



## **“If they don’t read much, how they ever gonna get good?”**

*Pat Cunningham*

Some of you may recognize the title for this column on struggling readers. I recycled it from an article published by Dick Allington in 1977. In that article, and relentlessly since then, Dick has preached the message that you don’t get good at anything unless you do a lot of it. You don’t become a good musician if you only play at your weekly lesson when someone is standing over you making you practice. No one has ever become a good athlete who didn’t practice regularly. Likewise, children who read only when they have no choice will not become good readers.

If you teach children to read, then you know the amount of reading children do is important. You have probably been involved even in incentive programs to promote children’s reading. Over the past three decades, there have been a wide variety of incentive programs, including the Pizza Hut Book It! challenge and Accelerated Reader, that have been implemented by schools to increase the amount of reading children do. The question we must ask is, “Do these popular incentive programs accomplish their goal—particularly for struggling readers?” Do your struggling readers read more and read more willingly because of the incentive programs you have in place? My experience makes me believe that incentive programs are actually “demotivating” our most struggling readers. Research by Fawson and Moore (1999) does not support the use of reading incentive programs.

Recently, I went to visit one of my student teachers who teaches fifth grade in a suburban school in the United States. As we reflected on her first week there, she told me about one of her first assignments. She was to watch over all of the fifth

graders who couldn’t go to see a popular video because they hadn’t reached their Accelerated Reader goals. These fifth graders—almost all boys—stomped into her classroom. One was heard to mutter, “I hate reading.” His companion responded, “Yeah, reading sucks!” “What can I do to change their attitudes?” my student teacher asked. A bit of investigating revealed that these children were the worst readers in the school and that almost all of them had been involved in the school’s Accelerated Reader program since first grade.

This story is, of course, only one example, but I ask you to compare it to your own experience. Look at the children who struggle with reading in your school. If you have an incentive program, do your struggling readers work toward the incentives? Are they becoming avid readers, even if their reading level is below the level it should be? If your struggling readers are not motivated to read by whatever your school is currently doing to motivate reading, consider implementing some of the following ideas.

### **Revisit your teacher read-aloud practices**

First, ask yourself the most obvious question: “Do teachers at your school read aloud to their students at least once every day?” Teacher read-aloud has been shown to be one of the major motivators for children to read. In 1975, Artley asked successful college students what they remembered their teachers doing that motivated them to read. The majority of students responded that teachers reading

aloud to the class was what got them interested in reading. More recently, elementary students were asked what motivated them to read particular books. The most frequent response was, “My teacher read it to the class” (Palmer, Codling, & Gambrell, 1994).

One of the simplest ways to motivate children to read at all grade levels is for teachers to read to their classes. When thinking about our struggling readers, however, we also need to consider what the teacher is reading aloud. Did you know that most of the fiction sold in bookstores is sold to women and most of the informational books are sold to men? Now, this doesn’t mean that women don’t ever read informational text or that men never read fiction; it just means that there does seem to be a preference among males for information. When I first heard this, I was transported back to a fourth-grade class I taught many years ago. I had five reluctant readers (all boys), and I tried all kinds of things to motivate them to read. I can clearly remember them telling me that they didn’t want to read because “reading is dumb and silly.” At the time, I thought this was just their way of rationalizing the fact that they weren’t good readers. I read to this fourth-grade class every day, but I am embarrassed to admit that I can’t think of a single non-fiction title I read aloud. I read *Charlotte’s Web* (White, 1952/1974) but never a book about real spiders. What if their “reading-is-dumb-and-silly” attitude was engendered by the fanciful text I so enjoyed reading to them? Reading to children motivates many of them to want to read—and particularly to want to read the book the teacher read aloud. I wonder if my struggling boys’ attitudes toward reading was an unintended consequence of years of being read to by female teachers who were reading their favorite books, which just happened to be mostly fiction? If I could go back in time, I would make sure to read equal amounts of fiction and informational text. Yes, I would still read *Charlotte’s Web*, but I would also read Gail Gibbons’s wonderful book, *Spiders* (1994).

Reading aloud matters to motivation, and what we read aloud might really matter to struggling readers. In *True Stories From Four Blocks Classrooms* (Cunningham & Hall, 2000), Deb Smith describes her daily teacher read-aloud session. Each day, Deb reads one chapter from a fiction book, a part of an information book, and an

“everyone” book. She chooses the “everyone book” by looking for a short, simple book that everyone in her class will enjoy and can read. (She never calls these books easy books!) By reading from these three types of books daily, Deb demonstrates to her students that all kinds of books are cherished and acceptable in her classroom. Deb follows her teacher read-aloud with independent reading time. The informational books and “everyone” books are popular choices—especially with boys who struggle with reading.

## Revisit your independent reading practices

When I taught, I had time each day for independent reading. Following what was considered “best practice” in those days, I sat and read something I was interested in while my students read. If, once again, I could be transported back in time, I would use those valuable 15 minutes each day to confer with individual children. I would divide my class into five groups, putting one of my five most struggling readers in each group. Every day, I would hold individual conferences with the children in each group, always calling the struggling reader first for the conference and giving that child a few extra minutes of my undivided attention. I would make these conferences conversations rather than interrogations. I would say things such as,

Let’s see, what have you got for me today?

Oh, good, another book about ocean animals. I had no idea there were so many books about ocean animals!

I see you have bookmarked two pages to share with me. Read these pages to me and tell me why you chose them.

I never knew there was so much to learn about animals in the ocean. I am so glad you bring such interesting books to share with me each week. You are turning me into an ocean animals expert!

Reading books you want to read motivates you to read more. Sharing those books once a week with someone who “oohs and aahs” about your reading choices is also a surefire motivator. Stahl (2004) stated that effective teachers “monitor and encourage” children as they engage in independent reading.

## Revisit the materials available for children to choose

Look carefully at your classroom libraries. Are there equal amounts of fiction and informational books? Are there “everyone” books that will appeal to children whose reading levels are not on grade level? Where are the materials? Can the children access them easily without moving from place to place? If your fresh look leaves you discouraged about the availability of materials your struggling readers will want to read, consider the following budget-friendly solutions.

**Subscribe to a few popular magazines.** Classrooms with accumulated volumes of magazines, such as *Zoobooks*, *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, *Nickelodeon*, and *Soccer Jr.*, seldom have struggling readers who won’t read during the independent reading time. Of course, when a new issue arrives, you will want to use some of the most appealing articles as part of your teacher read-aloud.

**Subscribe to a news magazine for kids.** *Scholastic*, *Weekly Reader*, and *Time for Kids* are very inexpensive news magazines. They all contain almost exclusively informational pieces. Consider getting the version for an earlier grade level or the *Time Big Picture* edition, and you will have a weekly supply of “everyone” reading. Share your subscription with a few other classrooms, and you will each have three or four copies to keep for a price anyone can afford.

**Share.** If you don’t have enough informational or “everyone” books, pool these materials from several classes and put them in five or six crates. Appoint helpers (perhaps your struggling readers) to move these crates to the next classroom. (Schedule independent reading at different times.)

**Buddy up with a kindergarten class.** Become “big buddy readers” for a kindergarten class.

Schedule a day to go to the kindergarten and have each child read to a “little buddy.” Let each big buddy choose a book from the kindergarten collection to take back to your classroom and practice for next week. You will have instant access to lots of easy books, and reading these easy books will not insult your struggling readers.

## Struggling readers need instruction

In future columns in the Struggling Readers Department, I will share ideas for developing phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension for these students. None of these will matter very much, however, if our struggling readers hate to read and do so only when forced!

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