SCHOLASTIC
Classroom Books

# RTI: The Best Intervention Is a Good Book

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*The current situation in many schools is that struggling readers participate in 30 to 60 minutes of appropriate reading intervention instruction and then spend the remaining five hours a day sitting in classrooms with texts they cannot read, cannot learn to read from, cannot learn science or social studies from.*

— Allington (2009) *What Really Matters in Response to Intervention*

Every day, with all the best intentions of helping, we ask our striving readers to read books they can't read or don't like. And, as a result, too many of our students find themselves caught in what our former Ambassador for Young People's Literature Jon Scieszka has tagged the reading "death spiral." Scieszka explains: "It's where kids aren't reading and then are worse at reading because they aren't reading, and then they read less because it is hard and they get worse, and then they see themselves as non-readers, and it's such a shame" (Washington Post, 2009).

It's not just a shame; it's a disaster. Struggling readers often get caught in a downward spiral from which they never recover. It's no surprise that our prisons are filled with young men who are struggling readers. It's that serious and that devastating.

There *is* a solution. Educators have rallied around Response to Intervention, an initiative that stems from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). At its core, the RTI directive is simple and straightforward: provide struggling readers with intensive early intervention and catch them up to grade level.

It turns out that the best intervention is a good book.

And there's research to prove it. Here's another quote—this one hopeful—from Allington:

> Whenever we design an intervention for struggling readers, the single-most critical factor that will determine the success of the effort is matching struggling readers with texts they can actually read with a high level of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension (2009).

## Easy Access to Good Books

Getting the right books into kids' hands is the key that opens the way to strategic intervention strategies that work, phonics and word skill mastery (Taylor, 2000), and—the ultimate goal— engaged readers (Guthrie, 2001). But we've got to begin with the books.

In *What Really Matters in Response to Intervention* (2009), Dick Allington reports on the striking findings of Guthrie and Humenick (2004): "when classrooms provide students with easy access to a wide range of interesting text, the effects on comprehension and motivation to read were enormous." Easy access to books that students enjoyed reading had a profound impact on both reading comprehension (effect size 1.6) and motivation to read (effect size 1.5). To put this in perspective, an effect size of 1.0 moves achievement from the 16th to the 50th percentile rank. That's hugely significant. Indeed, as Allington notes: "No other features of classroom instruction were as powerful in improving both reading comprehension and motivation."

Allington (2009) also cites Rosalie Fink's (1998, 2006) research, which centers on adult struggling readers and the techniques she uses to help them overcome their reading challenges. She follows a simple yet highly effective instructional plan: her students choose a topic about which they are passionate, and, with teacher assistance, gather lots of reading material related to their chosen topics. They read and work to develop a deep understanding of their topic and, again with teacher help, learn a range of specific reading strategies. The results? They become readers with a "supply of at-a-glance-words" and a strong sense of text structure that enables them to read one book after another about their topic and eventually, of course, about other topics as well. They literally read themselves into reading proficiency.

In a similar vein, Guthrie's CORI (Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction) engages students through conceptual themes, hands-on experiences, self-directed learning, interesting texts, classroom discussion, and time for extended learning (2004). Like Fink, Guthrie and colleagues found that engaged reading, which they define as frequent, focused, and strategic, entailing cognitive, motivational, and social attributes, trumped all other variables including gender, parental education, and income (2001). Indeed, Guthrie states: "Nine-year olds whose family background was characterized by low income and low education, but who were highly engaged readers, substantially outscored students who came from backgrounds with higher education, and higher income, but who themselves were less engaged readers."

Reading engagement is nothing short of miraculous—engaged readers spend 500% more time reading than do their peers who aren't turned on by books—and all those extra hours inside books they love gives them a leg up in everything that leads to a happy, productive life: deep conceptual understanding about a wide range of topics, expanded vocabulary, strategic reading ability, critical literacy skills, and engagement with the world that's more likely to make them dynamic citizens drawn into full civic participation. No wonder Dr. Veda Jairrels, who has both a doctorate in special education and a law degree, urges her African-American peers to fill their homes with books and read to their children. Indeed, she attributes low standardized test scores to a "lack of long-term voluntary reading" (2009, p. vii). She reminds them that Oprah claims reading saved her life when she was a child. There's no reason it can't do the same for other children as well.

But children need books. The question for teachers becomes, then, how many books is enough?

## Book Floods

Kelly Gallagher, a high school English teacher and author of *Readicide* (2009), draws on Warrick Elley's seminal research (1991) and suggests that nothing less than a *classroom book flood* will suffice—not 200 titles but 2,000. Gallagher maintains that "establishing a book flood is probably the single most important thing I have done in my teaching career" (p. 53).

And Gallagher doesn't stop with the book flood in his classroom. He makes sure his students have a book to take home every night. "If students don't have books, they will never develop into readers. If students only read in school, they will never become lifelong readers. In fact, I contend that teachers whose students read only in school ensure that their students will forever remain behind grade level" (p. 46).

## Reading Zones

As you might imagine, teachers like Gallagher, who are passionate about reading and share their passion for books— indeed, who even "bless the books," as Linda Gambrell (1996) recommends—inspire a similar passion in their students. How does one bless a book? Gambrell instructs: hold it up and do a quick book talk—"Don't miss this book because... !" To further hook the kids, Gambrell suggests then reading aloud a few pages of the book. Teachers who celebrate books in this way three to five times a day (as Gambrell recommends) quickly turn their classrooms into vibrant "Reading Zones" (Atwell, 2007) where everyone is deeply engaged in the pleasure of reading. And pleasure, after all, is at the heart of most reading: "to read for pleasure . . . to seek and find delight and enlargement of life in books" (Robinson Davies, l959, cited in Atwell).

It is *teachers* who create Reading Zones for their students. As cited in Allington, Pressley and colleagues (2003) developed a research-based checklist that looked at motivational factors in helping kids learn to read and then used the checklist to compare classrooms—effective classrooms (Reading Zones) that ignite a passion for reading versus ineffective classrooms, in which reading is undermined (unintentionally, of course).

**The classrooms that establish Reading Zones have these features in common:**

- The classroom is filled with books of different levels.
- The teacher introduces new books and displays them in the classroom.
- The teacher engages students in authentic reading and writing tasks.
- The teacher delivers expressive read-alouds.

It's not surprising to learn also that effective teachers are kind, rely on strategic, small-group instruction, and, in general, keeps things sunny and upbeat, always focusing on what students can do, encouraging them through continuous, lively conversations about authors and books, genres and topics.

## The Importance of K–2 Small-Group and Independent Reading

Note that teacher expertise and small-group instruction may be especially critical at the primary level. CIERA (Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement) investigated the practices of accomplished teachers within schools, who were helping strugglers beat the odds and achieve. What they found is a real eye-opener: "Time spent in small-group instruction for reading distinguished the most effective schools from the other schools in the study..." (Taylor, 2000).

### Time Spent in Reading Instruction by School Effectiveness Level

| | Minutes Spent in Small Group | Minutes Spent in Whole Group | Minutes Spent in Independent Reading | Total Minutes in Reading |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Most Effective Schools | 60 | 25 | 28 | 113 |
| Moderately Effective Schools | 26 | 37 | 27 | 90 |
| Least Effective Schools | 38 | 30 | 19 | 87 |

### Grouping Patterns and Teacher Effectiveness

| | Time Spent in Whole-Group Instruction | Time Spent in Small-Group Instruction |
|---|---|---|
| Most Accomplished Teachers | 25 minutes/day | 48 minutes/day |
| Moderately Accomplished Teachers | 29 minutes/day | 39 minutes/day |
| Least Accomplished Teachers | 48 minutes/day | 25 minutes/day |

In sum, effective teachers who demonstrate their own passion for books by sharing their reading lives with their students are the same teachers whose students, even the strugglers, develop a reading habit. And a reading habit isn't incidental to proficient reading; it's essential. As Atwell notes, "curling up every day with a good book consistently correlates with high levels of performance on standardized tests of reading ability" (p. 12). Indeed, it seems to be the only way—in addition to having a kind and caring teacher who provides extra, informed, strategic reading instruction—that striving readers can escape the reading death spiral. As Allington points out, kids currently in special education courses fail to gain a single month of reading growth, and Title I remedial reading programs add only about two months' growth. With numbers like these, strugglers can never hope to catch up to their higher-achieving peers. There simply aren't enough hours in the school day to provide the intensive intervention strugglers need. Clearly, our most potent teaching partners are books. We need to put them to work right away—and in a big way.

## Read, Read, Read

New Zealand researcher Warrick Elley (1991) investigated the reading achievement of 200,000 students in 32 countries and found a strong correlation between time spent reading and reading achievement. That shouldn't surprise us. The best way to get good at anything is to love what you're doing and do it—a lot. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found much the same thing. As stated in Kelly Gallagher's *Readicide* (2009), ". . . students who read for fun almost every day outside of school scored higher on the NAEP assessment of reading achievement than children who read for fun only once or twice a week, who in turn outscored children who read for fun outside of school only once or twice a month, who in turn outscored children who hardly ever read for fun outside of school" (from EdResearch.info; cited in Kelly Gallagher, 2009).

It seems pretty clear that the only way kids can escape the reading death spiral and begin to catch up with their higher-achieving peers is to log lots and lots of hours reading (indeed, far more than they can get through classroom intervention instruction; yes, kids ***must*** read at

home, too). And those who read get better at reading (just as those who cook come to know their way around a kitchen, and those who ski eventually can take on the expert slopes). Anne Cunningham and Keith Stanovich refer to a "positive feedback loop": those who read a lot, learn to read well and read more, "thus setting an upward spiral in motion." Put simply, the "read, read, read" model can be counted on to pull non-reading kids out of their downward slide.

## Your Reading ID

All voracious readers know what they like to read . . . and what they prefer to avoid. It turns out that developing a sense of reading preference is a critical factor in our efforts to help all students, and it's one that's largely been ignored, argue Elfrieda Hiebert and Leigh Ann Martin (2010). In order for students to discover what they like—and dislike—as readers, they need to encounter a wide range of genres and topics, possible only if they're immersed in a daily book flood. Still, left on their own, immersed in a deluge of books, kids might well drown. They need the supportive assistance of an informed teacher who knows them and helps them discover books that are just right for them and will feed all their reading interests and passions (as well as their instructional needs). Who are their favorite authors? Do they get hooked on series books or bored with the same cast of characters? Are they fiends for science fiction, or do they prefer the science investigations showcased in nonfiction? Even students as young as second grade, who work with teachers who share high-quality literature and discuss authors, illustrators, genres, topics, and text features, will then use that knowledge to guide their own reading selections. As Hiebert wrote, "In classrooms without such lessons, students simply pulled books off the shelf and gave few reasons for choices."

## Cognitive Consequences of Reading

The consequences of not reading are dire. In their seminal article, "What Reading Does for the Mind," Keith Stanovich and Anne Cunningham remind us that the bulk of a child's vocabulary develops indirectly, through language exposure, rather than directly, as a consequence of being taught meanings of words. What's more, most researchers agree that the primary difference between individual variations in children's vocabulary has to do with their exposure to text and reading volume. That's because oral language, compared to written, is lexically impoverished. Children encounter much richer language, replete with rare words, in the pages of children's picture books than they do in conversation with their parents or watching television. Rich, vibrant language is readily available in books—but kids who don't read don't access that language. That lack of access, in turn, makes it hard for them to understand texts that are more sophisticated. Lack of understanding then leads to feelings of inadequacy and the downward spiral of reading failure.

Students who read have a profound advantage over students who don't, simply in the sheer exposure they gain to sophisticated words. "The average child at the 90th percentile reads almost two million words per year outside of school—more than 200 times more words than the child at the 10th percentile, who reads just 8,000 words outside of school during a year. To put it another way, the entire year's out-of-school reading for the child at the 10th percentile amounts to just two days of reading for the child at the 90th percentile. These dramatic differences, combined with the lexical richness of print, act to create large vocabulary differences between children" (p. 4).

The advantage readers have over nonreaders doesn't end with vocabulary: growth in verbal skills and in conceptual knowledge of the world is also most readily available through reading and books. Study after study reveals that those who read extensively and intensively

know more about the world—from practical information, such as how a carburetor works, to more esoteric knowledge, such as what happens when the Federal Reserve raises the prime lending rate. Equally important, enthusiastic readers recognize misinformation. Voluminous readers are critical readers and, alas, voluminous television viewers don't develop similar critical analysis skills. Indeed, Cunningham & Stanovich found an opposite effect. Avid readers who log hours and hours in books are quick to spot misinformation. Those who spend equal numbers of hours in front of the tube, on the other hand, are more prone to alarming misconceptions about the world.

## The Solution

Both research and empirical knowledge have led educators to a similar "equation" in response to the problem of nonreaders. Roughly, this can be expressed as "Access to tons of books + books kids love to read + an informed, knowledgeable, kind teacher + time to read = kids' best chance to experience the positive feedback loop and escape the reading death spiral."

Reading saves lives—and history backs that claim. Survey the biographies of exemplary statesmen and world leaders, scientists and physicians, engineers and inventors, writers and artists, entrepreneurs and educators and see the role books have so often played in transforming lives. Books are not incidental to a strong and hopeful life; books are essential.

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