

Hooking Struggling Readers: Using Books They Can and Want to Read

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One of the keys to helping struggling readers is to provide them with books that they can and want to read. Fiction for struggling readers must have realistic characters, readable and convincing text, and a sense of the readers' interests and needs. Non-fiction books, newspapers, magazines, even comic books can hook students on reading.

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Charles is a struggling reader. Like three out of four children with reading difficulties, Charles is a boy. He started school with limited experience with print, struggled through activities with letters and sounds, and tended to be off task when there was independent reading time. He learned in second grade to have

his reading buddy do most of the reading. By third grade, when most of his classmates were fairly fluent, Charles was still guessing at words, using picture clues and avoiding books whenever he could. In fourth grade, when the illustrations were gone, Charles was in obvious trouble.

There are few tasks more challenging for teachers than reaching struggling middle school readers like Charles. These students not only have a history of reading failure, they have developed attitudes and coping strategies which lead them to avoid, rather than fix, their reading problems. The intermediate grades will often be these students' last chance for reading success. Like many struggling readers, Charles has problems that can be diagnosed. His attention span is short. He doesn't have flexible reading strategies — if sounding out doesn't work quickly, he'll guess or read blithely on. He doesn't monitor his own comprehension, continuing on even if the text is making no sense to him. Nonetheless, Charles knows that reading is important and he wants to read well. He knows that the jobs in his future will require reading. He even knows that there is a great delight to be had in stories and books, but that delight is simply beyond his reach. As teachers, our job is to extend that reach.

Increasing the quantity and quality of his reading

There is extensive research to support the premise that the best way to become a better reader is to read more. (Allington, 2001). Unfortunately, often the instructional solution for readers like Charles is to focus on "skills instruction" rather than connected reading. As a result, he usually ends up reading less than his classmates, thereby having fewer opportunities to build competence, a phenomenon Keith Stanovich calls "The Matthew Effect" (Stanovich, 1994).

If Charles is to increase both the quantity and quality of his reading, he needs reading materials that he can read and will want to read. While capable readers often have a wide range of

reading interests, and can access texts in a variety of genres and levels of difficulty, struggling readers tend to be more narrowly focused both in terms of interest and ability. Finding the "right book" for Charles is essential for him to build both confidence and proficiency.

As far back as 1946, researcher Emmett Betts suggested that we should be giving students texts in which they could read at least 90 percent of the words and comprehend at least 75 percent of the information enhanced both learning and attitude (Betts, 1946, in Allington, 2001). Subsequent research supports the premise that success with learning generates more learning (Allington, 2001). Yet all too often, struggling readers are subjected to texts that are much too difficult for them, that inhibit learning and decrease motivation.

Find effective high interest, low vocabulary books

The term "high interest, low vocabulary" is often used to describe books for youngsters like Charles. These are materials with controlled vocabulary and reading difficulty levels, but with plots and topics appropriate to older students. Such books avoid the problems of having Charles, a young teen, reading a picture book about teddy bears or butterflies. But effective hi/lo materials must provide very similar supports for struggling readers as those early picture books: illustrations to support the text, carefully chosen vocabulary, simple sentences, compelling stories, and character that interest the reader. The very best hi/lo materials provide these supports invisibly, so that students like Charles are not stigmatized by reading a "baby book." Effective hi/lo materials should always be developed with attention to measured readability levels. Typical readability formulae, such as the Fry and the Flesch-Kincaid offered with Microsoft Word, are based on sentence length and syllable count. More sophisticated formulae such as the Dale-Chall, Harris-Jacobsen, and the Lexile systems are based on three factors: sentence length, syllable count, and word difficulty. The basic idea is that longer sentences, polysyllabic words, and abstruse

vocabulary make it more difficult for readers to decode text (Zakaluk and Samuels, 1988).

Unfortunately, the nature of any mathematical formula makes it possible to artificially lower the measured readability of text by simply chopping sentences into pieces or substituting monosyllabic vocabulary.

Effective materials for struggling readers have their own textual integrity: realistic characters, readable and convincing text, and a deep sense of the readers' interests and needs. Consistency is important. A text whose readability runs from grade 2 to grade 8 may still have an average readability of grade 4, but many sections will be too difficult for a reluctant reader.

Writers of controlled-readability materials must be aware that the interest of a book must be sustained throughout. Authors of regular novels can spend more time describing characters and settings; authors of good high interest, low vocabulary books know that it's important to keep the plot spinning. Not all hi/lo materials meet these criteria. Consider this passage from a novel in the *Woodland Mystery* (1996) series:

Mrs. Tandy said, "Well, I have a plan you'll like, I think. Let's make sandwiches for lunch, and have a picnic!"

Sammy said, "Perfect! First the snack, then ATTACK!"

Kathy said, "Let's put the sandwiches into paper bags. Then we can use the bags for picking plums later."

Mrs. Tandy said, "Here's cold turkey and home-baked ham, and lettuce, and bread."

The sentences are short, the polysyllabic words few, and the difficult vocabulary virtually non-existent. Measured readability is slightly over Grade 3.0. But is this high interest? How did this picnic episode — which continues down an entire page — make its way into a mystery novel? Let's contrast it with a selection from another hi/lo novel:

The two wrestlers came together, a mass of arms and knees. Tom kept trying to throw Jes to the mat, but Jes kept slipping free. At last Jes saw his chance. He ducked and got his head under Tom's shoulder. Then fast — fast as anything — he flipped around behind Jes's back. The older boy was forced down to the

mat.

"Blue, one point," the coach yelled.

(from *Tag Team (New Series Canada)*, 2002)

The technical readability of this section is below grade 3, but the subject matter and rhythm of the prose keep the story moving and the reader engrossed. Ultimately, this must be the test of effective hi/lo fiction.

Books that support struggling readers

Sophisticated genres like the mystery or chopped-down "classics" are inappropriate in programs for struggling readers. Think about all of the reading strategies required to enjoy a mystery novel: a reader must be able to read for detail, recall a series of clues, make inferences and connections within the text and sustain interest until the end of the book when the mystery is resolved — all the things in which struggling readers are weakest. Similarly, classic novels that have been adapted for weaker readers still retain the complex plot twists and heavy concept load of the original text. Reading *Huckleberry Finn* remains difficult even if Twain's rich vocabulary and syntax are stripped from the novel. The best materials for struggling readers are carefully written, edited, and designed to provide supports for struggling readers.

These supports include:

- A compelling storyline and credible characters
- Topics and issues with which readers can make personal or emotional connections
- Supportive formatting that includes illustrations and appropriate text placement on the page (hyphenation is a problem for reluctant readers, line spacing is more important than type size, some type faces are more easily readable than others)
- Careful introduction and reinforcement of difficult vocabulary and concepts (no difficult word should be used only once, and every difficult word should be presented in such a way as to be sure its meaning is clear)
- Straightforward plot development (avoiding flashbacks, time shifts, and confusing changes in point of view)

- Simple sentence structures (the subject and predicate must be physically close to each other; subordinate clauses should follow the main clause, or be clearly set off by commas)

Effective characterization is the key to good narrative text.

Readers need to care what happens to the characters and how their problems will be resolved in the story. This is particularly important for reluctant readers. Novels for struggling readers need clearly defined and differentiated characters. This does not require a lot of description; it does require that the characters are clearly distinguishable from one another. In our research, we have found that even the characters' names should be visually different from one another to prevent confusion on the part of the reader.

Good hi/lo reading materials contain enough illustrations to help in comprehending the text. Not only do illustrations support the storyline, they also "pad" the text, so that the book appears longer but can still be read quickly. The text may look the same as in any other book, but space between lines in a hi/lo text is wider and words are not broken at the end of lines in order to facilitate return eye sweep and avoid impediments to fluency.

Sophisticated lit

erary devices such as flashbacks, sudden plot twists, or complex subplots increase the difficulty of reading for struggling readers. Story structure should be straightforward and move the reader through the text quickly and efficiently. Are there sacrifices here in the depth and complexity of the novel? Of course. But the goal here is reading and enjoyment; serious literary study can wait for other novels later on.

Making connections from one's own experience to the text is an important reading strategy and a basic literacy skill. It is important that students be able to relate to the topics and issues in the books they read. Such a connection may allow a student to read material with a measured readability two grade levels or more beyond his tested ability.

For instance, much of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has a lower measured readability than the newspaper sports page. Teachers know, however, that students will have difficulty relating to the situations and language in *Hamlet* without significant teacher

assistance. Many, however can handle the sports page with ease because they are familiar with both the game, the players and the specialized technical vocabulary involved.

Finally, a traditional appearance for hi/lo material is vitally important for middle grade students, whose self-esteem as readers may be lacking as much as their reading proficiency. Such books should not appear obviously "special" or have their reading levels marked in any apparent way. In fact, the best hi/lo books frequently have as much appeal for good readers as they do for struggling readers — the good readers just go through the books that much more quickly.

Teachers who tap into students' interests

Struggling readers should not be limited to hi/lo books in all their reading. Most of us can read material well beyond our measured instructional level if we are interested in the topic and motivated to read. Similarly, even the weakest reader will struggle through a book that is "hot" or "cool".

For boys especially, non-fiction has considerable appeal, particularly when titles can be found that match their interests and hobbies. The key is linking reading material to the things that interest the students, from extreme sports to World War II fighter jets to NHL hockey. Non-fiction text, especially, provides a number of supports for the struggling reader: headings and subheadings, graphics and illustrations, introductions, and summaries. These provide structures that help the reader access information even if the measured readability is beyond his capacity. A further advantage to non-fiction text is that the reader does not need to read the entire book in order to get benefit from it; the reader can gain information and pleasure from reading short segments.

Ultimately, we must also banish the bias that books are the only legitimate reading that students can do. Newspapers and magazines are good sources of short, interesting pieces of expository text in a variety of genres. A 1992 NAEP survey (Foertsch, 1992, in Allington, 2001) found that "the only group of fourth graders who achieved reading performances above the national average were those who indicated that they regularly

read story books, informational books, and magazines" (Allington, 2001, p. 61). Even comic books have their place in a student's reading repertoire, as they are fun to read and have been proven to increase vocabulary (Worthy, Broaddus & Ivey, 2001).

Learning to select books that captivate us, that inform us, that validate us, and that extend our thinking is a life skill. A balance of many kinds of reading is essential for all readers. We have found that children choose books to read for themselves for about the same reasons that adults do. In 1998, the Canadian Book and Periodical Council (1998) surveyed people purchasing books in a bookstore with the question: "Why did you choose this book?" The answers, in order, were:

- 1 Recommendation by friends (peers)
- 2 Interest in the topic or story
- 3 Interest in the author
- 4 Cover and back-cover blurb
- 5 Display
- 6 TV tie-in or promotion

Students are motivated by these factors as well, and a good teacher can use them to promote titles to all her students. A classroom "bestseller" list or book recommendations by students themselves are good places to begin. Author studies such as Jerry Spinelli or S.E. Hinton often work well because these authors have created works at a number of readability levels so that all students can be engaged in the authors' different novels. Classroom libraries should include many kind of books, especially those with short-term popularity, so that children can join in the enthusiasm of reading a popular choice.

Matching texts with readers in the upper grades is an ongoing challenge because of the many factors which enter into the match-up, from complexity of the text to the background experience of the reader. However, it is important that teachers take on that challenge. It is up to us to provide Charles and his buddies with accessible reading in school, so that they may build the attitudes and strategies necessary to become readers for life.

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References

Click the "References" link above to hide these references.

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