

Reading, Writing, and Misbehavior

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When students can't keep up in the classroom, they often misbehave, disrupting everyone's learning.

Students who chronically misbehave and struggle with academic success often are frustrated in their classes and act inappropriately to get attention from their peers or to have the last word with the teacher. One student put it this way: "If I thought the teacher was going to call on me to read, I'd put my head down like I was sick or punch someone so she would put me out [of the classroom]."

After observing a number of classrooms in low performing schools, we ascertained that struggling students often are adept at "playing school": they walk to class, get out their materials, try to copy from the board, and act like they are doing seatwork. Some are so compliant they don't draw attention to themselves and continue to progress from one grade to the other without incident. Others act out their frustration and gain notoriety for being disrespectful, difficult in class, and poor students in general. This last group of students, the ones who need more class time to catch up on reading and writing skills, are the same ones who force principals to take action to enforce the message that they expect respectful, appropriate behavior, causing the students to miss valuable class time.

This cycle of failure grows: as students experience more difficulty and frustration with texts, they attempt to read less, and the gap between the good readers and writers and the reluctant ones increases. Frequently, students who are struggling readers begin to be absent from school more and more, choosing to avoid being frustrated or embarrassed in front of their peers. Meanwhile, school administrators exhaust discipline options and, unwittingly, exacerbate the academic problem with school suspensions. Intervening in this cycle of failure is vital.

The connection among reading, writing, and misbehavior became apparent to us in Orange County (FL) Public Schools when Robert Williams, deputy superintendent, decided to look for a new discipline approach to students who had been suspended 30 days or more in the school year. Rosemarye Taylor, senior director of secondary education, was charged with

finding a solution. As the files of nearly 140 middle level students with 30 or more suspensions were examined for clues to help explain why the students chronically misbehaved, one similarity emerged—the students had reading comprehension scores below the 25th percentile on the Stanford 9 Achievement Test.

This discovery led to a proposal to research and develop a reading and writing classroom for the students instead of designing another discipline strategy. Ted Hasselbring from Vanderbilt University worked with Orange County administrators to provide research-based literacy software. This collaboration ultimately led to the Orange County Literacy Program.

From our experiences addressing the multifaceted problem of older, reluctant readers and writers, we learned that intervening with a comprehensive balanced literacy program that includes well-designed technological support allows students to see themselves as learners. Once they experience success with reading and writing, they recognize a relationship between effort and success in school, have less frustration, and exhibit less classroom misbehavior. Data about students in related experiences across the United States and beyond support our hypothesis that with appropriate instruction, reading, writing, and success in content classes will improve, as will attendance, self-esteem, and classroom behavior.

Comprehensive Balanced Literacy

Students who reach middle school and cannot or choose not to read should have a learning experience that is based on the most recent research about how students learn to read and write and that is sensitive to their unique developmental needs. To receive individual attention, they may need smaller class sizes than their peers who are successful independent learners. Smaller classes can provide the daily support, encouragement, and correction that struggling students need to develop literacy behaviors. Some teachers may be skillful enough to provide comprehensive balanced literacy in the context of a large heterogeneously grouped class. These concepts are good for all students, but are

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absolutely necessary for the reluctant reader and writer who misbehaves in middle level and high schools.

Modeling the strategies of good readers and writers is a major component of a comprehensive, balanced literacy program. Modeling is a powerful way to teach struggling students that the printed page carries an interesting message. It also shows them how good readers and writers observe and reflect upon their own strategies. Reading poetry, narrative, and informational text aloud are forms of modeling that work well with adolescents, as does thinking aloud. Shared reading, in which the teacher reads and the students follow along in the text or with a peer, also works well. Many students enjoy audio books that are on their grade level and allow them to read required or age-appropriate text independently. Besides showing students the strategies of good readers and writers, such modeling gives less skilled students access to appropriate grade level standards-based content knowledge, concepts, and skills that they will not be able to access otherwise.

Practicing is required to develop and hone skills in anything—basketball or reading or writing. To close the achievement gap, students need to practice reading and writing daily. Being held accountable for independent reading is an essential component of developing fluency in the poorer readers. Adolescents are striving for independence and need choice about their independent reading materials, with respectful guidance from a caring teacher. In contrast to reading aloud, shared reading, and audio books that may be on or above grade level, independent reading materials should be respectful of students' ages, be interesting to students, and be at their independent reading level.

Writing on a daily basis to express what they have read, heard, or observed in class is necessary to developing writing skills. Students also need explicit instruction in grammar, spelling, and the process and mechanics of writing in the context of the fiction or informational texts being read and studied. Shared writing and guided writing with either the whole class, small groups, or individuals will develop the writing proficiencies of these students. Students should be taught how to use writing rubrics to self-assess and peer assess.

Objective Feedback With Technology

It stands to reason that after six or seven years of schooling and a variety of teachers, struggling readers and writers have many different gaps in their literacy behaviors. As much as teachers want to meet the individual needs of each struggling student, it is often difficult to do so. As the students grow up, their need for peer approval is heightened and their sensitivity to criticism often negatively influences person-to-person interactions. They may respond inappropriately to mask embarrassment no matter how carefully instruction is handled.

In contrast, students respond less emotionally to the objectivity of software. Students become highly engaged when working with appropriate software that adapts to their unique learning needs. In addition to intensive, personal instruction that results in improved literacy behaviors—decoding, spelling, pronunciation, and comprehension—feeling better about one's self as a learner also reduces incidences of student misbehavior. Unlike the response many students have when teachers give them feedback, students are likely to accept and apply the immediate corrective feedback given by software in a respectful and private manner.

We have found that by using very smart software that constantly adjusts for the progress of each individual student in the context of a comprehensive balanced literacy classroom, teachers can accelerate the acquisition of literacy behaviors. Smart software does the following:

- Pre-assesses reading comprehension and spelling for each student
- Instructs each student personally on the basis of specific comprehension and spelling needs, constantly adjusting for growth or lack of improvement
- Provides mental models through video or graphics to activate prior knowledge and to provide basic information prior to introduction of print
- Respects ages, interests, and cultures of the students
- Introduces small chunks of new information, no more than five to seven words at a time
- Recycles learned words, phrases, and concepts intermittently to move them to long-term memory
- Provides corrective feedback to students so they don't practice incorrect spellings or understanding.

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Improving Behavior With Reading and Writing

A three-year implementation study of comprehensive balanced literacy in 12 middle level schools in Orange County Public Schools found that students improved significantly in reading comprehension, school-related self-esteem, and classroom behavior. Students grew from 2.6 to 3.6 grade level equivalents on the Stanford 9 Achievement Test in reading comprehension. Significant improvement was found in self-esteem as measured by the Culture Free Self-Esteem Inventory. On the basis of anecdotal records from teachers and administrators, we see that classroom behavior improved. Attendance improved for most students, although a few students committed serious offenses while not in class and were suspended.

Similar results are heard from implementation of the concepts in many middle level and high schools across the United States. Dan Reynolds, dean of Highland Middle School in Louisville, KY, shares this story: "Angela was in my office weekly during the first semester of middle school, but as the year progressed and she learned to read, I saw her less and less. By the end of sixth grade I rarely saw Angela in the office."

Her teacher, Ms. Neely, says of Angela, "When Angela came to me as a sixth grader, she was not only a nonreader, but a major behavior problem. She has improved in reading and behavior!" With improvements like these, the concept of comprehensive balanced literacy supported by technology spread from middle level to high schools and to elementary schools.

Older, reluctant students who are introduced to comprehensive, balanced literacy with supportive technology are sometimes initially resistant. The way they play school has been learned, and for them, it is how they know school. Teachers who are willing to take the risk of teaching differently with new materials and supporting students' risk-taking behaviors will find more success in achieving standards with more students than they thought possible.

Reading, writing, and misbehavior are inextricably intertwined, particularly in middle level and high schools. The cycle of failure is heightened by adolescents' need for independence, self-esteem, and peer approval. Comprehensive, balanced literacy efforts and smart software can help teachers reach every learner.

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