Both educators and policymakers are working to improve achievement and proficiency for struggling readers. In this Spotlight, learn how mix-gender classes may help boys read better, how educators can inspire confidence among struggling readers, and how teachers can foster authentic reading experiences for resistant readers.

First grader Aston Prieto, 6, uses magnetic letters to form words at the Franklin International Language Academy in Glendale, Calif.
Girls often outperform boys in reading, but a new international study suggests having more girls as classmates may give high school boys an achievement boost, too.

Using data from the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment, a benchmarking test of 15-year-olds in 33 countries, researchers led by Margriet van Hek, a sociologist at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, looked at how school characteristics affected boys’ and girls’ reading performance. They found girls scored nearly 30 points higher than boys on a 600-point reading scale, and all students scored better when girls made up at least 60 percent of students in the school.

In the study, published in the *Journal of School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, the researchers analyzed the concentration of poverty, the percentage of teachers with a college degree, and the proportion of girls to boys, in each school. On average across more than 281,000 students in more than 10,000 schools, students had higher reading scores in low-poverty schools and schools where a majority of teachers had a college degree. But van Hek also found that, while students in the lowest-poverty schools had higher reading performance overall than those in the highest-poverty schools, girls’ reading was affected more strongly by a school’s resources, while climate was slightly more associated with boys’ achievement.

“Boys’ poorer reading performance really is a widespread but unfortunately also understudied problem,” van Hek said. “Our study shows that the issue is reinforced when boys attend schools with a predominantly male student population.”

The study, however, did not include boys-only international schools. Leonard Sax, an advocate for single-gender schools and author of *Why Gender Matters*, argued, “this study is more evidence in support of an already-robust empirical finding, namely: If you are going to offer a co-ed classroom, try to have a majority of girls in the classroom.”

‘Distinct Opportunities’

The findings are likely to add to ongoing debate about when and whether boys and girls should learn together, as enrollment in single-gender schools surges nationwide and several of the country’s biggest districts, including Dallas and Washington, experiment with the model.

An Education Week Research Center analysis of federal data found there were 283 single-gender, traditional public schools nationwide, including charter schools, as of the most recent data in 2014-15. That’s a 67 percent jump in the last five years, and the number of students enrolled in those schools has more than doubled in that time. *Education Week* found students in single-gender schools in the United States are more likely to be poor and of black or Hispanic backgrounds—and more girls than boys are enrolled.

Erin Pahlke, an assistant professor of psychology at Whitman College in Washington, was not part of the Netherlands study but said its results didn’t surprise her. Prior research, she said, has suggested boys are more likely to be focused and better behaved in classes where they are outnumbered by girls. “One argument is it changes the classroom behavior, and so impacts the amount of on-task time in the classroom,” Pahlke said. “That’s powerful and important.”

But Bradford Giola, the headmaster of the 775-boy Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville, Tenn., argued a single-gender class can buoy boys’ interest in reading. “I don’t believe boys’ schools, girls’ schools, public or private schools are better by the nature of what they are; I believe culture decides what is a great school. However,
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there are elements of being a boys’ school that can provide distinct differences and opportunities,” said Giola, who also teaches a senior English class at the 7-12 school. He added, “Girls are typically much better readers, but in a boys’ school you can teach a love of reading, you can help them get beyond the stereotypes ... and help the boys understand the interior world of the written world and how it connects to their own interior world.”

Van Hek and her colleagues also compared reading performance in schools whose principals reported high or low levels of student absenteeism, bullying, disrespect of teachers, and other markers of a school’s overall climate. Both boys and girls performed better in reading in schools rated in the best quarter for school climate, versus those with the worst climate—but the benefit for boys was 9 points greater on the PISA scale than the benefit for girls. Yet, a good school climate alone did not account for the difference in boys’ performance, she found.

Pahlke noted that the findings might be less about gender than about high achievement; if girls on average outperform boys in reading, then boys in a class of mostly girls may be surrounded by high-achieving students, changing the tenor of the classroom.

“Part of the answer could be around how we socialize kids in terms of gender stereotypes,” she said. “We should be making sure that boys see models like male teachers and we are consistently giving the message that thinking critically and focusing is something for both boys and girls.”

Research Analyst Alex Harwin conducted the data analysis for this report.

Published April 19, 2017 in Education Week's Curriculum Matters Blog

Students Entering 1st Grade With Better Reading Skills Than Previously, Study Says

By Liana Loewus

Students are coming into 1st grade with stronger reading skills than they used to, according to a 12-year study from the Ohio State University.

Struggling readers in particular have made steep gains on basic reading skills such as letter identification and phonemic awareness. The researchers said the improved achievement could possibly be related to seminal federal reports on reading from the 2000s and a recent push to up the academic rigor of kindergarten.

And while the gains are good news overall, said the researchers, there is one caveat: The gap between low-achieving 1st grade students and their average-achieving peers has widened when it comes to more-advanced reading skills.

“It seems that what occurred was perhaps with the greater emphasis on basic skills in kindergarten, the low group responded and is coming up at a greater clip than the average child,” said Jerome D’Agostino, a professor of educational studies at Ohio State, and a co-author of the study. “But it’s not translating into reading connected text,” or passages of text.

Basic Skill Gains for Low-Achievers

The study used data from more than 360,000 entering 1st grade students who took a pretest for the Reading Recovery program between 2002 and 2013. The sample came from 44 states and is “as close to a nationally representative sample as you can find,” D’Agostino said in an interview.

The researchers found that students in 2013 scored better on all six subtests of reading skills than 1st graders had previously.

Students are “coming in much more prepared to engage with print than they were in 2002,” said Emily Rodgers, an associate professor of teaching and learning at Ohio State, and a study co-author.

The trajectory was positive for both low-achieving students (those who scored in about the bottom 14 percent nationally and were identified as needing interventions) and for their peers in the average range.

Over that time, the low-achieving students made substantial gains in basic reading skills—larger gains than their peers. “The low-achieving group is catching up,” Rodgers said.

But on measures of reading word lists and text passages, low-achieving students made less progress than their peers. “On what we’re calling more advanced measures, ... those achievement gaps are widening,” said D’Agostino. “The rich are getting richer.”
The release of two federal reading reports in the 2000s as well as the recent push to make kindergarten more academically rigorous may have contributed to the overall reading gains, the researchers said. (They emphasized, though, that they could not make causal claims based on their work.)

The landmark 2000 report from the National Reading Panel and the 2008 report from the National Early Literacy Panel emphasized the importance of teaching letter identification, phonemic awareness, and phonics to young students. Those may have had an impact on 1st graders’ skills in those areas.

“It seems reasonable to conclude that reports such as those produced by the NELP and NRP ... led to an increased emphasis on learning important skills in the early grades that are related to reading achievement,” the report says.

And recent efforts to up the academic rigor of kindergarten seem to correspond to the reading gains as well.

“There’s consensus that more and more is expected from younger kids,” said Rodgers. “We have [1st grade] standards that have been pushed down into kindergarten.” As we’ve written, many experts agree that the Common Core State Standards, which most states are using, ask more of kindergarten readers than did previous state standards. (Whether or not that’s a good thing has been debated.)

Do Higher Standards Make Sense?

Rodgers said she was initially interested in conducting this study to see if the higher standards for young students were warranted based on achievement data. Rising standards “do seem justified,” according to the report.

A separate recent study by Daphna Bassok at the University of Virginia found that kindergartners are coming in with stronger academic skills than previously. But that study relied on teachers’ assessments of students’ skills rather than an outside test.

As for the achievement gaps in advanced reading skills, D’Agostino and Rodgers said it’s not clear why those are widening.

“I wouldn’t suggest we stop working on letter identification and phonemic awareness—we need to keep all these things going,” said Rodgers. “But let’s keep an eye on how that’s translating into actually reading text.”

Michigan Bill to Retain Struggling Readers Reignites 3rd Grade Literacy Debate

By Liana Heitin Loewus

Michigan is the latest state to consider a law that would retain some students who aren’t reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade.

The bill has passed the state’s House and Senate and is awaiting signature in the governor’s office. Ari Adler, a spokesman for Gov. Rick Snyder, a Republican, said in an interview that the governor has been supportive of the 3rd grade reading initiative and is reviewing the final piece of legislation. A decision is expected next week.

Research has shown that students who read significantly below grade level in 3rd grade tend to continue to struggle and are more at risk for dropping out of school entirely.

Under the proposed Michigan law, which would go into effect in 2019-20, 3rd graders who scored more than a grade level behind on the state reading test would not be allowed to start 4th grade. There is, as usual with these sorts of bills, some flexibility. Students can continue to 4th grade if they demonstrate proficiency on an alternative standardized reading assessment or through work samples. Students with disabilities, limited English proficiency, and those who had been previously held back could be exempt as well.

A parent or guardian can also request a “good cause” exemption, and a superintendent can designate a teacher...
or someone else to grant one. And students who are deemed proficient in all other subject areas can move onto 4th grade and receive continued support in reading.

The bill also requires districts to take other preliminary steps to improve student reading, including giving teachers professional development, assessing students throughout the year, and providing intervention programs for struggling readers.

Sixteen other states and the District of Columbia have laws requiring 3rd graders be held back if they don’t meet reading proficiency standards.

In light of the Michigan bill, Brian A. Jacob, a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, looked at the effectiveness of such policies on student outcomes. He wrote that, “compared with peers who have progressed normally through early grades, students who repeat a grade during elementary school tend to have notably worse outcomes.” However, he notes that there is selection bias—that students who are held back tend to have other disadvantages as well.

But studies that compare students who fall just above the cutoff for retention with those who fall just below—i.e., students who are ostensibly quite similar in their reading ability—“also do not find significant and lasting benefits” for retention, he wrote. “Several studies find that retention is associated with short-term improvements in standardized test scores, but these seem to fade within several years.” And the studies don’t show any positive (or negative) effects on high school completion, either, he writes.

Only about 45 percent of 3rd graders in Michigan met the reading proficiency standard in 2016. That means that “nearly 60,000 children in the state would have been subject to retention had the policy been in place last year,” Jacob writes. (There were about 111,000 3rd graders in the state’s public schools last school year.)

But it’s worth noting that these retention policies are often much more complicated than they at first seem.

For example, some districts inevitably interpret the requirements and exemptions with more leeway than others. In Florida, some districts are threatening to hold back 3rd grade students whose parents opted them out of state testing, while others are letting those students prove proficiency through alternative means.

Last year, I looked at North Carolina’s literacy law and found that about 14 percent of 3rd graders in the state were considered “retained.” And yet very few of those students actually stayed back in 3rd grade. The law allowed them to receive hybrid 3rd/4th instruction or take a 4th grade class with remediation.

The Michigan bill doesn’t have those same allowances, but it does have plenty of exemptions. So how many students would really be retained if the governor signs the bill into law very much remains to be seen.

**COMMENTARY**

*Published September 14, 2017 in Education Week’s Teacher for the Whole Story Blog*

### Why Short Stories May Not Help Struggling Readers

By Ariel Sacks

We begin walking with a few steps, not a mountain climb. So, it seems logical that teachers of reading should start with shorter texts before longer texts, right? Perhaps. Small children start with picture books, move to short chapter books, and eventually read longer books without illustrations. Length is certainly an important factor in this progression. However, I want to issue a caution about the “short story” as a literary form. I just don’t believe it fits in to that progression as simply as we might expect or hope. For teachers looking to build students’ confidence and love of reading, especially in the case of reluctant and struggling readers, short stories may not be a great place to start.

Before I explain why, I want to acknowledge some of the reasons I see

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English Language Arts teachers relying heavily on short stories.

1. The short story is convenient. Students can read it quickly; teachers can read it aloud and finish in a reasonable amount of time—and it’s just so easy (and cost-effective) to photocopy for a whole class!

2. The short story seems to offer a lot of “bang for the buck.” There’s so much that can be done in the classroom with a well-written, creative short story. They seem to be almost made for us to dissect and interpret... salivating material for English teachers. I get it. But this very strength of short stories also brings me to the caution I want to articulate.

Contrary to what its length suggests, the way that meaning is communicated in a short story is generally MORE complex and abstract than in other narrative forms, including the much longer novel. In order to grasp the meaning of most short stories, we must analyze and dissect them. Short stories offer a truncated story experience, not a complete one. They tend to be very limited in character development, and plot lines are symbolic, not literal, and/or they are self-conscious twists on traditional plot lines, playing with the reader’s expectations.

When we read short stories, we complete the experience through our analy-
sis. For more mature readers, who have plenty of experience with more traditionally structured stories, this can be a fascinating and enjoyable challenge. But for readers who struggle to “get into a story” through reading, it can be an uncomfortable, confusing jump.

The first stages in becoming a reader, alongside breaking the code to be able to decipher words on a page, are (1) following basic—even predictable—plot lines, and (2) identifying with characters. These two elements work together to compel beginning readers.

When we identify with a character, we experience their story as an extension of our own life experience. (Neuroscientists have found that these virtual experiences are stored in our brains in the same way that real life memories are!) This is one of the huge draws for young people to read and hear stories. Take that away, and you immediately alienate some readers who need to spend time identifying with characters in order to feel reading is a rewarding activity.

Experience with traditional plot lines is also an essential building block to our understanding of “how stories go”—a form of background knowledge that readers can bring to literary texts. The more we know classic storyline, the more easily we can process new stories we encounter. Many short stories are experimental or abstract at the level of plot, so plenty of prior experience with variations on basic plot structures helps readers make sense of the condensed, thought-provoking methods through which writers of short stories often weave their commentaries. Without this background, struggling readers may feel lost and frustrated with a story that doesn’t, on the face of it, offer a fulfilling storyline.

Most novels, on the other hand, offer opportunities to identify with characters and follow along with a literal plot line, AS WELL AS analyze the author’s unique craft choices, use of symbolism, and conscious twists on our expectations. Less mature readers get a lot from the surface elements of the story, and can gradually dip further into the layers of the work as they gain experience and confidence. Short stories, though short, often don’t offer much for inexperienced readers to access on their own; teachers can easily compensate by over-teaching the story, and setting students up to depend on them for interpretation.

With supports, of course, all students can appreciate a great short story—and learn how to approach them independently as well. My point is NOT to reserve short stories for only advanced readers. I do want teachers to think carefully about where in the curriculum and for what purpose they introduce short stories to students. If the rationale is that their short length will make them more accessible to a range of readers and thereby build reading engagement and confidence, in most cases, I think that’s an illusion.

COMMENTARY

Published January 17, 2017 in Education Week’s Teaching for the Whole Story Blog

Understanding Students With Broken Relationships to Reading

By Ariel Sacks

One factor in our students’ reading abilities that often gets glossed over is their past experience with reading—those experiences that drew them toward reading and those that have repelled them. Teachers know that our work with readers depends as much on their reading attitudes as their reading skills, and that these two pieces are intertwined.

I think of my own daughter, who is not yet two. Each night I read to her before bed, in an enjoyable and loving ritual that many young children experience. I get to see her relationship with books, words and stories develop right before my eyes.

Although I’m aware of the body of research that shows the importance of early literacy experiences, I truly didn’t realize how much the simple act of reading together would draw my daughter to books. She “reads” them herself at other times, turning pages, naming items in pictures and speaking a combination of words and babble. I’ve never directed her to do this, but books are a part of her world and her repertoire of things to explore, and babies and toddlers explore what’s around them. Also, books have a positive connotation for her. Through her experiences, she’s connected reading with love. Take away this association, and she might not be especially drawn to books.

We influence our children so much through the activities we do with them with love. My husband has a lot of music recording equipment in the house. Our daughter explores instruments, buttons and cables alongside him while he works, and she’s learned to associate these items
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with love, too. I had friends growing up who, unlike me, played basketball with a parent every evening. They loved basketball and were so much better at it than I was when we played in school. Even though I was coordinated enough and willing to learn, I just did not have much experience. I remember that it was kind of embarrassing not to be able to play well, and I never really got past that feeling.

Many of our struggling readers did not grow up with a consistent reading ritual at home; instead, they were exposed to books mostly in school. What was that context like for them? Was it an enjoyable, affirming first experience? Or was it embarrassing, like me with basketball? Was the focus on their deficits or their interests? Were they able to connect to the enjoyable experience of a good story?

It would be easy to place blame on families who don’t develop their children’s reading— but I see no reason that school-age children are too old to be introduced to reading for the first time. However, the quality of that introduction and the ensuing reading relationship will be “make or break,” so to speak. I mean, I don’t think anyone wants to stare at a bunch of symbols on paper unless they associate this with some kind of pleasurable experience that is answering their needs, the way reading with a parent is for very young children. The responsibility is on us to be guides AND participants in developing our students’ positive experiences of reading, no matter the age.

I’m concerned with the trend in public schools today, NYC included, of rushing students to read. Those who enter kindergarten without letter recognition are labelled “behind,” and children must now read before first grade or be considered “at risk.”

What happens to a child who has had little experience reading before September of kindergarten, and is suddenly judged a failure? How does he or she experience reading in that scenario? Is she invited, gradually, into one of the most exciting and powerful tools of her life—or is she isolated and repelled by experiences that she can’t connect to? I’m sure practices vary widely across classrooms and schools; but I also know, that by middle school, many students have floundered as readers despite years of reading interventions.

I just wonder, what would happen if we gave students who are “behind” in their reading—and even older struggling readers—a solid year of organic exploration of reading with a caring adult, without being rushed toward objectives or forced to practice particular strategies? One example of such a thing, from veteran Oklahoma teacher, Claudia Swisher, is an elective course called Reading 4 Pleasure for high school students. In my own classroom, I alternate between giving students choice in their reading and student-driven whole novel studies. Also, teacher-author Pernille Ripp shares many wonderful resources on “shaping reader identity.”

Too many children are moving through the grades with broken relationships to reading. I don’t think there’s just one way to change this, but I know we would draw many more students toward books if our main goal was to help them have lots of positive experiences with reading. I think the rest follows much more easily from there.

COMMENTARY

Published April 13, 2016 in Education Week Teacher

The Importance of Real Reading For Resistant Readers

By Meaghan Hanrahan Dobson

For students who don’t read widely and regularly, current high-stakes reading tests may lead to failure and frustration. Failing these tests often lands students in intensive remediation classes, where schools offer endless practice in test-taking but few opportunities to engage in meaningful, self-directed reading. While we may ultimately teach students enough test-taking strategies to eke out a passing score and earn that high school diploma, we are missing a crucial opportunity to show our students that they, too, can be real readers.

I recently attended a workshop for high school teachers who, like me, teach students who have failed state-mandated English tests. Vocabulary is a huge weakness for these students, and my colleagues and I earnestly discussed ways of incorporating context clues, roots, and affixes into our instruction.

But let’s not forget self-selected reading. I suggested, as there are only so many words or strategies we can teach our students in the limited time we have. Of course the strategies are valuable, but real reading, which gives students much broader exposure to words than our selected texts and exercises ever can, should be a part of the equation.

The response: Some shrugs and rolls of the eyes. A few teachers were honest enough to give voice to their thoughts: These kids? They won’t read. Good luck.

Faced with kids who don’t or won’t read, we decide instead to teach strategies—many of them very good ones—but not to insist that these students also deserve rich reading experiences. We do this with the best of intentions: for students on the brink of dropping out, it seems a waste of precious instructional time to devote some of it to reading—and then to struggle to get students actually to read.

I know the frustrations: the hidden or not-so-hidden cell phone, the head down on the desk, the turning of pages without actually reading. I face these frustrations in my classroom in the alternative high school where I teach. Many of my students have completed all the required academic credits for graduation and are in my class simply because they have been unable to pass state tests in reading and writing.

Self-Selected Texts

Despite these challenges, I remind myself that my students need more meaningful reading experiences, not fewer. And so I still ask my students to
read self-selected texts every day in my classroom. I know that by developing the habit of reading, my students will build their vocabularies, encounter a variety of sentence structures, and experience reading as a process of making meaning, not just the chore that comes before answering multiple choice questions.

And here are a few things that have happened: A student who has taken our state reading test five times already, and who never fails to come to class with headphones on and his phone at the ready, has read three complete novels in the first semester of school. After completing two novels from the always popular Bluford series, he moved on to a more challenging text, The Blind Side, and finished it within a few weeks.

Another student is so resistant to reading that he announced at the beginning of the year, “Ms. D, I don’t read books.” This student, however, has a deep interest in current events. After trying unsuccessfully to interest him in various biographies, I reminded myself that the goal is real reading; books aren’t the only option. With a daily newspaper in our classroom, he now willingly puts his phone away and buries himself in the day’s events.

These students still need plenty of support to become strategic readers, but I know that I haven’t denied them the significant experience enjoyed by their more academically successful peers—that of engaged, authentic reading.

If, like me, you’re not ready to give up on helping struggling or even resistant students become readers, here are a few suggestions:

1. **Require only one thing: reading material that appeals.**

   My only requirement is that students like what they read. No expectations for length, superior authorship, lexile level, or having never read the book before. Students are often surprised when, at the beginning of the course, I announce that I want them to choose a short book, one that they can finish in just a few weeks of reading in my class. Graphic novel? Sure. Verse? Give it a try. Magazine or newspaper? We can start small and build stamina as we go.

   Many of my students (and for many, this is their fourth or fifth year in high school) report that they have not read a book since middle school. My goal for these students is that they experience reading a text—any text at all—from start to finish, just because it holds their attention, and not because they will have to take a test on it.

2. **Let them change their minds.**

   Students will start books that they don’t like. I give them permission to stop. As a reader myself, that’s what I do. I don’t require students reach a certain goal or complete a project. Instead, I work with them, and, with the help of our incredibly well-read school media specialist, we find a book that works.

3. **Read in class every day.**

   For kids who don’t read at all, even ten minutes a day helps to form a new habit. Short books with short chapters suit this purpose well, but if students want to read a longer text, they can read to the end of a paragraph or page when time is up. That way, students can carry a finished thought with them before the next day’s reading.

   Offering opportunities for real reading matters because none of us would ever say, “My students don’t like to write, so I’m just not going to ask them to do it anymore.” Or, “It’s so frustrating to get my students to use punctuation; I just won’t bother teaching it.” However, we get so worried about tests that it seems reasonable to us to say, “My students aren’t readers, so I’m not going to ask them to read.”

### Fostering Authentic Reading

Let’s use every reading strategy at our disposal, scaffolding learning opportunities for our under-prepared students. But let’s not forget that we all became good readers by finding texts we wanted to read and reading them for our own purposes. We can’t lose sight of the most important thing that readers do: read with the expectation that they will learn or enjoy something. It’s a false choice to say we don’t have time to encourage real reading because we have to teach strategies for passing tests. We can and should do both.

While passing a standardized test is an important short-term goal for our students, fostering true literacy is the larger vision. Real reading gives resistant students the experience they need to become more accomplished readers with better odds for success on high stakes tests. More importantly, maybe, just maybe, once they pass that last standardized test, they will see themselves in a new way: not just as high school graduates, but as readers.
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