Teaching Adolescents to Read:
IT'S NOT TOO LATE

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THE ADOLESCENT STRUGGLING READER

Older struggling readers may need instruction in skills they missed in the early grades, but in many other ways they present unique challenges that set them apart from their younger selves. Reading and writing for these students are slow, taxing, frustrating, and unsatisfying endeavors. Moreover, students' difficulties are chronic, traceable most often to early failure with the basics. Day in and day out, for many years, the students have been given tasks that are too difficult for them to accomplish independently and successfully. It is thus no surprise that, for the most part, they avoid reading and have learned maladaptive coping strategies when faced with academic assignments.

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Therein lies the most challenging aspect of teaching older students: because reading is difficult for them, they do not like to read, and so they read (and write) very little. As a result, they are not familiar with the vocabulary, sentence structure, text organization, and concepts of academic "book" language. Over time, they fall further and further behind. Consequently, factual and experiential knowledge of the world may be very limited. Spelling and writing are poor. What begins as a core phonological and word recognition deficit—often associated with other language weaknesses—becomes a diffuse, debilitating problem with language, both spoken and written.

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Consider as well the nature of adolescence. To a middle school or high school student, peer relationships, peer group status, identity as an individual, and concerns about the future are all-important. A struggling reader is equally, if not more, in need of school experiences that promote self-respect, competence, self-reliance, social integration, and peer collaboration.

So what can be done? Effective, intensive instruction tailored for older students. Basic reading skills can be bolstered in a respectful, age-appropriate, and engaging manner, especially within a blended learning program. At the same time, language comprehension and navigation of challenging text can be taught. The overriding goal—to improve all aspects of language on which reading and writing depend—is attainable given time, specially designed and engaging instruction, and professional development for teachers.

FACING THE PROBLEM

An astonishing proportion of students score "below basic" on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2013) reading test. The most recent NAEP documents alarming numbers of white (21%), black (50%), and Hispanic (47%) students who are "below basic" at fourth grade. These patterns continue in eighth grade, where reading levels "below basic" include white (14%), black (39%), and Hispanic (32%) students. At eighth grade, 34 percent of low SES students, 70 percent of English learners, 60 percent of students with disabilities, and 26 percent of all male students score at the lowest levels on the test and cannot read well enough to navigate in a typical classroom. The long-term consequences for this level of illiteracy are well known: dropping out of school; qualifying for only the least-skilled jobs; generational poverty; chronic social dependency; unwanted early pregnancy; greater risk for ill health; and sometimes, incarceration."[1]

Policies governing the education of adolescent poor readers often value "access" to the content of the general curriculum over delivery of remedial reading instruction.[2] Moreover, if remedial or compensatory reading instruction occurs, it is delivered as a supplemental or noncredit-bearing activity. Yet students' participation in the mainstream classroom—and their chances for success in life—are severely limited by their inability to read and write.

It is not too late; we know what to do and how to do it. We can rescue these students from the adverse consequences of chronic illiteracy.

Unless they learn to recognize printed words, know what they mean, and respond successfully to assignments and tests, poor readers will continue to be frustrated and overwhelmed by grade-level assignments. The majority of middle and high school students, however, can make significant improvement in their functional reading and writing skills if intensive, appropriate instruction is provided over several years.[3] It is not too late; we know what to do and how to do it. We can rescue these students from the adverse consequences of chronic illiteracy.

READING INSTRUCTION THAT WORKS

Intensive reading intervention can enable older readers to acquire the skills they missed in the primary grades and can advance their skills significantly. Structured teaching of language at all levels—speech sounds (phonology), the print system (orthography), speech-to-print correspondences (phonics), word meanings (semantics), sentence structure (syntax), and text organization (discourse)—is what works. Research[4] consistently shows that instructional programs or methods for older poor readers have these characteristics:

1. They systematically, explicitly, and cumulatively teach all essential components of literacy.
2. They are intensive enough to produce significant gains in a student's relative standing.
3. They stimulate language abilities through the direct study of phonology, morphology, orthography, syntax, and text structure.
4. They respect students' social, intellectual, and emotional needs.

All Essential Components

Although there is less research on interventions with older students than younger learners, comprehensive programs of instruction consistently get better results than single-component programs.[5] Researchers differ as to whether word recognition and fluency should be emphasized before text comprehension or whether all essential components of reading should be taught in parallel.[6] Data from a pilot implementation of *LANGUAGE!® Live*, a blended instructional program for the middle grades and high school, show clearly that students who work on both word study and text comprehension make more than twice the rate of progress as students who work on only one aspect of reading.

Whatever the intervention, it must match the student's level of reading development, because each stage of reading growth has

unique challenges. The poorest readers, for example, often struggle because they are unable to identify single speech sounds in spoken whole words, so they must have their phonological skills strengthened.[7] If phonological skills improve, students are better equipped to match written symbols to sounds, to spell, and to develop and expand their vocabulary.

For those students whose reading skills are less severely impaired, prioritizing multisyllable word reading and reading fluency better matches their needs.[8] And, if students can decipher printed words with sufficient accuracy and speed, then educators must aggressively address vocabulary deficiencies, background information required for comprehension, interpretation of academic language, and text reading strategies. Incentives to read challenging material independently, both in and out of school, will be critical.

It is not a student's chronological age or grade level that should determine the design of remedial instruction. Rather, it is the student's level of reading skill and profile of strengths and weaknesses across the language spectrum that determines the content of lessons.

Intensive Intervention

If remedial reading instruction occurs as a supplemental, noncredit-bearing class, a student may receive two or three brief sessions in a resource room per week. Intensive instruction, however, can mean more than one period daily and, often, more than one year if the goal is to move the student closer to grade level.[9] Teaching all essential components of language, reading, and writing takes time. There are no shortcuts for overcoming huge and chronic gaps in skill development and reading experience.

Direct Teaching of Language Structure

The Building Blocks of Spoken and Written Words

The majority of adolescent poor readers who read below the 30th percentile need some level of direct instruction in two foundational skills: the ability to map speech sounds to letters and letter patterns in print, and the ability to recognize printed words accurately and automatically—out of context as well as in context.[10] The poorest readers may still be confused about letters and sounds. They need systematic practice decomposing words into their component phonemes, syllables, and meaningful parts (morphemes), and recognizing how those linguistic units are represented in print. The techniques for teaching older students, however, should differ from those used to teach younger learners,[11] or students are likely to rebel against "babyish" tasks.

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The first rule is to treat students like young adults. Talk about linguistics and language study. Don't hesitate to use adult terminology, such as "phoneme deletion," "consonant digraph," "schwa," and "morpheme." Explain phonics and spelling within the framework of the history of English. Spice up the story with videos about Old English and Middle English pronunciation. Explain and demonstrate how the speech-to-print correspondence system works with skits, cartoons, animation, games, and illustrations.

Multisensory engagement will hold students' attention, with simultaneous listening, speaking, moving, looking, and writing or typing of symbols. Speech sounds (phonemes) should be learned with reference to their articulation.[12] Thus, students should look in mirrors as they practice phoneme discrimination and production. They should be able to imitate a good model and then listen to themselves produce, segment, or blend speech sounds.

Phonemic drills are short tune-ups that include games, such as reverse-a-word ("Say 'teach'; then say it with the first sound last and the last sound first—'cheat' "). Students can tap the number of sounds in a segmented word by using their hands or manipulating tokens—either on a computer screen or on their desks. Each sound in a word is represented by one tap or one token. Students can tap the first sound with their index finger and thumb, the second sound with their middle finger and thumb, the third sound with their ring finger and thumb, and so forth. Vowels or consonants that are spelled with more than one letter (/sh/, /ch/, /th/, /ck/, /oi/) are represented with one finger tap. This technique helps students identify all the sounds in a word.

To learn the correspondences between phonemes and graphemes (letters and letter groups that represent single speech sounds), mapping sounds to symbols on a grid works well. So do word sorting activities with immediate corrective feedback; selection of correctly spelled words to match spoken words; and writing or typing dictated words into meaningful passages. Production of written words (encoding) reinforces and enhances reading recognition.

Even if students are working with basics, the focus of instruction can be the six regular syllable types and their combinations in longer words. For example, closed syllables, which make up half the syllables in English spelling, contain short vowels and end in one or more consonants. Closed syllables can be blended to form words such as *com-mit-ment* and *ac-com-plish-ment*.

As students progress with syllable recognition and spelling, teachers can start to emphasize morphemes—prefixes, roots, and suffixes—from the Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and Greek layers of English. Beginning with inflections that may change the spelling of a base word (fine, finest; begin, beginning; study, studied), students can analyze words into units that often link meaning and spelling. (The fact that the words "conversation," "versatile," and "universe," for example, all share the root "vers" can open a discussion about the aspect of meaning they all share.) Instruction must be cumulative, sequential, and systematic, so that students overcome the bad habit of relying on context and guessing to decode unknown words.

Reading Fluency and Word Recognition

Two critical abilities—sound-symbol decoding and automatic recognition of words—are established in good readers. Poor readers, in contrast, are usually too slow, even after they become accurate, and this slowness generally reflects the lack of practice with reading.[13] Some poor readers, however, are just not wired to retrieve words from memory as quickly as others. These students may continue to be slow readers and may need many more practice opportunities before word recognition is automatic. Allowances must be made for their slower reading rate; for example, audiobooks and interactive novellas are helpful resources when fatigue sets in.

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Older poor readers can usually increase their reading speed with practice at several levels: sound-symbol association, word reading, and phrase and sentence reading. Quick speed drills, especially in computer-driven games, can build automatic recognition of words, syllables, and morphemes. Reading with a tape recording, choral reading of dramatic material, and rereading familiar text can all support reading fluency. Above all, however, students must read as much as possible, and they must read independently material that is not too difficult if they are to make up the huge gap between themselves and other students.[14]

LANGUAGE! Live is a program for adolescent students reading below grade level that uses web-based instruction to teach phonics and word recognition. The computer allows students to work at their own pace; practice decoding and spelling as much as necessary; receive immediate, corrective feedback; listen to their own voices and compare them to a model; and receive reinforcement for every success. Furthermore, the program saves the instructor from having to explain the ins and outs of language structure. Concepts ranging from understanding consonant voicing to distinguishing Latin roots are presented in clever, entertaining skits viewed on the computer.

Building Vocabulary and Background Knowledge

Normally progressing students can read most of the words in their listening vocabulary by fourth or fifth grade. From then on, they learn new vocabulary—primarily by reading—at the rate of several thousand new words per year. Older poor readers are at least partially familiar with more spoken words than they can read, but because they do not read well, their exposure to the words in varied contexts is limited. Many poor readers must overcome a huge vocabulary deficit before they will be able to read successfully beyond the fifth grade level.[15]

If vocabulary instruction is to be effective, it must occur daily and involve many opportunities to hear, say, and use new words in context.[16] Before each text reading in *LANGUAGE! Live*, students rate their familiarity with key vocabulary central to gaining meaning from the text to be read. Then teachers focus on the most important words by pronouncing, explaining, and using them in several sentences. In lessons that follow, students learn how to use context to derive meanings, find root morphemes, map word derivations, explore multiple meanings, discover word origins, and paraphrase figurative language. This approach recognizes that new-word learning is closely connected to learning subject-matter content and deepening background knowledge.

Text Comprehension

Reading with comprehension depends on rapid and accurate literal and inferential interpretation of written language, integration of ideas in the text with one's existing background knowledge, and being alert to whether or not the meanings are adding up.[17] Students with little reading experience often lag in their knowledge of genre, text structure, text organization, and literary devices,[18] and also may lack the background knowledge necessary to make inferences as they read. They are unused to reading closely to grapple with the deeper meanings of a text and often do not even expect that reading should make sense. Typically, they will not pause to reread, ask a clarifying question, or readjust an interpretation required for durable understanding of a text.[19]

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LANGUAGE! Live employs three overriding principles in designing text study to engage and motivate poor readers. First, the texts themselves must be worth reading and rereading. Lexile® levels can be adjusted, but the compelling nature of the information itself is the primary criterion for choosing a text. Several selections on the same topic are included within a unit, so that students can elaborate and deepen their own ideas about complex or controversial subject matter. Great texts such as fables, poems, oral histories, speeches, first-person historical accounts, and adapted classics stimulate students' imaginations and promote examination of self, others, and the world at large.

Second, text reading is highly scaffolded and actively guided by the teacher. Texts may be somewhat above a student's comfort level, but with careful preparation for reading, vocabulary instruction, and guidance through the text, initial goals for understanding can be

reached. Initially, the teacher may read the text aloud while students follow, but by the end of the unit, students can read the text themselves. The scaffolding process includes rereading the text several times: one to get the main ideas, or gist; one to analyze closely the language in the text; and one to take notes in preparation for a written response to the reading.

Third, students' language proficiencies are developed directly in every lesson and every unit. Comprehension in these students can break down at the most basic levels of language processing. For example, students who are poor readers may fail to identify the significance of a logical connective (*but*, *moreover*, *although*), the tone of a phrase, or the importance of a comma in determining the meaning of a written passage.[20] Aspects of book language such as figures of speech, sentence structure, cohesive devices, paragraph organization, and the distinctive features of various genres are directly and systematically taught.

WRITING IN RESPONSE TO READING

Written response to reading can greatly enhance comprehension[21], but poor readers must have their writing skills developed sequentially and cumulatively. Writing improves when students practice asking and answering specific questions, elaborating subjects and predicates, combining simple sentences, constructing clauses, and linking sentences into organized paragraphs. These are the building blocks of clear, expository writing.

While developing the building blocks for writing, students also need to have their teachers show them how the writing process works, from start to finish. A high degree of structure helps students transcend the daunting challenges of generating and organizing their own thoughts. Rather than turning students loose to face a blank piece of paper, which can petrify even capable writers, the instructor models and demystifies the composition process by first helping students identify the purpose for their writing, the format, and the genre's characteristics. Then, students are helped to generate and sort ideas through questioning and discussion. Next, the teacher talks students through each step of the composition, modeling decisions about what and how to write. Finally, the teacher models the task of editing, pointing out sentences that need elaboration, combination, or reordering, and replacing words as necessary. Students are thus prepared to compose independently.

SUMMARY: HOPE FOR THE STRUGGLING ADOLESCENT

Older poor readers, who include at least a third of the student population in middle school, can learn to read if three conditions are met:

1. They are taught the foundational language skills they missed
2. They have ample opportunity to apply the skills in reading meaningful texts
3. They work in a respectful, supportive, age-appropriate social context

All of this takes time. Intensive interventions can accelerate student learning and narrow the achievement gap, but "intensive" may require more than one class period daily over more than one year. Providing remediation to groups of students in an alternative, credit-bearing English course is the best vehicle for ensuring that daily, concentrated instruction occurs.

Twenty-first century workplace demands for literacy are only getting higher. Thus, the societal costs of leaving so many students "below basic" in reading are only increasing. We know that older struggling readers can be taught and that the lives of many can be salvaged with well-designed, intensive, faithfully implemented, language-based instruction. Let's get on with its implementation.

NOTES

[1] Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006. [back to text]

[2] Solis, Miciak, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2014. [back to text]

[3] Scammacca, Roberts, Vaughn, & Stuebing, 2015; Scammacca, Roberts, Vaughn, Edmonds, Wexler, Reutebuch, & Torgesen, 2007; Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008; Solis et al., 2014. [back to text]

[4] Ehren, Ben Hanania Lenz, & Deshler, 2014; Wanzek, Vaughn, Scammacca, Metz, Murray, Roberts, & Danielson, 2013. [back to text]

[5] Aaron & Joshi, 2012; Calhoon, Sandow, & Hunter, 2010; Lovett, Lacerenza, De Palma, & Frijters, 2012; Morris, Lovett, Wolf, Sevcik, Steinbach, Frijters, & Shapiro, 2012. [back to text]

[6] Calhoon & Petscher, 2013; Calhoon, Sandow, & Hunter, 2010. [back to text]

[7] Archer, Gleason, & Vachon, 2003; Barth, Catts, & Anthony, 2009; Ehren et al., 2014. [back to text]

[8] Boardman, Roberts, Vaughn, Wexler, Murray, & Kosanovich, 2008; Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, C., Salinger, & Torgesen, 2008. [back to text]

[9] Solis et al, 2014; Torgesen, 2004. [back to text]

[10] Archer et al., 2003; Calhoon & Petscher, 2013; Vaughn, Wexler, Leroux, Roberts, Denton, Barth, & Fletcher, 2012. [back to text]

[11] Calhoon et al., 2010; Ehren et al., 2014. [back to text]

[12] Moats, 2010. [back to text]

[13] Barth, Catts, & Anthony, 2009; Torgesen, 2004; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012. [back to text]

[14] Ehren et al., 2014; [back to text]

[15] Ehren et al., 2014; Kamil et al., 2008. [back to text]

[16] Biancarosa & Snow, 2006. [back to text]

[17] Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2015. [back to text]

[18] Catts, Adlof, & Weismar, 2006; Ehren et al., 2014. [back to text]

[19] Lovett et al., 2012; Oakhill et al., 2015. [back to text]

[20] Ehren et al., 2014. [back to text]

[21] Graham & Hebert, 2010. [back to text]

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