

FEATURE ARTICLES



Engaging the disengaged reader

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Many struggling readers soon become disengaged readers. They think they don't have the ability to succeed. They frequently give up to avoid unpleasant tasks. Teachers can work on developing in these students a sense of efficacy and to motivate and encourage them to overcome difficulties and to take on challenging tasks.

The National Association of Educational Progress data over the past 30 years document a somewhat fluctuating but persistent reading achievement gap between white students and African American, Hispanic, and Native American students. For example, the average reading scores of white students are higher than those of black students at ages 9, 13, and 17 (Donahue, Voekl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). These gaps decreased between the early 1970s and the late 1980s. Since then, the gaps have remained relatively stable or have increased. Recent studies conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2002) document large gaps in student achievement on school tests as early as kindergarten. For example, 73 percent of white kindergartners were proficient in letter recognition, but only 59 percent of African American and 49 percent of Hispanic kindergartners were proficient. There were similar differences among ethnic groups in the recognition of beginning and ending sounds of words and for print familiarity—skills typically identified as important for success in school (NCES, 2002). Diverse learners are more likely to be referred for additional testing and placement in special education programs because achievement tests typically do not assess literacy skills that they may have acquired outside school, and these skills often differ from the ones these children are expected to have when they enter school. If, indeed, the issue is reading, the more appropriate educational response is to match children's individual learning capabilities and needs

with the most appropriate reading instruction within the least restrictive environment, such as the children's classrooms.

In 2007, the Census Bureau reported there were 3.9 million eighth graders in the United States. Twenty-six percent of these eighth graders did not attain basic levels of literacy and only 31 percent reached proficiency. This means that approximately one million eighth graders were at basic literacy levels and another 1.7 million were not proficient. Across the nation achievement gaps have been observed by race, class, and gender. This means that children of color, children from lower socioeconomic classes and males performed least well (Lee, Grigg, and Donohue, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

These numbers likely underestimate the problem, since students with disabilities and English-language learners, who have testing accommodations, are at even greater risk of not developing appropriate literacy skills. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2008) tests only print literacy and does not tap into higher level, complex skills that focus on digital literacy that is needed for success in today's world and in the future (Coiro & Dobler, 2007).

The most severe symptom of disengagement from school exhibits itself among school drop outs. There are several indicators of withdrawal such as poor attendance, unsuccessful school experiences, whether academic or behavioral. These behaviors typically involve feelings of alienation, a sense of not belonging, and a general dislike for school. It is well documented by Barrington and Hendricks (1989) that this pattern may begin as early as the first grade.

Identifying these students is important because the costs for students who drop out of school are significant. Youth who do not complete high school are more likely to experience unemployment or be underemployed, incarcerated, and dependent on social services. It is estimated that nearly \$766 billion a year or

close to \$800 annually per taxpayer is needed to provide for these needs (Joint Economic Committee, 1991). Individual and societal costs point to the critical need for prevention and intervention strategies (Lair, Sinclair and Christenson, 2004).

Motivation and engagement: What research tells us

Due to the serious implications of low motivation for academic tasks and disengagement from learning in schools, the fields of education and psychology have studied the topics broadly. First, we will present the signs and causes of disengagement identified in the literature, then second, we will present the instructional techniques educators can use to overcome the effects of disengagement.

Underachievement is commonly associated with disengagement. According to Siegle and McCoach (2005) there may be underlying physical, cognitive, or emotional problems that could explain the decline of motivation for school-related activities. Our graduate students have reported turmoil in the family, situational stressors that would challenge well-adjusted individuals who possess excellent coping strategies, and an unknown scratched cornea that explained gradual decreases in school success.

A poor match between the individual student and the school setting may result in the student's perception of school as irrelevant. Solberg (n.d.) indicated that when students perceive school as lacking relevance and are not appropriately challenged, a gradual progression over time of decreased motivation and disinterest in school will likely result. Student attitudes toward the self, the school environment, and the utility of school for life are factors in achievement (Siegle & McCoach, 2005). Studies on underachievement often measure disengagement by behavior, conduct, grades, homework completion and via attitudinal measures.

Difficulty with reading and gaining information through text is also often associated with the disengaged student (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2000). The relationship between reading and disengagement may include little enjoyment from reading, a history of frustration with reading, and selecting activities other than reading to occupy recreation or leisure time. Given the importance of reading to school achievement, limited success with reading is likely connected to poor grades, difficulty with curricular demands, and pervasive disenfranchisement with school requirements.

The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) has devoted attention to the universal design of learning and instruction. The universal design approach identifies known barriers to learning, strategies for overcoming these barriers, and developing educational materials that promote access to instruction. Several

of these barriers are directly related to motivation and engagement including relevance, interest, boredom, and outcomes. The universal design of learning guidelines offer several important and related principles including multiple means of engagement, options for increasing choice, autonomy, and enhancing relevance and authenticity (CAST, 2008). Conversely, the engaged student often experiences success in academic tasks, higher grades, higher test scores, and lower drop out rates (Klem & Connell, 2007). Student engagement is related to positive academic outcomes, achievement, and persistence (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008).

Given the signs and causes of disengagement, there are instructional skills and techniques known to be effective in these situations. Several of these approaches are relatively generic and could easily apply to the educator's daily work habits, while others require alterations to the lesson planning process. The majority relate to the presentation of the lesson by the teacher.

Since disengagement and low motivation includes a psychological component with possible components of lack of confidence due to repeated frustration and failure and a perception of lack of meaningfulness of school toward life in general, then struggling students need both overt motivation and encouragement. One approach is for the teacher to model enthusiasm for the learner and the learning. Teachers can grab attention by communicating why students can become interested by the lesson. Casey (2008) implemented a learning clubs technique that grouped students by interest in certain curricular topics. Developing, facilitating, or capitalizing on student enthusiasms is clearly one approach to student engagement.

Since disengagement often includes an academic component, often with reading difficulty, then struggling students may benefit from skills instruction. Continuing attention to the development of reading and study skills may assist in engagement. Non-traditional formats including graphic novels, audio books, and other assistive technologies may support the struggling, disengaged student.

Challenging and authentic tasks, student choice-making, and supportive teachers assist in the engagement of learners (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008). If teachers provide a small array of appropriate pathways and students select one direction, then the teacher knows all of the pathways in the array are valid and the student may become empowered by actively selecting the direction of their own learning. In reading, this approach is commonly used when students select meaningful texts, books, or topics, however the choice-making does not have to be limited to book selection, it can be related to activities, centers, or groupings based on topic.

One solution to the apparent divide between a teacher's curriculum and student interest is by selecting

seemingly diverse materials with universal themes and then teach or have the students explore the connections between the disparate materials. For example, Lynch (2007) linked Chaucer, Eminem, and social issues for urban high school students. Students studied Chaucer, who employed rhyme to examine social and political issues, then connected Chaucer to rap music's similar features, never abandoning Chaucer as the primary focus of the unit. In a similar fashion, in England, Palmer (2008), drawing on personal experience as a student, used football (soccer) as the basis for several projects ranging from reading selected books where the sport or its athletes figured prominently to the development of interactive reading game that blends reading skills with the sport. Both of these examples used student interest to reach academic goals.

Guthrie and Davis (2003) identified six practices as part of an engagement model of instruction for middle school students: knowledge goals, real-world interactions, an abundance of interesting texts, support for student choice and self-determination, direct strategy instruction, and collaboration support. Many of the previously mentioned instructional strategies including linking Chaucer and rap (knowledge goals and interesting texts), using football as entree to reading skills (direct strategy instruction) and learning clubs based on shared interest (collaboration), embody Guthrie and Davis' engagement model.

Engaging the disengaged readers: Case scenarios

Case scenario 1: Richard

Richard is a fourth grader, who is currently struggling with his textbooks and is beginning to disengage from his schoolwork. His mother reports that he has been a good reader until now, read in the past, but can't seem to handle his current texts. He says that the texts have gotten longer, he struggles with vocabulary, his reading has slowed down and he cannot understand what he is reading. His past reading scores showed him at grade level in reading but he has started missing more school and is now starting to fall behind. He seems to have lost his confidence in reading and is unmotivated to do his work, except when he has time with the computer. Previously he would read mystery books and science related stories. But now, he has pulled away and reads nothing. He seems unmotivated and has also begun to distance himself from his peers.

In order to help Richard break his downward spiral and get him back on track as his teacher you might try the following steps:

First, have a conversation with Richard. Spend

some time talking with him to determine what makes him tick. Try to get at his interests, his strengths, what's going on in his life, how he views reading, what might be difficult for him, what he likes to read—we know he was a reader in the past and we suspect that the move to more advanced texts is presenting him with a real challenge. You might ask him to bring in a magazine he enjoys, or a science book that he previously read and enjoyed.

Second, Richard's self concept is low right now and he doesn't believe in himself. Your job is to help him feel that he is capable of succeeding at a task and that success is important to him now and in the future. If you can get him to see that he can succeed then he might be encouraged to work with you. Now you have to find the right materials and provide him with assignments that he finds meaningful. You would gradually bring in some more difficult assignments and when he can handle those, keep pushing him. Knowing he likes science, you might start with that, build in activities that he can complete, start charting his progress and try to hook him up with a buddy. You could use that "buddy" to work with him on vocabulary and share some of the assigned reading. You would also chart his progress provide him a visual record of his success and allow him to see what he can do, rather than what he can't do (Margolis & McCabe, 2006).

Third, we know that literacy is a big part of the everyday world of children. Students are more facile than some adults in text messaging, blogging, e-mailing, and using computers in general. Research suggests that connecting with a learning activity can be triggered by using the latest technology. Further, if one expects strong academic outcomes, one must be able to maintain interest which will then support persistence and effort required for skills to be acquired. Richard seems to shine when he can access the computer. Try to find a computer software that works on vocabulary and comprehension and would make him feel successful and redirect him if he does make an error. Since Richard has a buddy in reading, why not make him someone's "buddy" working on the computer—that certainly would add to his self-confidence, re-engage him and help him feel successful.

Fourth, capitalize on his interest in science. To do this, you can use as many real world experiences with Richard. These hands on experiences evoke visualizations, are personal experiences, and can motivate and help students make connections. Children enjoy looking, asking questions and discussing what they see. This in turn can lead to writing, keeping a science log, and reading text. We know that active learning is both stimulating and leads to knowledge acquisition. This is a powerful force for student learning—especially for Richard. According to Anderson (1998) and Ross (1988) science experiments

and computer simulations can lead to content understanding and aroused attention, which can lead to increased comprehension and stimulation (Guthrie and Cox, 1988).

These methods will not provide a quick remedy, but will establish a framework for increasing self-efficacy and providing motivation. Using and teaching to his interests, combined with strategic goal identification and specific reading strategy development, can help Richard move back to his texts and the classroom environment.

Case scenario 2: Jackson

Jackson is an outgoing seventh grade student who struggles with reading and has shown significant signs of disinterest in school. His reading problems have persisted for several years starting in third grade. His past reading scores show him at below grade level and at the frustration level. Reading comprehension is a particular skill of concern to his parents and teachers. His father reports that Jackson occasionally reads for pleasure, primarily on-line text related to his interests of college basketball and music; however, it has been several months since the family observed Jackson reading school-related material at home. Jackson's teachers indicate that his attendance is becoming inconsistent, his homework completion limited, and class participation sporadic.

Recognizing the signs of the disengaged student, particularly one who struggles with literacy, is the first step in intervention. Next, if Jackson's teachers possess limited knowledge of his background and interests, then their capacity to design engaging lessons is reduced. To address Jackson's situation it is important to first learn as much as you can about his interests, motivations, preferences, and views on school. If Jackson fails to share his interests, then steer the conversation toward known interests presented by his family. Connect his favorite topics to the curriculum, to texts, and to school. Re-establishing his connection to school by associating it with his interests may help him see a reason to attend class. Using examples of his preferred topics of college basketball and music in class content may spark enthusiasm. Integrating preferred topics into homework or course content may further maintain his participation in school. Capturing the attention of learners like Jackson with methods of this nature may facilitate engagement.

Since reading comprehension is a known concern in Jackson's case, then his teachers should turn attention to building this skill. According to Guthrie and Davis (2003) strategy instruction should be contextualized

in the sense that strategy instruction should not occur in isolation, but rather within the framework of their engagement model, which includes learning goals, real-world applications, interesting text, and student choice-making in their learning. In this context Jackson may not feel continued frustration with learning skills in which he has previously encountered failure, but instead may be practicing those skills in the context of familiar topics and events.

Last, remembering that disengagement has psychological components and knowing that Jackson is an outgoing seventh grader, Jackson's teachers may find success in using learning clubs. Grouping Jackson with other students who also enjoy college basketball and music may promote access to lesson plan goals, especially if they are on thematic units that combine those interests with curricular goals, but also may connect him to learning because of the shared preferences of peers. Sharing positive reading experiences with peers may help diminish Jackson's attempts to remove himself from the classroom and school.

Conclusions

Knowing the gravity of the situation and realizing that motivating struggling readers is a major concern of teachers (Ganske et al., 2003) teachers must develop strategies and plans to assist the struggling, disengaged reader. Applying motivation principles is critical as many struggling readers resist reading and reading instruction, become passive, or begin to act out or isolate themselves from reading and classroom activities (Ganske, Monroe & Strickland, 2003; Guthrie & Davis, 2003). If students have little or no motivation, they will not become involved and there will likely be little, if any engagement which will only exacerbate reading problems and provide no success for the students (Margolis & McCabe, 2004; Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

So as teachers, we must help students succeed; for when that occurs, kids have evidence that they can be successful, which leads to a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995). And as students begin to see themselves as successful, they will attempt to do more and gradually become engaged. Coupled with success, students must also find the materials interesting. Fortunately, research shows that by linking new work to recent successes, teaching needed learning strategies, reinforcing effort and persistence, and identifying or creating personally important goals—these have been successful with struggling readers (Margolis & McCabe, 2006).

When asked how they would work effectively with a disengaged reader, graduate students in our clinical practicum course echoed the sentiment of motivation and engagement researchers such as Guthrie (2000), Guthrie and Davis (2003), and Margolis and McCabe (2006). We leave you with a few of their thoughts.

Work on reading strategies with non-print texts like music, art, film, etc. Then move to print or vary the two and let's not forget the computer. This is a real motivating tool for many children.

~Meghan Jones~

The best place to start is with a conversation with the reader. Talk about topics other than reading to get a feel for the student's interests. I read a lot of children's picture and chapter books. By reading a lot of kid's books, I can usually find some sort of connection to what the student likes. I may try audio books or use song lyrics as a means of motivating them to read. Magazines are a popular way to try and get students to read. I have to tap into the student's likes rather than why they are in my reading class. I think once they see you are trying to connect with them—they are more likely to work with you.

~Betty Murratti~

Be sure that the student has a book that is at their appropriate independent reading level. This is important because it will allow the student to access the text with little to no difficulty. Be sure the student is reading something of interest to them and appropriate for their age and grade level. Offer incentives to the reader. Allow students to buddy read to a peer or a younger student.

~Karrie Rinaldi~

The key is to develop the student's confidence. Often, students who find reading difficult don't feel good about themselves. Teachers must build up their confidence so they are willing to try and take risks. I try to use computer games and texts that interest them. I use a lot of praise. I try to impress on kids that reading is a necessary skill beyond school. I encourage parents to bake with their children, help them assemble models, read maps, chart the weather, for example. This helps them realize that we also use reading outside of school.

~Allison Vicino~

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