Read to Succeed:

A brief guide on motivating students to read in order to achieve academic success

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Introduction

It may sound clichéd, but without the ability to read a student will not succeed in school or in life - as a skill, it really is that important. After all, if you can't read, you can't learn.

In this brief guide we will explore ways in which students can be motivated to read, supported in their book choice and encouraged to develop a genuine appreciation of the written word. In particular, looking at aspects such as:

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What is Reading?

At the simplest level, reading is the interpretation of text - the skill by which a person gets information from written letters or words. However, the actual process of reading is a complex one consisting of many parts:

- A key part of learning to read is understanding that words are formed of individual sounds or phonemes - which is known as phonemic awareness.

- Equally important is knowing that letters of the alphabet, either individually or grouped, stand for sounds or phonemes - this is the alphabetic principal.

- Knowing that a word has meaning is also a very important part of learning to read - these words form our vocabulary.

- As phonics skills develop, emergent readers eventually achieve fluency, which not only means pronouncing or knowing words, but includes many other parts, such as:
  - Being able to read quickly
  - Recognising words and their meaning
  - Understanding how to pronounce and emphasise words and phrases so that sentences sound natural
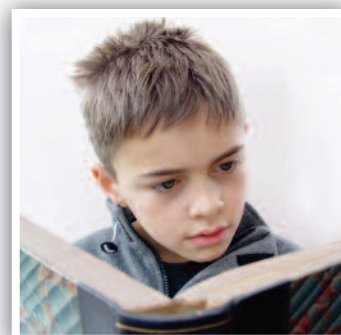
Ultimately, the most important part of learning to read is comprehension - understanding the information that words and sentences are communicating.

Literacy Development

Reading is an essential part of the development of critical thinking. The amount of reading done outside of the classroom during a child's formative years is a statistically significant predictor of critical thinking skills[1].

However, as Willingham (2009)[2] notes, the mind is not designed for thinking. Instead, he argues that it is actually designed to save us from having to think and in *Why Don't Students Like School?* he highlights the cognitive principal that whilst people are naturally curious, they are not naturally good thinkers.

Indeed, unless the cognitive conditions are right, people will avoid thinking. He goes on to say that, over time, the brain develops and changes so that the need to think is reduced through repetition:

> *"If you repeat the same thought-demanding task again and again, it will eventually become automatic; your brain will change so that you can complete the task without thinking about it."*

In this way, for a child to effectively develop literacy skills they must make the task of reading automatic through the application of regular practice - specifically, *perfect practice*.[3]

To avoid reading being perceived as a chore and to ensure the brain is suitably stimulated, the content of the text in terms of both interest level and difficulty must be carefully monitored.

When considered in the wider context of 'problem solving', it is very often the case that working on problems that are too easy or too difficult can be unpleasant and frustrating, whereas solving problems set at the right level of difficult can be very rewarding - and the same is true of books.

A child reading a book at too low a level of difficulty is likely to pay less attention to the text and derive little pleasure from it, whilst attempting to read books at too high a level of difficulty becomes demotivating - making them less inclined to attempt another book. We look at the need to accurately match students' reading ability to suitable texts later in this guide.

Literacy & the Curriculum

It is arguably true that, at some level at least, most children will learn to read - regardless of the method used to teach them[4]. However, those that don't or can't read suffer in a number of ways. One of the first casualties is self-esteem: children with reading difficulties often stop and start frequently, mispronouncing words and skipping others when asked to read aloud, and generally feeling ashamed that they struggle with a skill their classmates master easily.

As children progress from learning to read to reading to learn, those still unable to effectively comprehend text are deprived from exploring and experiencing the wonders of science, history, literature, mathematics - in fact, many aspects of the curriculum at large.

It is therefore important to understand the actual reading age and ability required to comprehend the course or subject texts. One way of achieving this is through the use of book levels, such as those determined by the **ATOS** readability formula (*www.renlearn.co.uk/atos*).

However, given that one in five 11-year-olds leave primary school struggling to read and 60% of white boys eligible for Free School Meals aren't reading properly at the age of 14[5], there is a strong chance that at least some students won't be able to read or comprehend the books properly. Therefore, it is equally important to understand the actual reading age and level of each student in relation to their chronological age, which can be done using baseline assessment software such as **STAR Reading**, coupled with the perfect practice offered by **Accelerated Reader (AR)** from **Renaissance Learning** (*www.acceleratedreader.co.uk*).

Choosing & Accessing Books

In order to become proficient readers, children must not only be comfortable with books, but also the act of choosing books for themselves. For those enrolled on AR this act is easy as students become familiar with using the labels to identify which books, whether fiction or non-fiction, are suitable for their individual reading level. However, a number of techniques can also be employed to promote choice and increase access to books.

Here are some general activities that can help build confidence in self-selection:

- Regular trips to the library (both school and local public library).
- Discussions on which books to read.
- Allocating time for students to share, review and recommend books to each other.
- Building anticipation by counting down to the launch of a new book or series.

In *Yellow Brick Roads* (2000)[6], Janet Allen introduces the *Book Pass* concept - a useful technique for motivating students who are stuck in a reading 'rut' whereby they are continually selecting books of the same genre, whilst actively avoiding others. Using *Book Pass* the teacher or librarian assembles various piles of books of a particular genre, such as poetry, which the students then 'preview' and discuss.

The students select one book and spend two minutes looking through it, recording their observations of the book on a Book Pass Chart (see Figure 1) and deciding if they would be interested in reading it. Once the time has elapsed they either return the book to the pile or pass it to another student before selecting a new book. After several rounds, the teacher or librarian stops and asks the students to share their thoughts on the books they have discovered, identify which they would like to read, and encourages them to loan the titles.

Title	Author	Topic	Rating

Figure 1: Book Pass Chart

Further to simply 'previewing' books for independent reading, the *Book Pass* technique can be used to reinforce concepts from lessons - asking students to find a simile or metaphor in poetry books, locate a key fact in a history or geography text, or make predictions about characters, settings or plots in fiction books. Of course, without sufficient access to books students are unlikely to develop their critical thinking skills or experience the joys of Reading for Pleasure. Surrounding children with books - in libraries, classrooms and in the home - can positively affect reading interest and achievement.
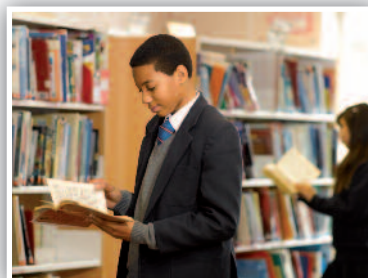
Access to books doesn't just mean having them on hand to read, it also means regularly reviewing and managing book stock to ensure it is accessible to students in terms of their reading age and ability. The best libraries are those that cater for a wide range of reading levels so that all students can select books they both understand and enjoy.

Research conducted by the National Literacy Trust worryingly revealed that young children, often from some of the most deprived backgrounds, are more likely to own a mobile phone than a book, with many having very limited access to books at home. Book ownership is an important part of ensuring that students are comfortable selecting and reading books outside of the classroom or library.

The free **AR BookFinder online resource** (*www.arbookfind.co.uk*) is a quick and easy way of students, parents, teachers and librarians to identify books that are suitable for the child's level of reading ability.

Reading for Pleasure & Academic Achievement

According to Leipzig (2007)[7], one of the most important factors at every stage of literacy development is motivation. If reading isn't pleasurable or fulfilling, it is less likely to happen and consequently the necessary practice to achieve fluency won't take place. Gambrell & Marinak (2009)[8] outline a few simple practices that help nurture a student's motivation to read, such as:

Self-selection: *"Honouring" books!*

Anecdotal evidence suggests that when a teacher or librarian does something to make a book 'special' - even if that's simply placing it upright on a table - children are more likely to choose that title over others available. Here are some practical suggestions for honouring books:

- Promote individual books as 'special' by selecting them for displays or inclusion in designated book baskets or bags.
- Provide a quick introduction to the books being 'honoured' by reading a few pages and perhaps talking around the themes or subjects as a way of grabbing the students' attention and instilling their desire to read them.

Read aloud: *Share the excitement!*

No matter how old we get, almost all of us enjoy being read to. However, the act of a teacher or librarian reading aloud is important in promoting both strategic reading behaviours and generating instructional conversation. In terms of literacy development, it is suggested that the socialisation of reading aloud enables teachers and students to collaboratively construct meaning from text. Here are some ways in which the excitement of reading aloud can be shared by:

- Using of a wide variety of texts, including non-fiction titles, newspapers and magazines.
- Encouraging interaction by inviting discussion around the text being read, which is a great way of promoting key literacy skills, such as: predicting, inferring, thinking and reasoning.
- Inviting the students to nominate a title to be read-aloud by the teacher or librarian - possibly asking a few to 'make the case' for a particular book and determining the winner by vote.
- Occasionally allowing students to take turns reading aloud a portion of text. This can be highly motivating - although may require some planning to ensure those chosen are confident reading the selected passage(s).

Book collection: *Keep it balanced!*

In 1999 the International Reading Association declared that young readers should be exposed to a wide variety of genres, including picture storybooks, fiction and non-fiction titles, magazines and poetry. Some suggestions for balancing collections include:

- Offering a wide variety of informational books for reading instruction in both the library and classrooms.
- 'Honouring' all forms of print - including electronic media - as a way of encouraging reading practice, whilst promoting reading for enjoyment and learning.
- Encouraging students to create and 'publish' their own work in designated newsletters or on wall displays.
- Involving students in the selection of titles for the classroom and/or library. Review and discuss possible titles, invite discussion and vote for the new books to be added.

When considering the overall book stock, however, it is important that any and all texts selected are of a suitability level of difficulty, and match the students' individual reading abilities. One way of quickly and accurately measuring the difficulty of text is by using the ATOS readability formula, and specifically the free online **ATOS Analyser** available at: *www.renlearn.co.uk/atos*

Sharing: *Making reading passions public*

Passion for reading shouldn't be hidden. From a young age children want to read and are naturally curious about books with which they are familiar - and this familiarity ignites reading motivation. When talking about books they most enjoy reading, students frequently cite recommendations from friends, reading other books featuring the character, author recognition or having read other books in the series as motivating factors. When exploring ways of making reading passions public, consider:

- Arranging and maintaining a 'Wall of Fame'. This display could combine student, teacher and even family favourites - featuring a selection of books, magazines and other printed media.
- Periodically publishing your student's Top 10 most popular titles by vote.
- Making time for brief discussions on what you and your students are currently reading, and thus providing a forum for peer-recommendation. As Gambrell (1996)[9] notes, students have a need to share their enthusiasm for books with each other that should be encouraged.

Incentives: *Demonstrating the value of reading*

Gambrell and Marinak (2009) suggest that reading-related rewards can help define a classroom culture that promotes and nurtures the intrinsic motivation to read. Rewards that demonstrate the value of reading in this way include:

- books or book vouchers
- increased read-aloud time
- increased time for self-selected reading
- increased library time
- time to talk about books
- book clubs

Ultimately, everything we have talked about here - honouring books, reading aloud, balancing the book collection, making passions public and the use of incentives - all help demonstrate the value of reading. However, these are just a few suggestions, there are many more techniques that can be employed to motivate students to read and develop a reading culture.

Conclusion

In the pages of this brief guide we have looked at some of the techniques and strategies that can be used to support literacy development, raise reading achievement and encourage Reading for Pleasure. There are countless others, many of which you may already be familiar with or have developed in accordance with your students' specific literacy needs.

Whichever approach you take, the important point is that it works for you and your students because the ability to monitor, guide, deliver and measure the effectiveness of perfect practice will allow your students to both read and succeed.

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For more information about Accelerated Reader please visit: *www.acceleratedreader.co.uk*

To access fun quizzes and videos of popular children's authors reading from their best-selling books please visit: *www.readtoamillionkids.co.uk*