

Really Great Reading®

Tackling the Adolescent Literacy Problem:
Decoding Strategies for Success



Research
Paper



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Many of our nation's adolescents struggle to read at grade level and the problem is only getting worse. According to the Nation's Report Card for Reading in 2009, 68 percent of all fourth grade students read below a proficient level and 34 percent read below the most basic level of achievement. It's a similar story for eighth graders: 69 percent read below a proficient level, while 26 percent read below the basic level for their grade.

For low-income students, the situation is even more dismal: only 17 percent of low-income fourth graders read at a proficient level and nearly half read below a basic level. This means that just about a third of all fourth graders and a quarter of eighth graders nationwide demonstrate only "partial mastery" of the most basic "prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work" at their grade level (National Center for Education Statistics 2009).

According to Snow and Biancarosa, literacy is a "prerequisite" for academic success "in middle and secondary school and beyond" (2003). Yet despite an increased focus on literacy in schools over the course of the past decade, there are still 8 million adolescents in grades 4 through 12 across the country who struggle with reading (Snow and Biancarosa 2006).

As an antidote to this pervasive problem, Really Great Reading developed tools for struggling readers, with emphasis on decoding and accuracy as the means to fluency and comprehension.

LITERACY STRUGGLES: A FAST PATH TO A DISMAL FUTURE

Each year, millions of students enter fourth grade without reading proficiency. As the Ann E. Casey Foundation (AECF) details in their 2010 report, *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*, this "puts them on the dropout track." Almost 6.2 million young people dropped out of high school in 2007, and these dropouts are more likely to be arrested or become teen parents than their counterparts who graduate from high school (AECF 2010). The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) has said that a third of all juvenile offenders read below a fourth-grade level, and two-thirds of prison inmates are high school dropouts (2006).

The Ann E. Casey Foundation has even ventured to predict that the fourth-graders who "cannot meet [National Association of Educational Progress] proficient levels in reading today are all too likely to become our nation's lowest-income, least-skilled, least-productive, and most costly citizens tomorrow" (2010).

EARLY READING DIFFICULTIES PERSIST FOR ADOLESCENTS

Research shows that students who do not read at least "moderately well by grade three will likely encounter difficulties reading throughout their school careers" (NASBE 2006). In fact, three-quarters of students who struggle with reading in third grade will still struggle with reading in high school (AECF 2010).

Reading is the tool that students use to access new information in school, and early weaknesses in reading prevent that access. Students who struggle with reading in upper elementary and middle school will also struggle to master content in all their content areas, including math, science, social studies, and literature. That's because learning in all of these content areas depends on students' ability to access printed text (Chall and Jacobs 2003).

Students' persistent reading problems can severely impact their ability to master everything they encounter in school. The Children's Reading Foundation has found that a fourth grade student who reads at a first or second grade level will "understand less than one-third to one-half of his or her printed curriculum," and "without immediate, direct, and effective intervention, this group falls so far behind by the end of third grade that 73 percent will never catch up."

THE PROBLEM GOES BEYOND COMPREHENSION

"Not all students acquire expert skills in phonics in the early grades."

—Michael Kamil, "Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century," 2003

Research shows that there are many different types of struggling adolescent readers. Although many do struggle with comprehension, some students in middle and high school struggle because they have yet to master the alphabetic principle. In fact, 1 in every 10 adolescents has serious trouble with word identification (Kamil 2003).

In their examination of the "fourth-grade slump," Chall and Jacobs found that for some students, the slump "may stem from lack of fluency and automaticity (that is, quick and accurate recognition of words and phrases)" (2003). Without the ability to "be fluent in recognizing words," students have a hard time comprehending and learning from the challenging texts with which they are presented beginning in grades four through eight (Chall and Jacobs 2003). These students will continue to struggle with text comprehension until their most basic reading weaknesses are remediated.

The Ann E. Casey Foundation has found that state tests do not always identify struggling readers who lack basic reading skills. Often students appear proficient in the early grades even though they "may not have mastered the skills they need to actually 'learn efficiently' in fourth grade and after" (AECF 2010). Other students simply have not been offered the type of explicit instruction that helps them see the connections between the sounds and symbols of the English language.

Eileen Marzola, former president of the New York Branch of the International Dyslexia Association, has said that "some [students] suffer from 'dystaughtia' because they have never had the opportunity to learn the underlying structure of the English language" (2006). It is this population that often requires the Really Great Reading approach to systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics skills to remediate their reading weaknesses.

THE REALLY GREAT READING SOLUTION

Fortunately, there is hope for adolescent readers who struggle with the basic reading skills of word identification and decoding. Research shows that instruction in basic reading skills can help remediate their weaknesses and put them back on the path to academic success (Kamil 2003). Really Great Reading's Phonics Suite solution for struggling readers gives

educators the tools they need to effectively diagnose, group, and instruct struggling readers in grades 2 through 12 who lack the basic reading skills necessary for accurate and fluent reading.

TARGET STRUGGLING READERS' SPECIFIC WEAKNESSES

The first step to remediation is to diagnose specific weaknesses. In their 2007 guidance document, “Academic Literacy Instruction for Adolescents,” Joe Torgesen and his colleagues at the Center on Instruction describe struggling readers in grades 4 through 12 as “very heterogeneous, often differ[ing] in the nature of their reading problems.” They go on to explain that “some students, for example those who fit the modern research-based definitions of dyslexia or specific reading disabilities, have difficulties reading the words in text accurately and fluently but may have quite strong vocabulary and language comprehension skills” while “others will profit most from tutoring in the flexible use of reading comprehension strategies” (Torgesen et. al. 2007). Some students, especially those who struggle with decoding and fluency, may require “intense individualized instruction” (Snow and Biancarosa 2006).

Because adolescent struggling readers face a variety of challenges that impede their progress in reading, the most effective interventions are those that target the specific skills that interfere with a student’s ability to comprehend text. Really Great Reading’s Diagnostic Decoding Surveys allow educators to determine whether students struggle with decoding, and when they do, the surveys pinpoint specific decoding weaknesses. This is the first step to successful intervention.

DECODING WEAKNESSES NEGATIVELY AFFECT COMPREHENSION

Upon identifying students with decoding weaknesses using an assessment tool like the Diagnostic Decoding Surveys, educators then need to remediate those weaknesses. These decoding weaknesses often are what hinder students’ comprehension.

Students who struggle to decode in middle and high school frequently suffer from poor comprehension. The National Association of State Boards of Education has found that 10 percent of middle and high school students have decoding deficits that “impair their fluency and comprehension” (2006). Students need to decode with automaticity, or without conscious effort, to be able to expend their mental energy on comprehending text. Stanovich notes that “reading for meaning” is greatly hindered when children are having too much trouble with word recognition because “when word recognition processes demand too much cognitive capacity, fewer cognitive resources are left to allocate to higher-level processes of text integration and comprehension” (1993).

A child’s word-level reading ability (both for words out of context and for previously unknown words) has a high association with his or her passage comprehension (Shankweiler et. al. 1999). Poor word recognition skills are also associated with students’ disinterest in reading, which then impedes vocabulary development as students are exposed to fewer new words (Curtis 2004).

Phonics Blitz, *Phonics Boost*, and *HD Word*, three of Really Great Reading’s sets of decoding intervention lessons, are designed to improve students’ decoding skills, increasing their automaticity with decoding and consequently improving their comprehension.

CONTEXT CLUES ARE NOT ENOUGH FOR WORD IDENTIFICATION

Some educators argue that students do not need to decode accurately as long as they are able to identify words using context clues. Really Great Reading's intervention gives students the skills they need to decode known and unknown words without relying on context clues. The automaticity with decoding that is developed through *Phonics Blitz*, *Phonics Boost*, and *HD Word* lessons frees up students' mental desk space for using context clues and other comprehension strategies to understand what they read.

Research supports that students should be taught non-guessing strategies for decoding unknown words. "The major problem with using contextual clues for word identification is that they are unreliable" (Adams 1990). Although context clues work well as a tool in the comprehension process, they should not be relied on for word identification purposes (Stanovich 1993). This is especially true for older struggling readers who encounter many unfamiliar content-area words in their academic reading. In order "to guess the pronunciation of words from context, the context must predict the words. But content words, the most important words for text comprehension, can be predicted from surrounding context only 10 to 20 percent of the time" (Lyon 2000).

DECODING INTERVENTION CAN IMPROVE COMPREHENSION FOR OLDER STUDENTS

When students do have decoding weaknesses, targeted and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, like that provided in *Phonics Blitz*, *Phonics Boost*, and *HD Word*, often is the key to their improvement in comprehension. Torgesen has found that for students with severe impairment in their ability to use phonemic strategies for decoding unknown words, intensive intervention in phonemic awareness and decoding can produce large gains in both reading accuracy and comprehension (2005). This is true for students of all ages.

The Center on Instruction has found that for "students in fifth grade and beyond...intensive and skillful instruction in basic word reading skills can have a significant impact on [their] comprehension ability" (2007). This type of instruction increases the percentage of words that students read accurately in text, which in turn improves their comprehension (Torgesen et. al. 2007). Although most reading programs in middle schools focus on strengthening comprehension skills only, there are middle school students for whom instruction in decoding is necessary (Bhattacharya and Ehri 2004). Students normally master letter-sound relationships before they reach fifth grade, but for some adolescents, these word-level and print-based challenges are the source of their comprehension issues (Curtis 2004). For these students, decoding instruction is the first step toward improvement in comprehension skills.

EXPLICIT, SYSTEMATIC INSTRUCTION IS MOST EFFECTIVE

Phonics Blitz, *Phonics Boost*, and *HD Word* intervention lessons allow teachers to provide explicit and systematic instruction according to a logical and effective scope and sequence. Research supports explicit and systematic instruction as the most effective for struggling readers.

For some children, “simple immersion in print and writing activities” is not enough for them to “pick up the alphabetic principle”; these children need “explicit instruction in alphabetic coding” (Stanovich 1993). There are a full 40 percent of children who will not become “capable readers” without “explicit instruction (including phonics)” (Moats 2007).

Fletcher and Lyon explain that phonics knowledge should be presented explicitly and in an orderly progression for children who are at risk for reading failure or who are poor readers (1998). The scope and sequence for *Phonics Blitz*, *Phonics Boost*, and *HD Word* progresses from easier to more difficult concepts. Students begin by learning short vowel sounds and closed syllable spelling patterns and gradually master more challenging long, variant, and r-controlled vowel sounds and the multiple spellings of those sounds.

The National Reading Panel (NRP) found that systematic and explicit phonics instruction has positive effects on both disabled and non-disabled readers who are simply not performing up to their academic potential. This type of instruction is “effective with children of different ages, abilities, and socioeconomic backgrounds” (2000). The NRP also found that “older children receiving phonics instruction were better able to decode and spell words and to read text orally” (2000).

PHONEMIC AWARENESS: THE FIRST STEP TO SUCCESSFUL DECODING

Phonemic awareness, or the ability to identify and manipulate the individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words, is a critical part of the decoding process. If students cannot identify the sounds in words, they will not be able to match letters with those sounds during phonics instruction. For many students, decoding weaknesses stem from a difficulty with phonemic awareness. Explicit phonemic awareness instruction is often the first step to successful decoding.

Really Great Reading incorporates explicit and direct phonemic and phonological awareness instruction in its *Phonics Blitz*, *Phonics Boost*, and *HD Word* lessons. Students segment and blend spoken syllables and individual sounds in spoken words. They are explicitly taught to identify and categorize four types of vowel sounds: short, long, variant, and r-controlled.

Research shows that this type of instruction in phonemic awareness improves the reading ability of struggling readers. The National Reading Panel found that “teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words was highly effective under a variety of teaching conditions with a variety of learners across a range of grade and age levels” (2000). They also found that teaching phonemic awareness to children “significantly improves their reading” (NRP 2000). Because English is an alphabetic language, it is critical for children to understand that letters represent spoken sounds. If children have trouble distinguishing sounds in spoken words, they will have trouble decoding unknown words that they encounter, which in turn will lead to difficulties in comprehension (Lyon 2000). In fact, “word recognition problems often arise from problems breaking apart words and syllables into phonemes” (Fletcher and Lyon 1998).

Deficits in phonemic awareness must be remediated no matter the age of a student. For struggling readers of any age or grade level, these deficits can contribute to reading problems (Curtis 2004).

SCAFFOLDED INSTRUCTION GIVES STUDENTS THE SUPPORT THEY NEED

When students learn new concepts, they need the support of the more knowledgeable teacher to master the previously unknown content. Commonly referred to as “instructional scaffolding,” the teacher provides the necessary support as a student works on a new concept or skill. The teacher gradually withdraws support as the student demonstrates more competency with the new concept or skill. Finally, the student achieves independent mastery over the concept or skills and the teacher no longer needs to provide support.

Instructional scaffolding is a proven and effective way for teachers to transfer new knowledge and skills to their students. Really Great Reading’s intervention lessons use an “**I Do, We Do, You Do**” structure in which a teacher introduces a new concept or skill by modeling (**I Do**), provides the appropriate amount of support as he or she works with the students to develop competency over the concept or skill (**We Do**), and then withdraws the support when students have mastered the concept or skill and allows them to independently practice and reinforce it (**You Do**). This structure allows the teacher to scaffold phonemic awareness and phonics concepts and skills, and leads to reading mastery.

TEACHERS NEED BACKGROUND INFORMATION TO TEACH READING EFFECTIVELY

Many teachers, especially those who have no reading certification but find themselves in classrooms with struggling readers, need background information to be comfortable and confident teaching reading concepts. Often, middle and high school content area teachers are particularly hesitant to teach reading because it is beyond their expertise. However these teachers want and need ways to incorporate reading instruction in their teaching.

The Ann E. Casey Foundation has found that “too many teachers lack the training, experience, or knowledge they need to teach reading effectively” (2010). The lack of solid instruction for teachers on how to best teach reading is a weakness in many teacher preparation programs. This is often an “impediment to serving the needs [of struggling readers]” (Fletcher and Lyon 1998). In his report, *Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century*, Michael Kamil notes that “educators know that something needs to be done but are daunted, understandably, by the considerable task of identifying and applying research-based literacy strategies” (2003).

Really Great Reading knows that, often, teachers without expertise in reading find themselves needing to teach intervention lessons to their struggling readers. That is why all *Phonics Blitz*, *Phonics Boost*, and *HD Word* lessons include a section called “**What You Need to Know**,” designed specifically to provide teachers with background knowledge on the phonemic awareness and phonics concepts they will teach in the lesson. This information builds confidence, allows teachers to teach the lessons with fidelity, and helps them answer student questions effectively.

Really Great Reading also offers an excellent professional development series that teaches educators not only how to deliver the lessons effectively, but also gives them the background knowledge in reading content that they need to be successful.

EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION IN READING MULTI-SYLLABLE WORDS

Research shows that one of the most common difficulties adolescents face when attacking words is how to deal with words that have more than one syllable (Curtis 2004). Often, students struggle to decode multi-syllable words because they do not take the time to fully break down the words and look at each part of a word. Instead, they look at the first part of the word and make a guess, which can sometimes lead readers to “compose...what they read” rather than “comprehending what has been written” (Curtis 2004).

Based on their study done with adolescents in sixth to ninth grade who read below grade level, Bhattacharya and Ehri found that there is value in teaching adolescent struggling readers to read multi-syllable words by “analyzing and matching” syllables to pronunciations (2004). They also found that “even a modest investment of time devoted to syllabication instruction is sufficient to yield significant gains in word reading for struggling readers” (Bhattacharya and Ehri 2004).

Phonics Blitz, *Phonics Boost*, and *HD Word* lessons use the research validated strategy of teaching students to “flex” the vowel sounds when trying to decode multi-syllable words. When students encounter an unknown word, they are taught to try to pronounce the word with one vowel sound and to keep trying different vowel sounds until they hit on one that produces a familiar sounding word.

Many researchers have found success using similar strategies. Curtis advocates teaching students that vowels often have more than one pronunciation in the English language, and then encourages them to try different pronunciations when they come to an unknown word until they hear a word that they know (2004). Others have also emphasized the “importance of flexibility in successful word identification,” especially with the vowel sounds (Lovett et. al. 2000). Anita Archer and her colleagues have emphasized that “research has shifted from rigid rules to a more flexible approach of decoding longer words”; “students learn they can be flexible in dividing the word into parts as long as they can ultimately make the word into a real word” (2003).

In *Phonics Blitz*, *Phonics Boost*, and *HD Word* lessons, students are encouraged to not worry about dividing a word into perfect dictionary syllables as long as they can pronounce the word correctly.

Really Great Reading’s intervention lessons give students concrete strategies for decoding multi-syllable words. Students use manipulatives and some simple questions to break words down into individual syllables. Students are taught to look for the vowel letters that are the heart of each syllable. By explicitly teaching students to analyze and attack multi-syllable words, *Phonics Blitz*, *Phonics Boost*, and *HD Word* lessons empower students to overcome this barrier that often prevents adolescent struggling readers from becoming successful decoders.

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ABOUT US: At Really Great Reading, we help children and adults master the skills for reading fluency and comprehension. Our approach, including our Phonics Suite materials, gives educators and specialists the tools to prevent bad habits while students are learning to read in k-3 and to identify and remediate bad habits when they appear in older grades.

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