

How to Maintain School Reading Success: Five Recommendations From a Struggling Male Reader

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In 2006, the Maryland State Task Force on the Education of African American Males (Maryland State Department of Education, 2006) acknowledged “that, at every level, there’s been a fundamental failure on behalf of our African American male students and a persistent bias against them” (p. 10). Many go to the extent of describing the underachievement of boys as a crisis (Aratani, 2007). To rectify this situation, the Task Force put forth a number of teacher recommendations. Yet, most committees charged with addressing underachievement are overwhelmingly comprised of educators, policymakers, and parents. Consequently, their recommendations rarely privilege the voices of the students being served. Therefore, in an effort to increase the achievement of male readers, this article provides five teacher recommendations from the perspective of Derek (pseudonym), a sixth grader and struggling reader.

First, who is Derek? In October 2005, I began to tutor Derek, a then 9-year-old African American male third grader. He is a soft-spoken, well-dressed, only child of divorced professionals and has attended the same multicultural elementary/middle school since third grade. His family lives in an east coast inner city where he enjoys weekly league bowling, video games, text messaging, surfing on his laptop, and completing local art programs. Although he frequently travels to beaches, ski resorts, and cultural outings with his mother and is repeatedly described as

amiable by teachers, he has always experienced difficulty with school literacy.

In kindergarten, Derek received therapy for speech delays. Later, he repeated the first grade (because of low reading achievement) and by October 2005, his third-grade teacher had already referred him to the Institutional Support Team, requested special education testing, and implied that he would repeat the third grade. It was at this time that I became involved to provide weekly tutorial sessions and advocate on the family’s behalf. As the result of a lot of hard work, Derek successfully completed third, fourth, and fifth grades (he is currently completing sixth grade). However, he continues to experience difficulty retaining new vocabulary and successfully completing subsequent reading comprehension questions (Jenkins, 2007).

Derek yawns at the mere thought of completing language arts homework and describes school book reading as boring. During a December 2006 tutorial session, for instance, when asked to describe his in-class language arts activity completed earlier that day, Derek explained:

Derek: We’re reading this story about climbing some hills and mountains...I don’t know....

Shawyn: You don’t remember anything else about the story? Who is the main character?

Derek: I...think this guy. I can’t remember.

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Shawyn: Can you remember anything else, did something funny happen?

Derek: When Demetrius fell out the chair, that was funny.

Shawyn: No, funny in the story.

Derek: No, nothing funny about the hill. Really, I can't remember the story. It is kinda long and boring. I start thinking about things when they [classmates] are reading. [December 4, 2006]

Because he is uninterested in school reading and largely unfamiliar with the vocabulary used, Derek's reading rate is below grade level and he often guesses on comprehension questions to quickly finish an assignment. Nonetheless, during our weekly tutorial sessions he openly evaluates his literacy instruction, discusses ongoing academic challenges, and shares his school successes. After reviewing field notes of our tutorial sessions, I selected five of Derek's most often recommended suggestions and compiled them into the following list in an effort to help teachers examine their instruction from the perspective of a struggling reader.

Recommendation 1: Teamwork Helps My Dream Work

Above all else, Derek's suggestions reveal the importance of teachers, after-school staff, reading specialists, tutors, students, and parents working together as a team, rather a *united front*, to reinforce home and school literacy practices. For example, some may have seen the cell phone commercials in which the customer with a weak, disjointed network has poor performance and the customer with the large, united network has superior performance; Derek's reading success happens the same way. Working in isolation, Derek's teachers and parents would be ineffective and disjointed. However, by working together (parents, tutor, teacher, and school staff) as the strongest influences in Derek's life, we are able to help him to remain on grade level to a greater extent than we can in isolation.

During Derek's most successful school years, we have made connections with his classroom teachers at the beginning of the year to do the following:

- Discuss Derek's strengths and weaknesses
- Share home and tutorial literacy routines
- Collect school vocabulary words and assigned stories

Then, we maintain monthly contact through face-to-face meetings, e-mails, or phone calls. Although teamwork undergirds Derek's success; realistically, creating and maintaining our team remains one of the greatest difficulties we face each school year.

Establishing and maintaining communication among busy classroom teachers, school staff, professionals, and overworked parents is challenging. However, we have been able to form effective teams when teachers, parents, and the student do the following:

- Select knowledgeable, trustworthy team members
- Converse on a regular basis (monthly at a minimum)
- Stay focused on each team member working to improve upon an identified area of need

Recommendation 2: Build on My Past Successes

Sadly, it seems that once the previously described team has been formed, bonds have been made, and trust has been built among team members, the school year ends. Then, a new school year begins with another classroom teacher who, according to Derek, often "doesn't even talk to the old teacher to use the same stuff that worked." Consequently, Derek suggests that struggling readers need flexible teachers who are willing to continue using the instructional adaptations, collaborations, and programs that have been successful in previous school years. To

build upon the past successes, schools can do the following:

- Allow students to loop, or remain with effective classroom teachers for two or more years
- Design after-school programs to individualize activities and routines to specifically address students' areas of need and loop effective after-school teachers with their students for two or more years
- Assign teachers to classes by late May or early June; therefore, parents (and team members) can conference with the new teacher and begin building their team before the new school year begins

Recommendation 3: Connect Book Reading to My World

Although Derek finds many of the assigned books in his Language Arts classes “boring,” he has a wide range of interests and experiences that teachers can use when selecting books and subsequent school literacy activities. This can be accomplished by using Derek’s interests (computers and technology), passions (art), extracurricular activities (bowling), home life (as an African American, inner city preteen), personal histories (as the only male child), and local or world events (the Presidential inauguration) as points of comparison during discussion or activity completion and as a basis for book selection. According to Derek, “It makes more sense to do this project than just reading the book.”

Researcher Alfred Tatum (2006) affirmed this recommendation by explaining the importance of using what he terms *enabling* texts with African American males, “An enabling text is one that moves beyond a sole cognitive focus—such as skill and strategy development—to include a social, cultural, political, spiritual and economic focus” (p. 47). The use of enabling texts allows students such as Derek the opportunity to “analyze their realities in the context of the curriculum and discuss strategies for

overcoming academic and societal barriers” (p. 48), thus providing the engagement with school literacy that Derek currently lacks.

Recommendation 4: Allow Me to Help Select Books, Topics, and Activities

According to William Brozo, author of *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader* (Brozo, 2002), teachers frequently “say over and over again that the students who are the hardest to motivate [and] who are most often in special education are boys” (International Reading Association, 2006). To increase his motivation, Derek suggests teachers allow him to help select books, topics, and activities. By providing him with regular opportunities to choose the books he is required to read and the activities he has to complete, Derek can begin to develop the sense of ownership of his literacy learning needed for reading success and strengthen the level of trust between student and teacher.

Recommendation 5: Provide Me With a Variety of Texts on a Single Topic

Derek often explains that if he had more time to read a given text he would perform better on the final test. Therefore, in order for him to fully comprehend and retain important textual information, he suggests that teachers spend more time reading and discussing texts. Here are a few ways in which teachers can increase exposure to a given text and topic:

- *Read a variety of texts on a single unit or topic.* To facilitate comprehension, read and analyze a variety of trade books on a single topic, across disciplines and subject areas. For example, when Derek was assigned to read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, he could have also been assigned to read related speeches, plays, memoirs, websites, picture books, newspaper accounts, magazine articles, or book reviews while

examining related art exhibits, song lyrics, photographs, or movies. Exposure to these texts across subject areas (such as social studies, science, math, art, music, and computer skills) will provide him with the in-depth understanding he needs to successfully retain textual information.

- *Link book reading to interdisciplinary, practical projects.* To foster a lifelong love of reading, students must be exposed to the wide array of literacies that exist beyond completing academic tasks, such as researching histories, writing postcards, sending e-mails, following arts and crafts directions, building models, creating to-do lists, reading maps, and cooking using recipes.
- *Connect book reading to technology.* Derek and his friends enjoy using the latest technology such as e-mails, websites, avatars, podcasts, blogs, social networking sites, and text messaging. Collier (2008) referred to the 21st-century skills that today's students need to be successful "as the C's of change" (p. 6). These skills include "producing information using multimodal tools (audio and video as well as text); publishing what you've created; and networking with others online" (p. 6). Teaching these skills using the technology enjoyed by Derek and his friends serves as an avenue to fill the chasm which exists between home and school literacies.

Final Recommendations

The debate continues as to whether the underachievement of boys has reached crisis levels. However, Derek's recommendations reveal that educators' daily instructional decisions determine the extent to which struggling male readers will be able to make the connections needed to create and maintain school literacy success. Furthermore, Derek's experiences remind us that struggling readers need teachers who are committed to reaching out to parents, adapting their instruction, partnering with colleagues, and using innovative instructional approaches to decrease failure for struggling readers. Finally, to be more effective educators of 21st-century skills, we must begin to truly listen to the voices of the students we serve.

References

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Questions for Reflection

- Do you notice that more boys than girls in your class struggle with reading? Are there differences in the types of challenges boys and girls experience? How can you differentiate your teaching to reach both girls and boys with the most appropriate support?
- One of Derek's suggestions is to allow continuity of staff from year to year. What do you think of the idea of one teacher staying with a group of students for more than a single grade level? Could this be a successful approach in your school or district? How would you make it happen?