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We Become Better Readers by ... READING!

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How do you teach and encourage students with special needs to read? Generally, they are not excited to learn, they have not had great reading successes, and their confidence level in learning at all, is low. It is not that teachers before them have not tried to teach reading skills; but years of discouragement and stagnation have culminated in frustration. My new students knocked on my door every fall semester, and I, though enthusiastic, was unprepared.

As a secondary special education teacher working primarily with students with learning disabilities, I wasn't really trained to teach students how to read. My education covered the different disabilities and how to evaluate students' needs. I studied psychology and learned how to write appropriate plans for students, but information addressing developing reading skills was absent. I assumed that most of my high school students had the ability to read by the time they reached my classroom. What I learned was that they had general decoding skills, but they couldn't READ. There was no comprehension. They didn't realize that reading could be fun and informational. These students were not readers; they were decoders.

As a graduate school student, I finally started making the connection between decoding and reading, but my first task was to

try to understand students with learning disabilities. Herbert Kohl's book, *"I won't learn from you" And Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment* lead to my understanding of "Not-Learning." "Not-Learning" is the tendency students have to shut down or cause a distraction so they won't be required to participate in a lesson. Investigating the reason behind this behavior of a student refusing to read, a frustrated teacher might attribute this behavior to laziness, orneriness, or lack of will to succeed. Teachers need to change not only the behavior, but the attitude, and encourage a desire to learn within the student. This encouragement may mean helping students to overcome fears and disappointments of the past in order to prepare them for their learning tasks ahead.

As teachers of reading, have we truly thought of the students who don't want to show their inadequacies? Have we thought that a student who has faced failure, only to be chastised, just isn't ready for the fight any longer? We must change the old philosophy that continues pushing this student into either sinking or swimming. We must remember one simple concept: Students need to succeed!

Theoretical Framework

In restructuring the approach to the reading classroom for students with learning

disabilities, I decided to offer an environment where students could confront their reading and learning fears, purge old failures, and find a new success in reading. Although I am not the first to pen these themes for learning, I suggest two theories for such a reading classroom. First, We become better readers by ... **READING!**, and second, To write is to read.

We become better readers by ... **READING!**

In the first few weeks of the class, I was direct with students about how much they would be reading. I required a book to be read on students' time every quarter in addition to the reading that was a part of my curriculum. I acknowledge that this is not a new concept to reading teachers, but holding my students and their families accountable for this task certainly was. However, our book reports would be celebrations of literature, not boring tasks that take the fun out of reading. Assignments, such as "Book in a Bag" or "Host a Talk Show" as described later, would replace the standard written report.

The second activity required each student to take a parent or guardian to the public library. Together, they completed a scavenger hunt to locate the fiction and non-fiction sections, the computers, the magazines, the books on tape, et cetera. At this time, the student also interviewed their parents about their own reading successes. This activity opened up communication between my students and their families and set the tone for the rest of the year.

And third, to emphasize our class goal, on every handout, note and assignment, our mantra was written: "We become better readers by...**READING!**"

To Write is to Read

To help students make the connection between reading and writing, I used lesson plans to get the brain thinking creatively. For students with learning disabilities, establishing the connection between information in the mind and producing that information by the

hand through writing often seems to be stalled or interrupted. When students write creatively and for fun, this process of writing down on paper what they are thinking becomes easier with time. I had students who continued to struggle tell me their thoughts orally before writing them on paper, thus encouraging the connection between mind and hand.

In the box below are some of the writing assignments that helped my students stimulate their brain and encourage an interest in writing.

Three Unrelated Subjects

Write three random objects on the board such as The Tooth fairy, pumpkin and motorcycle. Have students free write about the objects, attempting to form some connection within their stories or descriptions. Begin with a short time limit of three minutes at first. As in all free writing, students can write about the subject or anything they want as long as their hand is moving. Later, increase the time to five minutes.

Writing for Understanding

To aid comprehension development, ask students to retell parts of the story being read in class to a partner. As students become proficient at this, ask students to paraphrase the story on paper. Later, this assignment can grow into retelling of their own life story, or parts of it. Again, students can tell their partners their stories before they write. A caution—students with learning disabilities often have poor memories of their elementary years but students like to write this assignment because they are writing about themselves. Their memories will also begin to come back to them and they will remind each other.

Journal Writing – Millennium Writes

Take advantage of a momentous year to develop a journal-writing project. Give students 10 writing subjects, such as their favorite day, their hero or heroine, or their goals for the future. Students should write five additional entries to add to their journals. Use computers to type all entries and print them out. Assemble the pages into a journal to become a written time capsule for them to keep.

Day 1: The Beginning

In planning for this new beginning, I considered the educational needs of my students, their ages, and what I could discover about their past experiences. All of the students were freshmen or sophomores and new to my class. Their learning problems were varied, from reading disabilities to behavior problems. Teachers of their past all stated that they knew they had lost the students' interests in the area of reading and writing. I considered this information when planning for the first day and designed the following activities.

First, my students walked into the room and sat at their desks in the round. I introduced myself, stood on a desk and talked about my reading successes. I then asked them to do the same. The students' direction was to stand on the desk, give their name and talk about their reading successes in the past. The reason we stand on a desk, I informed them, was because reading is important and I want them to feel proud of their learning successes. My first volunteer stood on the desk, told me her name and then looked at me sheepishly. I asked Susan, "Have you had a reading success?" With much thought, her answer was, "Yeah. I actually read a story last year." Susan reported that in the 7th grade she had read a short story that made sense to her. I asked her to repeat after me, "I am a reader." And so it went until everyone in the room had a chance in the middle of our circle.

Next, I had the students stand at one end of the room and participate in what I call The Opinion Continuum. I explained that by standing at the far end of the room, you would indicate that you do NOT agree with my statement and by standing at the other end of the room you agree with my statement. If you choose to stand in the middle, you're undecided. You can choose to stand partway and gauge your feelings of mostly agreeing, but some disagreeing, and so on. I then read the following statements:

- I like pizza.
- I like to read.
- I think I am a good reader.

- I would like to read something that Shakespeare wrote.
- I like school.
- Sometimes, I don't feel very smart.
- Sometimes, other people make me feel dumb.
- Sometimes, teachers have made me feel dumb.
- I think Ms. Jensen wants to teach me to read better.
- I believe that Ms. Jensen can teach me to read better.
- I will become a better reader.

You can imagine how your students will respond. As for mine, the excitement of sharing their long-held, secret feelings far exceeded my expectations of the activity. By the time I read the last statement, my students were encouraging all of their classmates to join them at the AGREE side of the room. I took the teachable moment, and we huddled up. I told them that I would help them to read better, but they needed to be honest about how they're doing and give my wacky lesson plans a try. I told them that they already had skills when they walked in the room, but that we needed to practice for the big game, just like the football team does. And guess who's going to be their biggest cheerleader?

Finally, we talked about "Not-Learning," the concept from Herbert Kohl's book. I gave them some examples from my past when I chose "Not-Learning." I told them about my first grade reading competition. I didn't win the most prizes and felt like I was a poor reader. I showed my students the plastic swan that I did achieve, but offered that one wasn't enough in the eyes of my teacher. At that point, my students told me that I was a good reader for earning even one prize. They could identify with my frustrations about the expectations of others. I asked them to write a letter to themselves about "Not-Learning" experiences they had in the past and include the goals they were developing for their reading skills for the future. The students then finished their letters with a positive message to themselves. We "mailed" those letters to the front of their notebooks to keep and reread as often as they needed to.

The First Step

As a class, my students needed to experience comprehension and have a positive reading success together. We read the book *J.T.* by Jane Wagner. This book is short, but is beautifully enhanced with pictures by Gordon Parks Jr.

My students read the book in chunks – a few pages at a time. I did not read to them, although some students chose to read aloud to each other in a group. We would talk about the story, much as I had done in the past. But this time, I looked for a way for my students to become the character. They needed to jump into the mind of J.T.

First, we copied Parks's pictures, mixed up the stack and, in groups, reordered them according to how the book took place. Then I asked the students to form teams and to explain to me what happened in the book by describing the order of the pictures. This took some work, but finally the teams were in agreement. The students began discussing the book – as though they were sitting in a coffee shop discussing a novel from their literature class.

In the book, J.T. is to write a Christmas theme for his teacher, but he never turns it in. This was our opportunity. For the final assessment of the book, I asked the students to pretend to be J.T. and write his Christmas theme. Out of the entire class, I had only one student who couldn't quite grasp the concept of first-person writing, "I went to the store" instead of "J.T. went to the store." They were fantastic! We focused on the telling of the story, rather than the conventions. As my students prepared to leave class that day, I walked out in front of them. Pausing calmly before the door, I looked back and told them, "Don't tell me you can't read a book. You just did."

Reading and Writing Units

Knowing I had students with different levels of reading ability, I then turned to activities with literature that would develop and enhance decoding skills as well as pro-

duce an excitement and enjoyment of reading. The following units offered the subject matter in which students developed their reading and writing skills.

"Billy Shakes": Short for William Shakespeare

I've discovered that students like to study Shakespeare because it makes them feel smart. The language is not important; it's the stories! We would compare the basic story lines to current events and literature, stressing that we can still learn today the lessons that characters learned in the past.

"Romie and Jules"

This is a great prediction play for comprehension. Students like this story because it reflects the emotions they are feeling during their high school lives. They feel that no one understands what they are really going through. The characters also know this and communicate to students in special ways. Make sure to focus on Friar Lawrence. He is an adult who understands teens. He's a wonderful example of a "cool" adult who can help to solve problems (even though he ultimately fails).

"Romeo and Juliet" Lesson Plans

- Stop after every other scene and have the students predict what will happen in the future. Check the progress – who was right and who was wrong – as the students read. This enforces the comprehension.
- Students can rewrite the Capulets' Party scene and can act it out, stressing the conflict of finding out that Romeo and Juliet are really sworn enemies AFTER they fall in love. The students made masks to use. This lesson is especially effective during Mardi Gras season.
- Keep a chart of who's who and who is on what side. When reading the play have the student characters wear armbands identifying their allegiance.
- Assign a character to each student and have him or her develop an in-depth description. Perhaps they could pick out what music they would like to listen to or what they would wear in 2001. I particu-

Continued on next page

“Romeo and Juliet” Lesson Plans (continued)

larly like the Nurse, Benvolio and Mercutio (my hero).

- Best question of the play: How is Rosalyn feeling about all of this?

- Watch the movie with Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Daines. My students thought it was excellent. Have the students keep track of how they adapted old text to modern times. Here is a hint: What are their “swords”?

- Have students rewrite the more famous lines. What is the character saying?

- “A plague o’er both your houses!” - Mercutio
- “Come tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man.” - Mercutio
- “Deny thy father, forget thy name” -Juliet
- “A rose by any other name, would it smell as sweet?” – Juliet

Celebrate the Literature – but don’t tell us the ending!

Book reports have deservedly developed a negative connotation. In order to diminish this traditional torture, our reporting day was meant to celebrate students’ reading progress and the books and characters they were discovering by creating book reports that were fun to listen to and take part in. Students with special needs learn best by using various senses. Therefore, at the end of our four nine-week grade periods, I gave the students three forms of reporting to choose from, each with a different sensory focus. For example, one set of choices involved music, oral reporting, and art. Each student would prepare his or her report to share on the day of our celebration. These activities allowed the students to combine their abilities with the information from their story.

Book in a Bag

Students pick five items that represent the book and put it in a brown bag. They should decorate the outside of the bag with pictures from the book, the author, and the title. A description of each item, including why they chose it is included in the bag.

Be the Character

Students take on the role of a main character of the book. They wear an outfit as the character dressed and come to “visit” the classroom. Students can ask the character questions such as, “Where are you from?” “What problems have you had lately?” “What do you do for a living?” etc. The students should also be prepared to hand in a complete and detailed description of the character.

Story Board

Student should draw a large storyboard representing the book. This makes them choose five to six important events from the book. They draw a picture for each and put them in order on the storyboard. Remember: the students shouldn’t include the ending.

Host a talk show

The host assembles friends to act as characters from the book to come to the talk show. Issues discussed should be from the book. The student will have to do a great deal of work to prepare their friends so that they can be in character. The show takes place during class time with classmates serving as audience participants. This is a great group book assignment.

Write a review

The students develop a reviewing system including descriptions and pictures such as Thumbs Up, Five Stars, Three Bags of Popcorn, etc. Students then write a review of the book using this rating system. They explain their system as a part of the book report. Other students in the class can then use this rating system for their book.

Life’s a MYSTERY!!!

Mysteries are great for comprehension! Kids like the suspense and it produces page turning. Anytime you can use blood and guts appropriately with teenagers, that is a good thing.

The Basic Components of a Mystery

My class developed the following list of elements found in any mystery story. The students had sheets of paper with the categories

listed and filled in the characteristics of each mystery we read, wrote or watched.

- Weapon
- Motive
- Crime
- Suspects
- Setting
- Alibi
- Detective
- Victim

Fairytales, Folktales, and Fables

As with the mystery unit, the class decided that there are certain components of a fairytale, folktale or fable. You must have the following:

- A hero or heroine
- An evil person or being
- Some kind of magic
- A castle
- A moral to the story

We read, sang, and retold everything from "The Three Bears" to *Aesop's Fables*, often spending more time on the history of the story than the tale itself.

After reading "Rapunzel," I hosted my own talk show. The students did not practice for the event, in fact the element of surprise about who would be what character added to the fun of the assignment. The rest of the students served as crowd participants who were allowed to ask questions of the character. We took commercial breaks to get back on track if needed. In the end of our story, Rapunzel and her mother were reunited. The queen promised to allow Rapunzel to marry and didn't charge her father for the lettuce. This result came from the students, not from their teacher!

English Open House

Because of all of the successes in the classroom related to reading, I decided to host an open house for parents and teachers to showcase the students' work. Each student was given a desk to decorate and display his or her work. They had to display at least one book report, their memory papers, and Mil-

Radio Show Lesson Plan

This lesson was a great amount of fun.

1. Students identified and described each element of a mystery.
2. Students told the story of the mystery based on the elements.
3. In groups, students wrote the outline of the story after telling out loud.
4. The groups wrote the script of their story.
5. We assigned parts, including the sound-effects person and sound technician.
6. The groups performed their mysteries on a tape recorder.
7. I hosted a "fireside" radio day with old-fashioned popcorn and hot chocolate and we listened to each group's show.

lennium Writes. I found that almost all of the students displayed every project we had completed in the semester's time. The students also included sign-in sheets on their desks where visitors could make comments about their work. These pages of kudos became beautiful treasures for my students. Several parents commented that they had never been to an event to see the great work their students had accomplished.

Conclusion

The more effort that my students put towards believing that We become better readers by...READING! and To Write is to Read, the more improvement we saw in abilities in both skills. The difference of this curriculum compared to those I had developed in the past was the expectation I put on the students and my follow-through to see them succeed.

The activities were effective for my students with special needs because they were interesting, challenging, and fun and put the power of learning back into their hands. As many special educators do, we focused on present levels of skills and built from there with activities that students were excited to

complete. Most importantly, we created a learning environment, instead of our usual class of "getting by." My students and I also celebrated every success and created an environment of trust and understanding. Students' quotes such as, "I used to be a bad reader, but now I'm not. I'm a lot better." and, "I'm starting to dig reading now." were feelings exclaimed as words of pride in front of an entire class instead of never spoken at all.

As a result of developing this curriculum, I now know that high school special education teachers can help to improve reading skills in students with learning disabilities. I would say I became a believer by...BELIEVING!

References

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