Correct Misleading Perceptions of At-Risk Readers - Part I

By Marie Carbo

More than ever before, our nation needs great teachers of reading—teachers who raise reading levels quickly and make learning to read easy and exciting. This series will help teachers begin that journey by providing important research and powerful, differentiated reading strategies that have produced high, rapid reading gains across the U.S.

Topics will include: correcting misleading perceptions of at-risk readers, focusing on comprehension and enjoyment, teaching to students’ strengths, using powerful modeling methods, providing student-responsive environments, and making test preparation educationally sound.

As an educational leader, you want the students in your care to have the best chance to become competent, lifelong readers—and you want the learning process to feel easy and enjoyable so that maximum learning takes place. Given the current statistics on reading, the accomplishment of those important goals requires not just good teaching; it requires great teaching. Consider these facts:

- Reading for pleasure, which is closely linked to reading achievement, declines across the grades each year.
- Less than one-third of our students in grades 4, 8, and 12, are reading at or above their grade level (Dillon, 2005).
- Boys fall 1.5 years behind girls in reading between grades 4 and 8, and smaller and smaller percentages of males are attending college due to their low levels of literacy (Newkirk, 2003).
- Though a high percentage of our students perform at the proficient reading level on their state exams, a very low percentage perform at that level on the more valid and accurate National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Ravitch, 2005).

As a group, American students graduating from high school or college and entering the workforce are increasingly less literate. Robert L. Wehling, a retired global-marketing officer, warns of the “devastating consequences” for our country caused by our low literacy rates stating:

I’ve been watching very, very closely the educational progress in Asia—China, India, Vietnam, Singapore, and several others… they’re making rapid progress, whereas we’re making miniscule progress. And I don’t think the average
American understand the impact of this for our future, because they're going to have the bulk of the intellectual and creative talent in the world, and that has devastating consequences for us (Olson, 2005, p. 24).

Great teaching is needed to change these dire predictions for our nation.

How Teachers Perceive Their At-Risk Readers
Great teaching often requires major changes in how teachers perceive their students. So how do teachers perceive at-risk readers? Over the past five years, I've asked about 4,500 teachers across the United States to describe the behavior of their at-risk readers. Teachers' responses spill forth rapidly, and their most common answers are decidedly negative (See Figure 1 on page 3). Their at-risk readers, they say, are angry (the most common response), frustrated, resentful, lazy. They are class clowns, withdrawn and act out. The list goes on until I stop the activity.

My next question is: How much class time do you spend dealing with the negative behavior of at-risk readers? The most common estimates from teachers are a whopping 50-90% of their class time. Apparently, teachers spend an enormous amount of their teaching time thinking about and trying to improve or “handle” the negative behaviors of their at-risk readers, especially at the higher grade levels. It’s likely that this problem with behavior has contributed to the overuse of scripted, rigid reading programs—a practice that is not beneficial for many at-risk readers.

My last question is: How do you feel about what you’re accomplishing with your at-risk readers? Here the answers are slow at first, and then they come forth in spurts. Many teachers say they feel frustrated, tired, ineffective, inadequate, sad, hopeless, burned out. Some of their answers mirror the words they use to describe their students!

They also say that contributing to their problems are the high numbers of skills required at each grade level, the large amounts of paperwork that distance them from their students, the endless test preparation, and the never-ending tests throughout the school year—all of which work against student engagement and achievement.

Despite this host of challenges, most teachers still say that they became teachers to make a difference. They want to do a good job, they want to be excited about teaching, and they’re willing to work hard to help their students.

The Power of Teaching to Students’ Interests and Strengths
We all need to perceive students in terms of their strengths rather than their disabilities. This is especially true for

References
Frymier, J., et al. (1992). Growing up is risky business and schools are not to blame. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa.
struggling readers who as a group tend to be global, tactile, kinesthetic learners (Dunn, Griggs, Gorman & Beasley, 1995; Duhaney & Ewing, 1998; Sudzina, 1986; Thies, 1999-2000; Wilson, 1993) (see Figure 2). These youngsters benefit from high-interest, challenging reading materials, structured choices, powerful modeling of texts, hands-on skill work, and opportunities for mobility and working in groups (see Figure 3). Consider this often-overlooked truth: Many students are at risk of failure simply because they don't receive the kind of instruction and materials that would enable them to learn easily.

Remember that constant failure is poisonous to both students and teachers. It causes high levels of stress, and stress dulls the mind and creates anger and fear. Caine, et al. (2005) explain this phenomenon, stating: "Excessive

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Figure 1

Teacher Descriptors for At-Risk Readers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>descriptor</th>
<th>response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>angry*</td>
<td>defeated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frustrated</td>
<td>scared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>withdrawn</td>
<td>hopeless</td>
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<tr>
<td>unmotivated</td>
<td>slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel stupid</td>
<td>explosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disruptive</td>
<td>embarrassed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distracted</td>
<td>hyperactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unhappy</td>
<td>off-task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disorganized</td>
<td>impulsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sad</td>
<td>need attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intimidated</td>
<td>short attention span</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don't care</td>
<td>lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class clowns</td>
<td></td>
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</table>


*A angry was the most common response.

Figure 2

Style of the At-Risk Reader

- Highly tactile
- Highly kinesthetic
- Global
- Prefers group work
- Needs mobility
- Prefers choices
- Needs structures

Figure 3

Powerful Strategies for the At-Risk Reader

- Focus on comprehension, enjoyment and learning strengths
- Provide choices of high-interest reading materials
- Use reading methods that accommodate students' strengths
- Use powerful assisted reading methods
- Provide sufficient repetition
- Practice skills with hands-on games
- Reduce visual dyslexia with colored overlays
- Make learning to read easy, enjoyable and fail-safe
stress actually short-circuits the brain/mind and reduces the ability of people to engage their own higher-order capacities” (p. 30). Excessive frustration and stress sabotage our students’ abilities, make them feel stupid, and often lead to unacceptable conduct. Psychologists explain that many students prefer to be regarded as “behavior problems” rather than as slow or stupid.

On the other hand, positive emotions have the opposite effect. They motivate young people and create excitement (Jensen, 1998). For that to happen, reading programs need to feel easy and engaging, with large doses of brain-friendly strategies that are successful, respectful of students’ strengths and interests, and fail-safe. Then learning accelerates, and students become excited about and interested in what they’re learning.

Visit a Model School Online
The reading strategies that will be described in this series of articles have helped good teachers of reading to become great teachers whose students enjoy reading, read a great deal, and perform well on achievement tests. Here are the academic results from three of our highest level model schools.

O’Connor Elementary School (Victoria, TX, PreK-5, 70% Hispanic, 18% White, 12% African American, low socioeconomic, schoolwide Title I). In 1993, after one year of reading styles, O’Connor rose from 19% to 80% of its students passing their state reading test. For the past ten years 96% to 98% of O’Connor’s 500-plus students have passed math, reading, and writing at all tested grade levels, and the school is rated “Exemplary” by the Texas Education Agency.

West Amory Elementary School (Amory, MS, PreK-2, rural, 58% free or reduced lunch, schoolwide Title I). In 2002, West Amory was one of three Title I schools to achieve the highest NCE gains in Mississippi. Their students gained 38.5 NCEs in reading in three years and won the International Reading Association Distinguished Title I School Award.

Marion Elementary School (Marion, MI, PreK-5, rural, 99% White, one third of families have no phones, high unemployment, 61% free or reduced lunch). Between 2003 and 2007, Marion’s students moved up from 42.1% attaining proficiency in reading to 95%. Those results are not rare. They reflect the work of educational leaders who have focused their teachers on consistently reducing reading practices that make learning to read difficult and increasing practices that make learning to read easy.

To visit a Reading Styles Model School online, please visit www.nrsi.com. A link is available at www.tepsa.org.

You Can Change and Save Lives
Being an at-risk reader places a student at risk of other factors. Compared to average and good readers, students
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with low reading scores are three times more likely to fail their courses, four times more likely to be referred for special education, twice as likely to be absent excessively, more likely to be retained, suspended, drop out, do jail time, and even to commit suicide (Frymier, 1992; Kozol, 2005). According to the editor of Jails, about 80-85% of prisoners read at a second-to third-grade reading level. Since there are fewer and fewer jobs in this society for low-level readers, those who can’t find work have a greater risk of committing a crime and going to jail.

The reading strategies that will be presented in this series have helped students to read substantially better and to feel smart and capable. One visible side effect has been greatly diminished negative behavior, and that enables teachers to spend more time teaching, use more effective strategies, and enjoy teaching. Success breeds more success.


Author

Marie Carbo is the founder and executive director of the National Reading Styles Institute, which has empowered tens of thousands of educators nationwide to greatly improve reading instruction. She has written three ground-breaking books, including What Every Principal Should Know About Teaching Reading.