

Developing Great Teachers of Reading - Part 2

By Marie Carbo, Ed.D.

Part 1 of this series focused on at-risk readers and the essentially negative perceptions and frustrations teachers feel when working with many of these youngsters. We also discussed the power of teaching to the interests and reading style strengths of at-risk students.

In Part 2, we will look at the importance of focusing on reading comprehension and enjoyment, as well as specific reading strategies that facilitate learning to read and those that make learning to read difficult.

Focus on Comprehension and Enjoyment

There are many competing ideas about the best way to teach reading, but research definitely places the following two goals at the top of the list. First, we want students to read and comprehend at high levels (Greer, 2005). Second, we want them to enjoy reading so much that they read a great deal voluntarily.

Research tells us that students who like to read and who read often for their own pleasure are likely to improve their reading skills at a much faster rate than students who do not (Allington, 2001; Anderson, 1996; Krashen, 1993). In the literature, these students are called “engaged readers.” Engaged readers are students who take books out of the library and read for substantial amounts of time *for their own enjoyment*.

As an administrator, you definitely want to do everything you can to help your students become highly engaged readers. Here’s why: The amount of engaged reading is an excellent predictor of reading achievement. Apparently, the cognitive abilities required to perform well in reading comprehension (our most important goal) are developed and strengthened through large amounts of engaged reading (Guthrie, Shafter, & Huang, 2001). Brain researchers provide another piece of the reading puzzle (Caine, Caine, McClintic, &

Klimek, 2005; Jensen, 1998a, 1998b; Sprenger, 1999, 2003). Their research tells us that emotional memory is the strongest kind of memory. When students are deeply interested and emotionally involved in what they are reading, their reading motivation and achievement move forward rapidly.

Good reading programs raise reading scores; *great* reading programs bring about *exceptionally* high gains in reading motivation and achievement. Not only do students score high on achievement tests as a result of great programs, but they read a good deal more for their own pleasure. Let’s be clear that engaged reading is not the same as assigned reading, nor is it affected by extrinsic rewards such as distributing points or gifts. Engaged reading is reading that students do *because they want to read*.

Our most important reading goals then are to improve students’ reading comprehension and to make the process of learning to read so enjoyable that all readers want to and do read a great deal for their own pleasure. Great teachers of reading are very clear about these reading goals. Consequently, they accomplish high gains with their students. They eliminate (or use only minimally) reading strategies and materials that cause students great stress and/or reduce comprehension and reading for pleasure.

The Important Reading Expert Studies

During the 1990's reading experts with strong opposing positions seemed not to have any common ground or agreement. However, significant points of agreement among reading experts were reported by Flippo (1998) and Reutzel and Smith (2004). These "reading expert" studies describe in some detail reading practices that facilitate learning to read versus reading practices that make learning to read difficult. They will serve as a guide for the recommendations that follow, along with research findings in brain behavior, learning styles, and reading styles.

Reduce What Does Not Work and Increase What Does

Reading practices that make learning to read difficult are listed in Figure 1. Those debilitating practices should be decreased and replaced with reading practices that facilitate learning to read (Figure 2). The first step toward creating these changes is, simply, to reduce or stop what does not work for students, so that adequate instructional time is provided for teachers to do what *does* work.

Note: More assistance is provided on the website of the National Reading Styles Institute (www.nrsi.com). Visit www.tepsa.org for a link.

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Figure 1

Reading practices that make learning to read difficult:

- Focusing on skills instead of comprehension
- Drill and mastery of skills
- Using worksheets for each skill
- Providing students with few choices
- Allowing little/no reading for pleasure
- Following teacher editions without responding to students' needs
- Encouraging reading as a contest with points
- Exhibiting low teacher expectations

Figure 2

Reading practices that facilitate learning to read:

- Modeling of stories
- Providing access to high-interest materials
- Allowing student choice of reading materials
- Encouraging reading for pleasure
- Supplementing reading lessons with dialogue and discussion
- Using increasingly difficult stories
- Providing a print-rich classroom

(Flippo 1998; Reutzel and Smith 2004)

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Stay Focused on Comprehension and Enjoyment

Always keep in mind that the simple goal of *all* reading instruction—including instruction in phonemics, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary—is to improve reading comprehension and to make learning to read enjoyable. If a reading program confuses or bores students, then it is doing more harm than good and should be changed or discarded. Many of today’s reading programs teach far too many miniscule reading skills, use too many worksheets, are scripted and unresponsive to students’ needs, and don’t provide reading materials that students prefer, especially boys—many of whom have a strong preference for sports, cartoons, comic books, science fiction, action, and adventure (such as the Harry Potter series) (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). The fourth article in this series will delve into this topic in some depth. The result? Only one-third of our students are reading at or above grade level, and reading for pleasure declines every year. Those figures have remained the same for well over a decade.

By focusing energies where they should be—on reading comprehension and enjoyment—educational leaders are more likely to make learning to read easy and nurture a love of reading in all their students. Reading for pleasure helps to increase reading ability, so give your students the gift that keeps on giving: Make your reading program fun!

Part 3 of this series will focus on the important topic of identifying and teaching to students’ strengths. It will include checklists for identifying and accommodating students’ strengths for maximum reading progress.

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