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# Using Quality Literature with "At-Risk" Secondary School Students

**Leslie McClain-Ruelle**  
**Richard Telfer**

*Why should students who are less able or motivated have to 'earn' the right to engage in interesting work?*

*Grant Wiggins, 10 'Radical' Suggestions for School Reform*

This comment by Wiggins (1988) goes to the heart of the issue of working with at-risk secondary school students. Too often, at-risk students are required to work their way through to interesting, worthwhile work, a situation that only exacerbates the problems of the at-risk students. Wiggins goes on to suggest a general solution to the problem that he has identified. "The establishment of firmer 'scaffolding' would help less able students. Rather than ignore their needs, we should respond to them by simplifying work that is interesting but challenging. Shakespeare can be read profitably by anyone if the right kind of support is provided" (p. 20).

This article has two purposes: to present a rationale for using quality literature with at-risk students and to present effective strategies with which to do so. Instruction for at-risk students is often inappropriate for two major reasons. First, at-risk students are often mistakenly assumed to be students with low abilities and low levels of experience. Second, the educational goals for at-risk students are often inappropriately low.

At-risk students have been identified in several ways, often by listing factors associated with at-risk students. Druian (1986) and Green (1987) each listed characteristics associated with at-risk students.

These characteristics include:

- coming from single parent homes
- coming from families with low socioeconomic status
- exhibiting behavior and discipline problems
- receiving low grades
- displaying poor command of basic skills
- being one or more grade levels behind their classmates in achievement
- experiencing low self-esteem, boredom, alienation

Moreover, within the population of at-risk students, there is a disproportionate representation of Black, Hispanic, and Native-American students. Although these factors do not necessarily cause failure, they are associated with failure.

State agencies have also created definitions of the at-risk students. Children at risk have been defined as “dropouts and other students whose school achievement, progress toward graduation, or preparation for employment is in serious jeopardy. These children are usually one or more years behind their age or grade level in basic reading and mathematic skills. At-risk students in grades 9-12 are typically three or more credits behind their grade level in credits for graduation. Children at risk may also be chronic truants, school-aged parents, or adjudicated delinquents. In addition, alcohol or drug abuse, family trauma, and physical, sexual or emotional abuse may be present. Children at risk may also be ethnically, economically or culturally disadvantaged” (Wisconsin Department of Instruction, 1986, ix).

While these characteristics suggest students of diverse backgrounds, they also suggest students with strong experiential backgrounds. Educators have often overlooked these experiences, without using them to the students' advantage. Rather than activating backgrounds to enhance understanding of quality materials, materials have been simplified and backgrounds have been ignored.

Simplified materials fail to take advantage of at-risk students' relevant backgrounds, since they are often designed with the assumption that these students have no prior experience which is relevant to an understanding of literature. The educational goals which accompany these materials are consequently set too low. In the resulting mismatch, students' turned-off attitudes may be reinforced.

In addition, use of simplified materials alone may be detrimental because of the characteristics of the resulting materials. Materials are typically simplified by reducing the complexity of the vocabulary and the sentence structure or by deleting whole sections of the text. Either method may result in simplified materials that are devoid of substance and interest. The following excerpts from versions of *A Tale of Two Cities* illustrate important differences between original and adapted versions. The first example is from the original.

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way — in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.*

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859

The next example is from an adapted version:

*On a Friday night late in November 1775, the stagecoach that carried passengers and mail from London to Dover was toiling slowly up Shooter's Hill, just outside of London. The hill was steep and the road was muddy, and even though the three passengers had alighted from the coach to lessen its load, the horses had several times stopped as if refusing to go farther. A steaming mist, cold and clammy, shut out from the coach lamps everything but a few yards of road.*

Dickens, adapted by M. D. Holmes, 1978

The original and adapted versions differ in use of language and choice of content. The adapted version eliminates an important passage and instead treats *A Tale of Two Cities* as if it were simply an adventure story.

As a result of adaptation, materials may be especially inappropriate for at-risk students who already have a weakened interest in school-related activities. Rather than simplifying materials for at-risk students, educators' efforts should be spent in helping these students relate their individual experiences to more substantial materials.

At-risk students' disenchantment with simplified content and their strong experiential backgrounds suggest a need for an alternate approach to instruction which encourages the use of quality literature in conjunction with a scaffolding of learning strategies. With such an approach students use what they already know and are helped to bridge the gap for work with rich, meaningful, quality material.

## **Quality Literature**

Adler and VanDoren (1972) help to define quality literature when they repeat Francis Bacon's comment, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." Quality literature is that which is

meant to be chewed and digested. From this perspective, Adler and Van Doren identify two possible goals of reading: reading for instruction and reading for understanding. Quality literature is crucial to the second of these goals, reading for understanding. The authors suggest that in reading for understanding, "The mind passes from understanding less to understanding more" (p. 8). They further suggest that in order to accomplish reading for understanding, readers need to use material that requires that type of reading. Quality literature serves this function; it deserves and demands the kind of reading that leads to "understanding more."

While Adler and Van Doren's description is helpful in considering appropriate materials and goals for the at-risk students, Early (1960) reminds educators of the need for teacher intervention. Intervention can help move the students toward accomplishing such goals. According to Early, students move from a stage of self-conscious appreciation into a stage of conscious delight when learning to appreciate quality literature.

At a self-conscious appreciation stage the reader lives vicariously through books. This stage usually corresponds with the egocentric adolescence and the search for self. Self-conscious appreciation is a necessary prerequisite to the next stage, conscious delight which includes aesthetic appreciation. Thus, at-risk students as readers in the self-conscious appreciation stage must be encouraged to read materials which are relevant to their immediate lives. Then, with teacher guidance, students may be nurtured through a transition into reading quality materials for aesthetic appreciation and understanding. Quality literature will be useful in both stages, provided students are given support in their use of these materials. Specifically, at-risk students can benefit

from learning strategies which help them bridge the gaps between their reading proficiency and the demands of the materials and which help them build upon their own rich experiences.

## Strategies

As readers, specifically at-risk students, move to higher levels and stages of reading, teacher intervention is valuable. At-risk students should be allowed to encounter quality literature while the teacher is bridging the gap with the appropriate scaffolding. Learning strategies used to support at-risk students in reading should be selected with a consideration of those students' unique characteristics. Specifically, the strategies should fit the following criteria:

- Students must be *active participants*. By having the students participate actively, the students' disenchantment with school is directly countered.
- Strategies must help students *overcome gaps* between reading ability and difficulty of materials. While these students may be capable, their reading skills may be weak, with the result that they are likely to be incapable of reading the quality literature without help.
- Strategies must *give control* to students. By giving students a measure of control over their learning, disenchantment, and alienation from school-related activities, can be overcome.

Using these three criteria, two teaching techniques -- LINK and the anticipation guide -- can be recommended as suitable for teaching at-risk students. The success of these strategies results from their effectiveness in bridging gaps between

students' experiential background and the content of the text, and between students' reading ability and the difficulty of the text. In addition, both strategies involve students actively in the reading process.

- **The LINK strategy**

LINK is a prereading strategy based on brainstorming that serves to activate students' backgrounds (Estes and Vaughan, 1986). The four initials in the strategy stand for the four steps, List, Inquire, Note, and Know. First, the teacher selects a term and displays it using an overhead projector. Then students list associations on paper, usually for two or three minutes. Next, responses are solicited from each student and listed. All responses are written on the overhead without being evaluated. Once all responses have been recorded, students inquire about the terms on the screen. That is, they ask each other why they put certain items on the board. Although the teacher may participate in the discussion, the focus is on students asking and answering questions about unfamiliar terms and unfamiliar relationships. Once the discussion has ended, the overhead projector is turned off. Students turn their papers over and note what they learned by listing everything they remember. Finally, students are encouraged to recognize what they now know based on their past experiences and the class discussion.

LINK is a particularly effective strategy in working with at-risk students. The following two examples may help illustrate the success of the strategy. The first example involves the use of LINK as an introductory activity before reading an article in the school newspaper. The class consisted of E.D. (emotionally disturbed) students in an alternative school. The teacher's goal was to enable the students to work together. In order to do this, he selected an article written by a high school



senior entitled "From a Student's Notebook" in the style of Dostoyevski's *Notes from Underground*. The article focused on whether the author had identity and on how he related to school. Before distributing the article, the teacher put the word *school* on the chalkboard and asked students to contribute other words that they associated with this word. Initially students responded with a series of negative comments and reactions (e.g., "school sucks"). After the initial rush of negatives, however, students started looking seriously at reactions to the word and the idea of school. After finishing the introductory LINK activity, the teacher distributed the article and conducted a discussion about what it meant to be a student. The students decided that the article showed understanding of what it meant to be a student and the author must indeed have identity because he was able to question so effectively whether he had identity. Following the discussion one of the students in the class requested a copy of *Notes from Underground* and read that as well as other related works.

The power of this approach is best shown by contrasting the reaction described above with the reaction of a different class. In a second class, the same student-written article was used. However, no prereading preparation was provided. The students simply read the article. There the response was quite different (e.g., "What geek wrote this?"). The students were not helped to connect intellectually or emotionally with the article; therefore they did not.

A second example applies LINK to *Romeo and Juliet*. The procedure focused on the word *feud*. Students listed related words and phrases: *argument, hate, long-term, dispute, get-even, Hatfields and McCoys, Contras, gangs, blood*. In the inquiry step, students asked other students why they included

various words. For example, "why was *blood* listed?" Another student asked why *Hatfields and McCoys* was listed. After the explanation students again listed associations with *feud*. These lists were both more extensive and more clearly organized. The teacher then related the discussion to *Romeo and Juliet*, pointing out the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues. The main effect of the LINK strategy in both examples was to help bridge the gap between students' experiences and the quality literature.

### • The Anticipation Guide strategy

A second strategy, the anticipation guide, is also appropriate for at-risk students. An anticipation guide is "a series of statements to which students must respond individually before reading the text" (Vacca and Vacca, 1986). Anticipation guides can be of two basic types. The first type, the cognitive anticipation guide, stresses what readers know or think they know. The second type, the affective anticipation guide, stresses how the readers feel about a topic related to the reading selection.

Both types of guides can be effective with quality literature and at-risk students; the affective guides are particularly suitable. An affective guide used with *Romeo and Juliet* included the following statements:

1. Someone can be in love with one person and then suddenly be sincerely in love with someone else.
2. A person should allow a deep love to develop for someone from a family or a group that is a mortal enemy of his or her own family.
3. It is okay for someone to "tempt fate" in this way (#2).
4. "Love at first sight" is bound to be superficial.
5. "Love at first sight" can be the real thing.
6. A person must be a certain age before feeling true love.

7. A young girl should have the right to marry someone she loves regardless of whether or not her parents approve.
8. A young boy should have the right to marry someone he loves regardless of whether or not his parents approve.
9. It should not make a difference whether such questions are asked about a boy or girl.
10. It should make a difference whether such questions are asked about a girl or boy.

Students responded by agreeing or disagreeing with each of the statements. The use of this anticipation guide brought out students' feelings towards themes addressed in *Romeo and Juliet*. Rather than seeing *Romeo and Juliet* as an old story written in difficult language, students saw that it addressed their real concerns.

A cognitive guide over *Romeo and Juliet* emphasizes specific knowledge related to the story. A guide was used with the balcony scene in which readers were asked to predict things to which Juliet would be compared. For example "Was Juliet compared with a glove?...the stars?...the moon?" Students made predictions and then read the scene to confirm or disprove their predictions.

Overall the anticipation guide works well in assisting at-risk students in appreciation of quality literature because it allows the students to interact with the concepts they will encounter in the readings. It allows them to bring personal values, emotions, and judgments to the reading.

## Conclusion

These two strategies are among many that help at-risk students move toward aesthetic appreciation and understanding of quality literature. These strategies draw upon rich

experiential backgrounds of at-risk students, encourage them to become more actively involved prior to the reading, and provide a sense of control. As Wiggins indicated, "Shakespeare can be read profitably by anyone if the right kind of support is provided" (1988, p. 20). The use of quality literature, in conjunction with appropriate support strategies, can serve as a source of motivation and interest for at-risk students. Led by a teacher equipped with appropriate support strategies and heightened educational goals, these students may experience a renewed sense of satisfaction and an increased feeling of confidence. When they perceive themselves as capable they may be motivated to approach quality material and struggle with it until it becomes their own.

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