading.

What do you hope to achieve by visiting prisons and detention centers?

Woodson: The school-to-prison pipeline is real. It’s important for me to show up and make sure people know their rights. In a lot of prisons and detention centers, books are being censored. One book, *The New Jim Crow*, was censored because it talks about the history of mass incarceration and what it looks like and what it means. And some people are saying, ‘No, you can’t read that.’ Books should not be censored because a system is afraid of being dismantled. We know the power of books. There are so many people who have studied law in prison, and then gone on to get law degrees and challenge the system of mass incarceration.

What do you do to get kids interested in reading?

Woodson: I talk about myself as a young reader. I talk about their power, about their right to read, and their right to ask for the books they want. They should have books in their classroom libraries that mirror who they are. If they don’t, someone is remiss. If I’m visiting

an underserved school, I’m also talking with teachers about organizations like First Book, and about making sure all students are empowered with library cards. It’s all about giving kids that access.

Do you have any advice for teachers?

Woodson: Know who your students are. I’ve gone into schools where I wanted to read *Visiting Day*, a picture book about a girl whose dad is incarcerated, and teachers have said, ‘We have no kids with incarcerated relatives in our class.’ I started talking about the book and how my uncle was incarcerated and come to find out, there are 10 kids in the class whose mothers, or brothers, or uncles are in prison. Get to know your students, make no assumptions about them, and you’ll be better able to help them choose literature that is relevant. A lot of times kids don’t want to read because they haven’t seen themselves or anything that interests them in a book.

Take boys who think they don’t like to read. The minute they start reading *Ghost* by Jason Reynolds they’re gone. They are enrapt. You have to be under a rock to not know Jason Reynolds at this point in time, but I’ve met people who have never heard of him. Find current books to engage young people. Authors are always tweeting about the latest books.

As often as you can, read aloud to students. You will see a difference. My son is 10, and if it’s up to him he would read *Big Nate* books all day long. When I see him reading, I see his passion, I see his joy. But at night I could go up to him and read aloud *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and he loves it just as much.

You said you enjoy being alone and writing and that the idea of taking on this extroverted role was intimidating. What ultimately convinced you to take it?

Woodson: Talking to Carla Hayden [the first woman and the first African-American to become Librarian of Congress] who has worked so hard, and I watched her go from her work at the Enoch Pratt Library [in Baltimore] to Librarian of Congress. We are living in a time where we have to show up. As Ambassador, I’m trying to show up, do the work that I’ve been called to do, and not be afraid or resistant to it. ■

ACCELERATING LITERACY GROWTH FOR RELUCTANT READERS

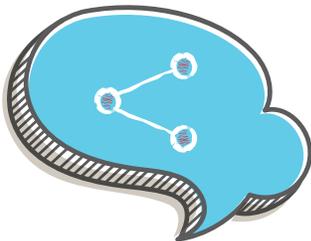
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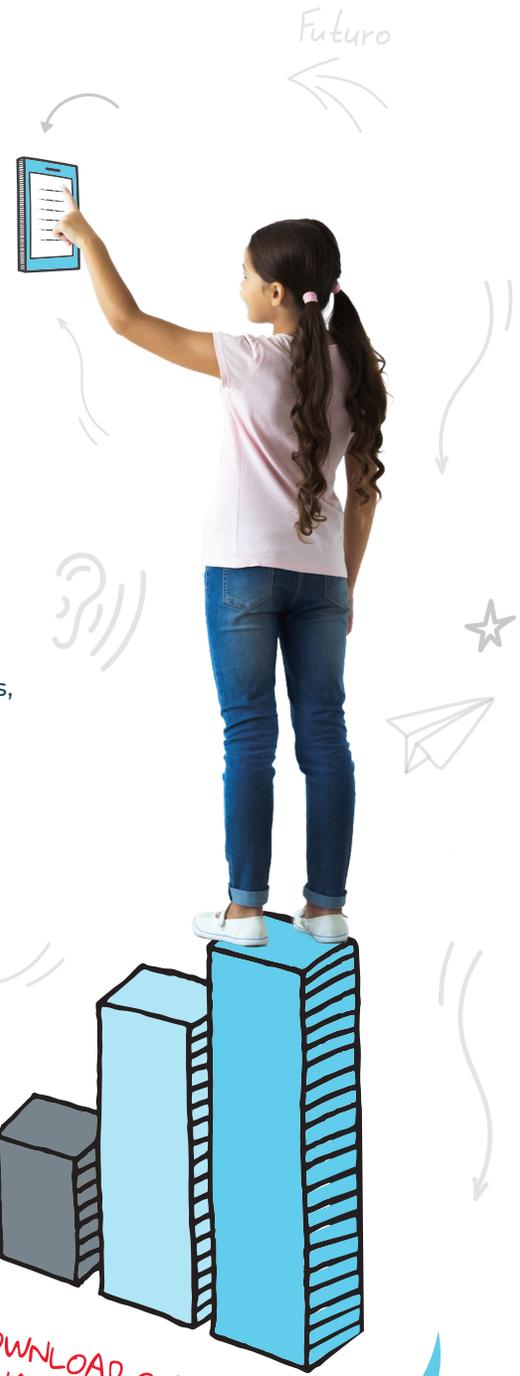


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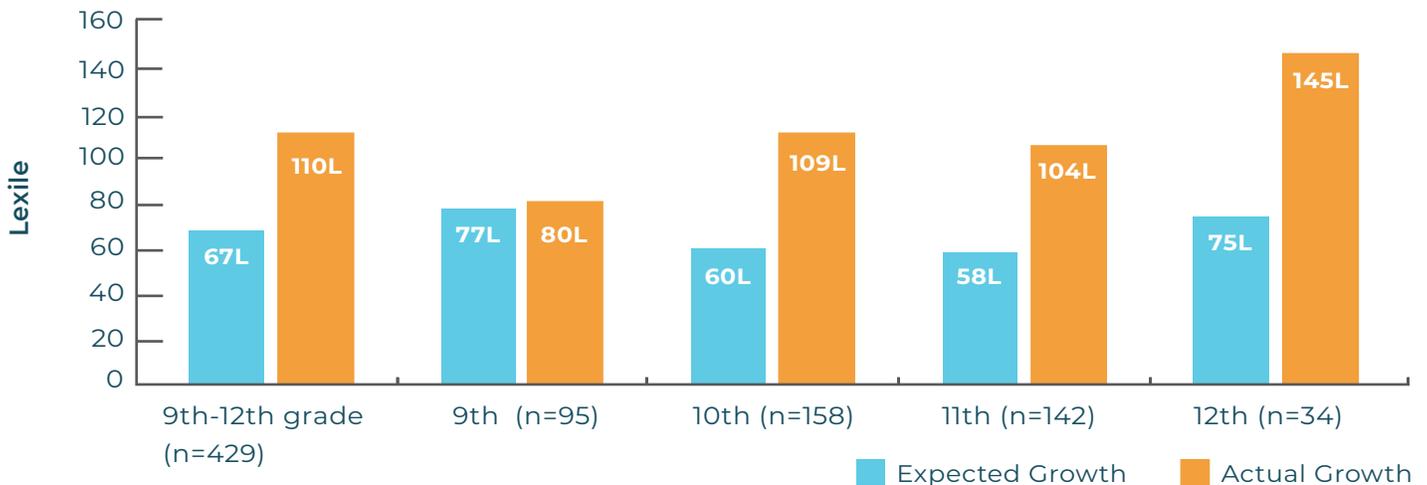


Reluctant Readers Exceed Expectations on End-of-Year State Assessment

Introduction

At the start of the 2017 school year, West Broward High School began a schoolwide initiative with the aim to increase learning gains for students with scores of levels one or two on the Florida State Assessment. They set a goal for the students to improve their scores and demonstrate growth in reading and English language arts by three percent as compared to the previous year. In the Reading Department, every student works on a laptop. Achieve3000 Literacy was easily adopted as part of their blended learning model in the fall of 2017.

Expected Versus Actual Literacy Growth*



*Please note this data is from the year after West Broward began their implementation, the 2018-2019 school year.



“Achieve3000 gave the students who were struggling with reading the stamina, confidence, and endurance to compete and succeed on their end-of-year state tests.”

**– Elizabeth Rivero,
Literacy Coach**

Engagement as the Key to Achievement

Learning gains for the lowest quartile of students went from 39% in 2017 to 49% in 2018. This group included Reading Intensive and English language learners. The district's literacy coach, Elizabeth Rivero, explains, “All of our lowest quartile students were using Achieve3000, and instead of meeting our goal of decreasing the number of students in the lowest quartile by three percent and helping them achieve learning gains, we exceeded it with ten percent more of our students increasing their scores and showing learning gains.”

Rivero went on to say that she understands that was one part of the multiple initiatives used at West Broward High School to improve reading and that they use other programs to support teachers. She says: “Even though, it was part of a bigger team effort, Achieve3000 Literacy was the thing that gave our students the stamina, confidence, and endurance they needed to succeed on their end-of-year state assessments.”

Principal Brad Fatout was very happy with the results and the work of his dedicated faculty, “I am extremely honored and proud of the instructional leadership provided by Ms. Rivero and the implementation of Achieve3000's instructional strategy by the West Broward reading teachers. Not only did West Broward show gains for the lowest 25 percent of readers, 96 percent of our seniors who were enrolled in a reading course met their graduation requirement for reading. Achieve3000 was an integral part of the remediation process of West Broward's blended learning model.”

Published on February 28, 2020, in Education Week's Teaching Now Blog

These Schools Filled Vending Machines With Books. Will It Motivate Reading?

By Sarah Schwartz

In most schools, if you're looking for a book to read, you go to the library. Now, students in search of new titles may also be headed to a vending machine.

Some schools have brought in these vending machines, which let students select a book of their choice with a token. Generally, teachers hand out these tokens as a reward for positive behavior, or for taking on academic or personal challenges. Kids can then take the books home to keep.

The goal, educators say, is twofold: to give students an incentive to make good choices and to foster a love of reading.

Deborah Weatherford, the principal at J.B. Watkins Elementary School in Midlothian, Va., made the vending machine part of her school's system of positive behavioral interventions and supports, or PBIS.

"It's built a lot of classroom camaraderie," said Rebecca Ozbalik, a special education teacher at J.B. Watkins. Students get excited for their classmates when one of them earns a token, she said.

The school also has a library that all students have access to. But having the vending machine makes getting a new book feel like "a special treat," Weatherford said. Kids have told her that they've spent time reading at home with their prizes—a big win, Weatherford thinks, when there are so many other types of entertainment vying for students' attention these days.

There's research that shows having to work for something can increase its perceived value, said Stephanie Wormington, a researcher at the Center for Creative Leadership who studies developmental and educational psychology.

"If I have to earn this token to be able to get a book, then that indicates to me that this is something that I should want and that I should be going after," she said.

Still, putting books behind glass and restricting student access could have other consequences, too. Schools should be conscious of how they're framing any reward system with books at the center, so that they don't inadvertently discour-

age students who are already reluctant readers, Wormington said.

One way that teachers could talk about the purpose of the vending machines, she said, goes like this: Teachers are excited about these books and they care about reading—they want students to be able to read these books. They're going to help students do what they need to do to become better readers and get these books in their hands.

Another way: If you want to read these books, you have to earn it—reading them is a privilege, and not a right.

"Those are two very different messages that you could send to students," Wormington said.



Ensuring Access?

At Cox Intermediate School in Spring, Texas, administrators were giving out free books to students before they put in a vending machine this year, said Principal Deborah Spoon. Students could earn one by giving a "book talk" about another story they had read, in front of the school.

But the vending machine offers teachers the opportunity to shine a spotlight on a broader range of achievements, Spoon said. Students can earn a token for the machine for making honor roll or hitting academic goals, but also for showing kindness, character, or good citizenship.

Cox Intermediate is planning to give

out 50-75 books a week, stocking the machine through donations and hunting for deals in school book catalogs.

Schools have long given out rewards to students to incentivize good behavior, or in attempts to motivate attendance or higher performance. Research on these incentives is mixed, but in general, rewards are more likely to work when they're tied to things that students feel like they can control.

And there's a better chance that this system would foster a love of reading if students feel the tokens are within their reach, Wormington said.

"Are there some messages that are being sent, potentially, about who are the students that are being able to get access to these books? Is it because adults like them more?" Wormington

asked. Schools need to be aware of creating a "in-group, out-group" situation, where some students never get to pick out a book from the machine, she said.

At J.B. Watkins, teachers are looking to make distribution more equitable. The goal is for every child to earn at least one book this semester, Weatherford said.

For these vending machines to foster a love of reading, schools need to first examine their culture more broadly, Wormington said. Students need to trust that their teachers want them to access knowledge, and that teachers aren't going to withhold books as a punishment, she said.

Of course, vending machines aren't the only places in these schools where students can access books. So how do libraries fit into this equation?

At Cox Intermediate, the librarian

has helped pick out the book selection for the new device. And at J.B. Watkins, educators have used the machine to get kids hooked on collections. They'll put one book out of a series in the machine, and let students know that the rest are in the library.

"A lot of the books in the vending machine are new titles," said Ozbalik, the special education teacher. "The kids who see their peers get books, they get interested in the titles they're seeing."

Sparking kids' interest in a series is a smart strategy to build engagement, said Wormington. Schools could also try tucking in recommendations from staff members into the backs of the vending machine books, she said—a way to "harness the relationships that students have with their teachers." ■

COMMENTARY

Published on January 5, 2020, in Education Week's Classroom Q&A Blog

'Writing Directly Benefits Students' Reading Skills'

By Larry Ferlazzo

In what ways can writing support reading instruction?

All of us obviously want to help our students become better writers. But are there ways we can "double-dip," too—in other words, help them improve their writing AND also use writing instruction to improve reading skills?

We'll explore that question today with Tony Zani, Mary Tedrow, Mary Beth Nicklaus, Colleen Cruz, and Pam Allyn.

Giving kids the "write stuff" makes them better readers

Tony Zani is a literacy coach in the Salt Lake City school district. He has a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in instructional leadership. Tony is a national-board-certified teacher with a specialization in early-childhood education:

Writing is often the overlooked content area. After the National Reading Panel left it out and No Child Left Behind focused on reading achievement, there seemed to be a decline in teaching writing. After the Common Core State Standards came out, there was an increase in

“
Writing...provides big
gains in reading
comprehension and
reading fluency.
- Tony Zani
in Education Week Teacher

writing instruction. But, if your state is like mine, writing is only tested in a few grades. So, guess what? Those are the grades when writing is taught like crazy. In other grades, it often becomes a nice thing "if there's time." There's rarely time.

This mentality is prevalent because every level of the education system focuses on making sure students do well on end-of-year, high-stakes assessments. Jobs are at stake. Money from the government is at stake. Heaven forbid your school does so

poorly that an outside group comes in to help you "turnaround."

Never fear, though. Writing directly benefits students' reading skills. For example, if you have students write about what they've read or learned (for nearly any content or age), you'll dramatically improve reading comprehension. Students are often forced to reread and think more deeply about what they've read. When students have to consider a controversial question and use texts they've read to defend their

point of view, reading comprehension is off the charts. In our school, we've emphasized writing about what we read. It took about two years for most teachers, and students, to really embrace the concept. It was about that time that our end-of-year reading scores had a huge jump. Our highly impacted Title I school made enormous growth just because students were better at thinking about what they read.

Writing also improves students' reading fluency. When students have to stop and think about what spelling patterns to use when they write, they are making a deeper connection in their brains about sound and spelling patterns. This deeper connection makes it easier, and faster, for students to recall those same patterns when they read. Written language is literally a secret code that someone made up to represent spoken sounds. The more stu-

tions. Again, students have a framework to build upon when they read others' narrative texts. In a bit of irony, our school focused on writing informative and argumentative pieces—those are emphasized in the common core, right? Our students had very high scores when reading informational texts. However, students scored lower when reading literature. Reading literature was a strength for most other schools. Writing in all genres is important. Don't lose that balance!

Writing is a critical communication skill. Universities and employers frequently complain that writing is an underdeveloped skill. It's no wonder, when we have an education system that often relegates writing to the land of "I wish we had time" and "That's not on the test." What a tragedy. Teaching students to be effective writers is important by itself. However, writing also

their function in symbolizing the sounds we speak. Encouraging students to write, even before they know all the rules, builds a deeper understanding of how reading works. In kindergarten, the inventive spelling students employ to compose early writings allows children to represent on the page what they are hearing in the world. Children more clearly understand the letter/sound relationship as they compose thoughts and stories in writing. Recent research has revealed that students who are given latitude to use inventive spelling become better readers (Oulette & Senechall, 2017).

But the interplay between writing and reading goes well beyond just learning to read. When students are asked to write for their own purposes, they intuitively understand the choices authors make as they create a work that moves a reader.

Teachers who have students writing authentically—that is, the way real writers write—can interrupt the process and teach craft lessons. Show students how to develop several good beginnings and ask them to choose the one which serves their purpose best. Show how to incorporate the senses in description, how to move a plot forward through dialogue, how to manipulate sentences for punch and clarity.

All of these writing skills are the inside/out version of analyzing writing by others. When we analyze the books, poetry, and essays we read, we are simply describing the choices an author made on their road to composing a piece. When students are heavily involved in creating those pieces themselves, they will more easily see what authors are doing and understand the messiness required in producing effective communication. Writing brings the author and his or her skill to life.

Students who write are better, more observant, and appreciative readers in general. And students who read are better, more competent writers. Be sure your students have the chance to breathe in and out throughout the day.

"Lure" students into reading through working with their writing

Mary Beth Nicklaus is a secondary-level teacher and literacy specialist for the Wisconsin Rapids public schools in Wisconsin:

I have found it possible to lure secondary-level students into the reading world through working with their writing. I work with 6-9th grade struggling readers as a reading specialist and literacy coach.

“
Reading is the
inhale; writing is
the exhale.”

- Mary Tedrow
in Education Week Teacher

dents think about and practice the code in written form, the better they will be at understanding the same code in writing. Again, in our high-needs school, we saw students' scores on tests like DIBELS and our end-of-level test rise dramatically. Fluent readers more deeply understand that code.

Writing also improves reading comprehension as students get better at formatting their writing. When students write argumentative essays, they learn how authors often lay out their arguments and evidence. This, in turn, gives students a framework for reading others' argumentative writing. Having a framework in your mind helps you fill in the blanks and improves comprehension. When students write narrative pieces, they develop an understanding of how authors typically lay out character development, setting, plot, problems, turning points, and resolu-

tion provides big gains in reading comprehension and reading fluency.

"Reading is the inhale; writing is the exhale"

Mary K. Tedrow, an award-winning high school English teacher, now serves as the director of the Shenandoah Valley Writing Project. Her book, Write, Think, Learn: Tapping the Power of Daily Student Writing Across the Content Area is available through Routledge:

Writing and reading are intricately intertwined. One is the inverse of the other: Reading is the inhale; writing is the exhale. They depend on each other, and when we find time to practice both, the students are the winners.

In the earliest readers, writing is a natural way to ingest and experiment with a growing knowledge of letters and

By the time they are referred to me, they have not been reading for years—which accounts for much of their struggle. When we teachers work through the power of written self-expression with and for these students, we can also tinker with content-specific academic vocabulary, text structure, and mechanics of writing. We can also prime and build basic reading and comprehension skills. Even researchers have found that use of reading-response writing, explicitly teaching writing process, and engaging students in wide writing practice enhances basic reading skills and comprehension in K-12 readers. Here are some strategies I have found to be successful working with secondary-level students based on the aforementioned three areas:

- **Create reading-response writing opportunities focusing on opinions and feelings of the reader.** By the time they are in 6th grade, most students want to share information about interests and opinions. How can we connect that interest into reader response? To begin with, we don't always have to work with published text. We can create our own texts in the classroom. We teachers can start the process by writing a letter to students sharing some general information and interests. The teacher then guides the students to write a letter back to them with similar information. This experience encourages students to begin sharing and expressing themselves in writing. Get into the habit of crafting student-writing response assignments for which we are asking about students' feelings and opinions regarding classroom reading—even soliciting poetry writing if that genre works best for some students. Students may also find starting with a salutation hailing a specific audience helps them focus their thoughts in their writing. "Dear teacher/class/partner, I think that____." They can also focus on sharing their writing with a partner or small group.
- **Teach the writing process relative to classroom text.** Teach students a few writing structures to clearly communicate thoughts and ideas. Teach the main structures of the text you use in your content—be it narrative or expository structures. Let's say we want to teach students to compare and contrast within a classroom text on the running of restaurants. We might use a Venn Diagram graphic organizer to compare and contrast the information about restaurant operation with them on the smartboard. Allow the class to help fill

in information. Then together, flesh out a comparison-contrast response with a question like, "Based on our reading today, what might be a more difficult restaurant to run, Culver's or Buffalo Wild Wings?" Use a template to gather student input to flesh out a response. Teach students to support viewpoints with evidence from the text and show them a specific way you will always want them to use to cite evidence. Allow the class to help design or co-create a rubric for evaluating writing, which will help students internalize the elements of the specific writing. Steer the strategy to a similar text where you might use the same kind of structure and response.

- **Engage in wide practice of written response:** Continuing both "big" and "little" writing in our classes, based on the structures and types of texts we teach, can increase reading comprehension. Working on mechanics of writing improves basic reading skills like fluency and word recognition. In addition, continue to practice reading, writing, and reflecting and sharing in whole-group, small-group, and partner contexts. Have students create "Why?" questions to inquire about text. Supply sentence stems to help students focus their text response with their writing such as, "I think _____ did what he did because in the story_____." Make it a habit of requiring written response in the form of exit response slips where students within a limit of 3-5 minutes, quickly write a response to an inquiry regarding what they learned through the reading. Wide practice of writing helps students' classroom reading become second nature, and it helps prune their focus on text.

I know the strategies I have elaborated

“
I have found it possible to lure secondary level students into the reading world through working with their writing.”

- Mary Beth Nicklaus
in Education Week Teacher

upon work, because my students made enormous, lasting gains in their reading through focusing on writing. Also, the gains secondary-level students can make through focusing on feelings and opinions in their reading-response writing foster livelier conversations during classroom discussion. Students' overall gains even show students that content texts across the curriculum can pique their interests outside of the classroom. It's a win-win all around!

Having students annotate their writing with the Strategies they use

Colleen Cruz is the author of several titles for teachers, including The Unstoppable Writing Teacher, as well as the author of the young-adult novel, Border Crossing, a Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award Finalist. She was a classroom teacher in general education and inclusive settings before joining the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, where as the director of innovation, she shares her passion for accessibility, 21st-century learning, and social justice. Most recently, Colleen authored Writers Read Better: Nonfiction (July 2018) and Writers Read Better:

As an educator who works with teachers and students in grades 2 through 8, I find that I often look at the practices of primary-grade teachers and wish we upper-grade folks borrowed more heavily from them. Whether it be a focus on individual development, an emphasis on play, or just an overarching focus on the whole child, there are pedagogical treasures we need to bring more to our big-kid classrooms. At present, the most pressing for me is the desire to use writing to support

reading instruction more often.

Every kindergarten and 1st grade teacher I know asks students to write as soon as they enter the classroom. This is long before students know the entire alphabet or how to read any words. In fact, most of us who have had little ones at home can attest to how often kids pick up a marker or crayon and write their names, strings of letters, or familiar words. Our youngest learners often produce words before they consume them. And when they do that, they are setting themselves up for success as readers because they learn early on, if they can write their name they can read it. If they can write any word, they can read it.

Also, many of us grew up as educators with the knowledge that reading supports writing. I first learned how this conventional wisdom applies to children's writ-

sible paths to overcoming that challenge is through writing. It's a transferable understanding that can last a lifetime: Show students that every reading skill has a reciprocal writing skill, and if they have written something like it, they are able to read it well, too.

One of my favorite ways to do this is to ask students to annotate their writing with the strategies they tried as writers and the reasons why. For example, "I used show-don't-tell in this paragraph to help make a picture in my reader's mind." I then ask them to read a book of their choice with their own writing nearby. When they come to a spot in the text they find challenging, they can look back to their own writing to see if they made a similar move and why. A few common writing/reading reciprocal moves I teach students include:

“
For every comprehension
move a reader makes, there
is an author on the other side
of the desk.

- Colleen Cruz
in Education Week Teacher

ing from Katie Ray and her seminal book *Wondrous Words*. So, it should not be all that revolutionary to discover that those early-writing and -reading connections still apply when students move into more complex reading.

Yes, they might have moved past simple decoding and literal comprehension work. But the role of writing and reading reciprocity still applies. For every comprehension move a reader makes, there is an author on the other side of the desk. If a young reader is also a writer, they will be well-positioned to see the mirror moves they have made as a writer in the texts they are reading by other authors. Studies have shown this, of course (Graves, Calkins, Chew, Graham & Herbert to name a few). But in my work with young readers and writers I have seen time and again that if something is challenging to a reader, one of the most acces-

- Show-not-tell in writing helps readers to infer in reading.
- Plotting in writing helps readers to make predictions in reading.
- Developing objects as symbols in writing helps readers interpret symbols in reading.
- Defining a word in writing helps readers to understand the meaning of an unknown word.

There are, of course, countless more.

We know the power of modeling. And I believe for many years, rightly so, we have taught students how to mine the power of the published word for ideas for their own writing. For many of us, it's time to try to teach the power of modeling by asking students to look at their own writing as their mentor for their reading lives. I am hard-pressed to think of more empowering reading work.

Writing "is a powerful lever for helping our students learn to read profoundly"

Pam Allyn, senior vice president, innovation & development, Scholastic Education, is a leading literacy expert, author, and motivational speaker. In 2007, she founded LitWorld, a global literacy organization serving children across the United States and in more than 60 countries, pioneering initiatives including the summer reading program LitCamp and World Read Aloud Day.

Writing and reading are not just two sides of the same coin; they are profoundly related and entwined. I have often said that reading is like breathing in, and writing is like breathing out—the child is taking new breaths in this new world, feeling her power and her potential.

Surrounding our children in the sounds of language from literary and informational text is crucial to their understanding of language. The child who is read aloud to multiple times per day, week, month, and year is already realizing the sound and feel of language. Then, too, the child who is given the opportunity to put her first marks on the page is already beginning to make meaning in the world. When reading a book, she sees it as something constructed from a world she already knows because her scribbles connect to those of others and give her the powerful idea that she has a voice.

Writing early and constantly, in and out of school, is a powerful lever for helping our students learn to read profoundly. Here are five ways writing supports reading and vice versa:

- 1. Building a deep sense of the beauty of grammar, sound, and vocabulary.** The student who writes becomes alert to the structure of sentences, the rhythm of multiple words together, and words that surprise. Because our students are using the tools of language to build their own stories, they are awake to the qualities of texts. When students share works by authors such as Jacqueline Woodson or Naomi Nye, they're astounded and try to emulate them in their own writing.
- 2. Understanding the purpose of and use of genres.** Students who write quickly learn the necessity of genre. My 1st graders were writing informational texts and choosing their own topics. One wrote about nursing homes because that's where her grandpa was. Later, I saw her scouring a book with

a glossary in it. She explained, “I want to add a glossary to my story. My readers might need to know some of the big words I use to describe where my grandpa lives.” Genre is already embedded within her at the age of 6.

3. Recognizing the power of writing to connect us. Students who write understand that by telling their stories, they’re making their thoughts permanent, which leads to a hearty respect for the text, the authors who write them, and the uses we make of them. When our student writers are finishing works to put into the classroom library, they have an opportunity to see themselves side by side with published works, which feels celebra-

tory. Writing, theirs and others, inspires and connects them.

4. Becoming aware of the ways writing can change someone’s mind or change the world. Even the smallest writer has big ideas. My 2nd grade class once wrote letters to the entire neighborhood inviting them to come see our play. People young and old came, and students saw how they could change their communities with the power of their own words. So, when they read, they consider all the ways writers can change people.

5. Knowing and deepening one’s own writing and the voice of an author. The student who writes is building confidence, courage, and a sense of self. She

is learning how to evoke emotion, keep someone in suspense, and persuade while developing her own voice, which will serve her in the future whether she’s writing a narrative or an email. When she turns to her reading, she is now more aware of the author’s voice and knows the risks the author takes. She is one herself. ■

Larry Ferlazzo is an award-winning English and Social Studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif. and is the author of Helping Students Motivate Themselves: Practical Answers To Classroom Challenges, The ESL/ELL Teacher’s Survival Guide, and Building Parent Engagement In Schools.

COMMENTARY

Published on November 20, 2019, in Education Week Teacher

Bringing the Joy of Read-Alouds to Middle School Students

By Christina Torres

Eyes wide and mouths agape, 24 8th graders are waiting with bated breath as the villain sneaks up behind our protagonists. I pause. “Should we stop for today?” I ask with a smirk.

“Noooo!” the class collectively reacts, and I laugh and continue. It’s rare to have the rapt attention of two dozen adolescents around anything, but when I garner that attention for a book, I am particularly grateful.

Their engagement should hardly be surprising, however. Reading aloud is a strategy elementary school teachers have capitalized on for generations. Teachers use storytelling and drama to get younger students engaged with and loving literature, only to mourn when those same students appear to lose that love once they reach middle and high school. We rarely acknowledge that reading quickly turns from a group experience to an individual one once kids reach middle school.

For the past six years, I’ve used “read-along,” a twist on reading aloud, as a staple of my middle and high school teaching practice. Based on the Perfor-



Juna F. Nagle

mance English program from the Curriculum Research and Development Group at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (or Manoa), my students and I read about 75 percent of our texts together in class (they also have independent reading books that they choose). Unlike traditional read-alouds, all students follow along with their own copy of the text, and I stop periodically to explain vocabulary, model note-taking in the margins, or engage in class discussion.

This strategy has been hugely beneficial for my students. Reading texts aloud in class has helped me build community. And the experience of hearing a story together has helped build student enjoyment, engagement, and camaraderie. Since I began doing read-along, my students have started discussing the books we read the way an audience talks after a movie: They walk out of class chatting about what happened. They ask their peers in other classes about the voices I used, or if I added sound effects. Other

teachers tell me they catch students reading ahead or discussing what we read in class with their peers.

This love of storytelling can snowball into an overall love of literature that extends beyond our classroom walls. I often have students ask me if Harper Lee has written anything else they can read after we finish *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a class.

By reading the book with students, I'm also able to engage more deeply in discussions mid-text. When we encounter a difficult word, we stop and work through it as a class. I'll model metacognitive thinking as we read, stopping after a line and questioning my reactions to plot points or literary devices, or connecting the story to other things we've read. Later, I'll ask students to pause and share their reactions and reflect on where those feelings are coming from, as well as have them create text-to-text connections.

Reading aloud can be nerve-wracking for those new to the method. Here are some ways to reap its full benefits:

Use performance and storytelling techniques.

Do I use a subtle Southern affect while reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Absolutely! Not only does it show students that reading can be playful and imperfect (their reactions to different voices are always amusing), but it also helps conjure the world of the novel and attract interest in the story. I create different voices using pitch, vocal placement, and speech patterns to differentiate characters. I also play with pacing to build suspense or excitement. I'll even turn off the lights or project images on the board for ambience.

Build in time and activities to purposefully engage with the text.

Reading along gives us the opportunity to discuss not just the overall story, but the intricacies of the writing. We can model and use a variety of skills to understand new vocabulary, and give students chances to explain their reasoning when they infer meaning. Stopping to help students recognize "sign-post" moments in a story—strategically placed words, phrases, or plot points that help readers recognize that something important is happening—can help them learn and practice deeper analytical skills in a group setting.

I'll have students share their thoughts, questions, and epiphanies (TQEs, as teacher Marisa Thompson calls them) at the ends of sections or even mid-paragraph, ensuring we read actively. These strategies also allow students to have critical conversations with themselves and each other as they read the text, not just after they've read it. Students can hone these skills together before they have to use them independently.

Practice, practice, practice.

Read-aloud is like any performance: We do better when we know what's coming and how we want to create feeling. When I practice, I time myself reading a page so I can better plan for how much we'll get through in class. I also make notes on different voices, difficult words to address, and where I want to stop to engage in discussion or activities.

Only ask students to read if they've had time to prepare or are reading in small groups.

This a question I'm often asked when I share my read-along practice: How much do I read and how much do the students read? I read a majority of the text in a whole-class setting. While reading aloud can build fluency, research shows that forcing students to read aloud, in front of their peers, and without preparation is not only unhelpful, but potentially damaging. When I do have students read aloud, I use a number of strategies that lower the stakes (such as partner or small-group reading) or give them time to prepare a passage on their own. This gives them a chance to practice fluency while ensuring we don't do more harm than good.

Beyond its practical benefits, read-along has provided me some of my most rewarding teaching experiences. Students frequently share that is one of their favorite, most memorable parts of their experiences with me, and nothing quite beats the feeling of hearing a classroom full of students gasp, laugh, or squeal in delight in response to a great story—ultimately leaving us feeling just a little closer to one another at the end of the day. ■

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COMMENTARY

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How to Make Reading Instruction Much, Much More Efficient

Scaling back small-group instruction would have dramatic improvements in literacy

By Mike Schmoker

Third grade reading proficiency matters—enormously. It is eerily predictive of academic and career success; students who don't reach this benchmark are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time. Unfortunately, K-3 literacy instruction, on which so much depends, is often a misguided, inefficient mess. While it consumes a generous portion of the school day, it typically neglects the most vital elements of literacy. That's why our success rate, despite some progress, is still abysmal: only about half of our 3rd graders perform at grade level on their own state assessments. It is even lower for poor and minority students.

This is both horrific and unnecessary. According to literacy researcher Richard Allington, studies show that "virtually every student could be reading on grade level by the end of 1st grade." In my experience, most educators acknowledge the need for intensive, systematic phonics instruction. They also know that students need to read and talk and write far more than they currently do, across the curriculum. There is wide agreement that all of these elements must be in place for K-3 students to acquire the fluency, knowledge, and vocabulary needed to become literate

and articulate. We've yet to capitalize on this consensus. Or to see what prevents us from acting on it: the structure and substance of the typical K-3 literacy block and our overhyped commercial literacy programs. Their failure can often be traced to the pervasiveness of small-group, ability-based instruction.

The most successful K-3 teachers I've observed use small groups sparingly. That's because their whole-class instruction consistently incorporates the most proven (but rarely implemented) elements of successful teaching. They master simple methods for ensuring that all students are attentive, and they conduct frequent, ongoing assessments of the class's progress throughout the lesson—and then re-teach accordingly. An Education Week article last year adds credence to this approach, reporting that whole-group instruction is “almost always” more effective than the small-group, ability-based model.

These facts point to an opportunity for dramatic improvements in 3rd grade literacy. Do the math: In a two-hour reading block, five groups of students will receive about 20 minutes of reading instruction per day. In a classroom that uses small groups more sparingly, students will receive about 80 minutes—three to four times as much.

Three to four times as much. This would allow for huge infusions of instructional time into the essential components of literacy. Teachers could use this additional time to incorporate more:

- **Intensive, sustained, systematic phonics.** We could substantially accelerate students' mastery of the phonetic code in K-1—and still have time for kids to read and listen to far more fiction and nonfiction texts.
- **Reading/general knowledge.** If most students have mastered decoding in the 1st grade, they could spend record amounts of time in 2nd and 3rd grade reading literature, history, and science texts to build their knowledge base and vocabulary, which are critical to effective comprehension.
- **Vocabulary instruction.** Most of a rich vocabulary is acquired through abundant reading. But research also shows that we can reliably supplement this with targeted, embedded vocabulary instruction.
- **Discussion.** To become confident, articulate speakers, students must engage in frequent, purposeful discussions about what they read. We could



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multiply the length and frequency of such discussions, which animate an appreciation of reading and are excellent preparation for writing.

- **Writing and writing instruction.** Writing has an unsurpassed capacity to help us think logically, express ourselves clearly, and understand, analyze, and retain content. It often promotes dramatic, measurable improvements across the curriculum and is crucial to success in innumerable careers.

Let's be candid here: These core elements of literacy seldom get the time they deserve in most K-3 classrooms—or our inordinately praised commercial programs. A shift to larger amounts of well-executed, whole-class instruction would at least double the amount that students receive in these critical areas. The benefits, for K-3 and beyond, would be immense.

Of course, many will argue that students don't need more time with their teacher; they can learn to read and write on their own, at our now-ubiquitous independent learning “centers,” which are set up with materials for students to work independently while the teacher works with small groups. But are they learning? “According to the studies,” writes literacy expert Timothy Shanahan, “No.” Time spent away from the teacher, he writes, should not be considered a “productive part of the school day.” I consistently observe students languishing at these unsupervised centers, ambling slowly from station to station, aimlessly turning pages or talking quietly with a partner instead of reading. And that explains, as Michael P.

Ford and Michael F. Opitz found nearly two decades ago, why only about a third of the overall literacy period has any academic value.

What should we do? Take Shanahan's advice: “Brush up your skills in working with larger groups,” and use the windfall of precious time to multiply the amount of instruction we provide in the most indispensable elements of K-3 literacy. Then as night follows day, 3rd grade literacy rates will rise. ■

Mike Schmoker is an author, speaker, and consultant. He is the author of FOCUS, 2nd edition (ASCD, 2018) and Leading with FOCUS (ASCD, 2016).

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