

Successful Teachers Share Advice for Motivating Reluctant Adolescents

Cheryl Taliaferro, Sheri R. Parris

“What we do as teachers is intimately connected to why we are here on earth. We become teachers because we believe each child is special—each child—and deserves the best academic, social, and emotional support we adults can offer. It really is that simple.”

—Justin Smith, recipient of 2007–2008 Princeton University Distinguished Secondary School Teaching Award

In an ideal world, secondary classrooms would be filled with students excited about their assignments and eager to learn more. Although some classrooms come close to realizing this ideal, it unfortunately is not the reality that many teachers face. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (2006), fewer than 75% of students in the United States graduate from high school. Although factors influencing this high drop-out rate are certainly complex, one factor that plays a pivotal role is related to students' experiences in school.

What motivates some students to remain in school and to excel at academic tasks while others languish or give up completely? As Turner and Paris (1995) note, “Motivation does not reside solely in the child; rather it is in the interaction between students and their literacy environments” (p. 672).

KEY POINTS AND STRATEGIES

- Selecting Texts for Adolescents
- Building Relationships
- Giving Students Choices
 - Literature Circles
 - Sustained Silent Reading
- Making Text Relevant
 - Making Connections
 - Inquiry Projects
 - Front-Loading
- Modeling
 - Read-Alouds
 - Think-Alouds

The purpose of this chapter is to identify instructional routines that have proven to be effective in helping to motivate reluctant adolescent readers. To help us determine what those practices are, we interviewed award-winning secondary teachers from across the United States. Following are the most common practices that they cited as being helpful in their classrooms.

Select Texts on the Basis of Students' Interests and Needs

To engage the reluctant adolescent reader, teachers need to align materials and assignments to students' interests and needs. Researchers have noted that a mismatch often exists between what students want to learn and what they are required to learn in school, and this mismatch is further evidenced by discrepancies between many students' in-school literacy activities and their out-of-school literacy activities (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In other words, students often have skills that schools and teachers ignore. Mary Schlieder, 2008 Nebraska Teacher of the Year, reminds us, "You have to find a way to help [students] find their strengths and know they are capable. Everyone is good at something, even if it's not an area we teach and test during the school day."

To motivate reluctant readers, teachers should begin by recognizing and working with students' strengths and then scaffold instruction to include a wider range of literacy activities. John Kline Jr., 2008 New Jersey Teacher of the Year, describes the way he uses this approach in his classroom:

For adolescents with reading difficulties, start with something they're good at and enjoy. For example, a football player who's having difficulty reading—give him a *Sports Illustrated* and find articles that he enjoys reading.... After a few months of *Sports Illustrated*, move up to a *New York Times* sports page.

Build Relationships

To select materials and activities based on students' interests and needs, teachers need to know what those interests and needs are. They need to build relationships with their students. According to the teachers we interviewed, the best way to create these relationships is to take a personal interest in each student in the classroom. Adolescents know when their teachers care about them and when they don't, and students are more likely to work for teachers who show an interest in them as individuals (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Student-teacher relationships can be fostered in myriad ways: teachers can greet their students at the door before they enter the classroom; attend their students' extracurricular activities, including sports games, drama performances, musical recitals, and academic competitions; and talk to students about their interests.

In their qualitative study of adolescent boys throughout the United States, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that many boys alluded to an implicit social contract that exists between students and their teachers. This social contract includes the following features:

1. A teacher should try to get to know me personally.
 2. A teacher should care about me as an individual.
 3. A teacher should attend to my interests in some way.
 4. A teacher should help me learn and work to make sure that I have learned.
 5. A teacher should be passionate, committed, work hard, and know his or her stuff.
- (p. 99)

Unfortunately, many of these boys expressed that their teachers had reneged on this contract; therefore, the boys were not willing to do their part in class. However, when they did encounter teachers who met even one of the conditions outlined in the contract, they were willing to work hard for him or her. The power that teachers have in this regard can be instrumental in motivating students. By showing an interest in students as individuals and by recognizing the skills and strengths that students bring to the classroom, teachers can get through to their students and build a community of learners who strive to do their best on their literacy assignments.

April Todd, an 11-year English and language arts teacher who was named Maryland Teacher of the Year in 2008, offers this advice: “Know your students. Reading can be an intimidating and challenging topic for many learners. You can’t teach and the students can’t learn without a mutual network of trust, respect, and communication.”

Give Students Choices

Sullivan (2004) reminds us to give students “the chance to choose the type of reading materials they want and the level of difficulty they are comfortable with, and they won’t regard reading as a chore and language as an enemy” (p. 39). The teachers interviewed for this chapter indicated three activities that are frequently used to make a place for student choice within their curriculums: literature circles, sustained silent reading, and a range of assessment tools.

Literature Circles

Literature circles are one way to bring students’ choices about texts into the classroom, because choice is a primary component of literature circles (Daniels, 2001; Dutro, 2002). Generally, a teacher enacting literature circles presents a variety of texts that function as a text set to his or her class. If, for example, the theme to be studied is World War II, the text set may include copies of *Anne Frank: The Diary*

of a Young Girl; Night, a memoir by Elie Wiesel that details the author's experiences as a Jewish man forced into several concentration camps; *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, a memoir presented in the form of a graphic novel by Art Spiegelman; *The Summer of My German Soldier*, a young adult novel by Bette Greene that centers on a Jewish girl living in Arkansas and befriending a German prisoner; and *Number the Stars*, a Newbery Medal winner by Lois Lowry that tells the fictionalized story of 10-year-old Annemarie Johanssen, who helps her best friend, a Jewish girl named Ellen Rosen, escape with her family when the Jews are evacuated from Denmark. These texts together represent a variety of interests and reading levels.

Each student is allowed to choose the work that he or she would like to read. Students are then grouped into their circles according to their commonly selected texts. Students meet in circles on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss ideas that they generate about the novel, and they make notes to help them create more meaning from the work. Sometimes the members of literature circles are given specific roles to fulfill within their group, such as wordsmith, discussion director, illustrator, and summarizer. These roles, however, may be adapted or eliminated according to the needs of the particular students in the classroom. Laura Carlton, who has taught English for 15 years and has been named the 2008 Louisiana State Teacher of the Year, says,

I let students pick their own books and use basic literature circle roles plus a 'connector'—someone who connects the book to something they like or have read before or talks about a current article in the news that connects to the book.

Sustained Silent Reading

Sustained silent reading has long been presented as one method of improving student reading. Different classrooms and schools currently enact this routine in varied ways. Some teachers devote the first 15 minutes of class time to sustained silent reading. Some schools as a whole have adopted Drop Everything and Read time, in which the entire school stops all other activities and everyone reads silently for a set amount of time (Cumming, 1997). Other classrooms, following a reading workshop approach similar to that advocated by Nancy Atwell (1998), set aside a certain number of days each week for sustained silent reading. In this case, students know, for example, that reading workshop will occur every Tuesday and Thursday, and on those days they are expected to read a self-selected book and complete a journal response about their reading.

Sustained silent reading is difficult to measure and justify in the current educational climate that is dominated by positivist research and objective test scores (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004); however, common sense and the expert teachers interviewed for this chapter maintain it is a worthwhile engagement of students' time. A central tenet of the practice is student choice, and at its best, sustained silent reading allows students the time and the opportunity to read a book that's

written at their personal reading level and that is interesting to them. Any such program needs to ensure access to books; provide appealing books to students; ensure an environment conducive to silent reading; provide encouragement and staff development; create a sense of student-centered accountability in which traditional assessments are replaced by writing, discussion, and other alternative assessments; provide follow-up activities that encourage the students' excitement about their reading; and guarantee a definite, regular time to read (Pilgteen, 2000).

Teachers who regularly include sustained silent reading in their curriculums report a range of positive results. One of those positive results is the transformation of students' understandings of literacy. Earl DeMott, a 14-year teacher and recipient of the Human Rights Award for Ambassadors of Change: Uganda Project as well as a 2008 Teacher of the Year nominee, says the following about sustained silent reading as enacted at the Global Studies and World Languages Academy at Tallwood High School in Virginia Beach, Virginia: "What this gave, ultimately, was exposure to literature, as well as a very important visual aspect that everyone in the school (from the janitor to the principal) cared about literacy."

Assessments

Just as teachers can benefit students by offering them choices in reading materials, they also can better serve students' needs by relying on a variety of measures that assess student learning. Paul Cain, 2008 Texas State Teacher of the Year, reminds us, "Teachers have to recognize that students have different ways of learning, and we have to adjust our teaching and evaluation to the students' learning styles."

Although traditional testing may work well for some students, it certainly does not capture the full range of learning exhibited by all students, particularly students who have spent years struggling with literacy. Therefore, teachers need to consider alternative assessment measures in their classrooms. Beginning with the objectives in mind, teachers should consider the various ways that students might demonstrate their learning and then give students options regarding how they are assessed. Above all else, assessment should be authentic and interchangeable with good instruction (Shepard, 2000). For example, if the objective is to analyze how an author uses setting to advance characterization, a teacher could allow students to write a literary essay, perform a skit, create a piece of artwork, or design a PowerPoint presentation that explains the concept and provides illustrative examples from a variety of works with which the student is familiar.

Make Text Relevant

Researchers agree that reluctant readers need to find relevance in the work that they are asked to do (Lindfors, 1999; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Relevance does not have a standard definition, however. It may involve incorporating humor and nontraditional genres in the classroom to build community (Newkirk, 2002). It may also include students engaging in authentic inquiry acts that involve “seeking new information, clarifying, confirming, rejecting, connecting, applying” (Lindfors, 1999, p. 9). Whatever the particular definition, relevance is what makes learning meaningful for the learner—either on a social level or an academic level.

Connecting Fictional Experiences to Students’ Lives

With literature, teachers should help students find ways to connect their own life experiences to the characters, plot situations, and themes in the works that they study. Unfortunately, these connections may be more difficult for some students to find. Raymond Page, a 30-year teaching veteran at St. Anthony High School in Jersey City, New Jersey, and Princeton University Distinguished Secondary School Teacher Honoree, explains one aspect of this problem:

I find that lack of motivation is often due to the fact that characters in books do not look like [the students], do not live in areas like the ones they live in, and do not encounter the same problems they do. Because of the realities in the books they have encountered in the past, they have come to believe that reading is an activity far removed from their lives.

An important way to help reluctant students find relevance in literature is to provide them with reading experiences that are reflective of their own lives. For this reason, multicultural literature needs to have a prominent place in English curriculum.

The teachers at Mr. Page’s school create ways to incorporate literature that reflects the lives of their students into both their regular English curriculum and into an optional school book club. Multicultural literature can be especially powerful because of its ability to draw in students who may not see themselves and their experiences as represented in other, more traditional Western texts. Additionally, it has the power to help adolescent students transform their understandings of themselves and of people from other cultures, whom they are likely to encounter in their own lives (Banks, 1994; Bean, Valerio, Senior, & White, 1999; Dressel, 2005; Glazier & Seo, 2005; Ketter & Buter, 2004; Louie, 2005; Poole, 2005).

Inquiry Projects

Inquiry projects (Lindfors, 1999) can be another means of helping students find relevance in their work. Inquiry may take the form of information seeking or of wondering, but in either case it must come from the student rather than from the teacher or a predetermined curriculum. Students should be afforded the time and

the opportunity to explore topics that are meaningful to them. This means that students need time to discuss their learning with their classmates as well as their teacher. They need to spend time reflecting on their learning, and they should be allowed to choose their own topics when conducting research, writing essays, and completing projects.

Laurie Jones, 2008 Washington State Teacher of the Year, reminds us of the importance of students saying, “I’ve got to solve this problem so I need to do research to find the answer.” A student may be more willing to engage with reading if the reading serves as a practical means of answering a question the student has. In the classroom, inquiry projects can take many forms. If the purpose of a unit is to teach research skills, students could be allowed to choose any topic to research, rather than being required to write a paper or complete a project about an author or an historical figure. Instead of focusing on traditional academic topics, some students may choose to research how to fix a car or how to pursue a specific career. Students will read more and engage with their learning more when their assignments help them answer real questions that they have (Lindfors, 1999; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Inquiry projects also have a place in the curriculum when a unit is content driven rather than skills driven. For example, if the purpose of a unit is for students to acquire more knowledge about African cultures, students could be asked what kind of information they would like to learn. They might be interested in topics as diverse as traditional music, wild animals, medical practices, modern religions, women’s rights issues, the impact of AIDS, and genocide. Students should be given the time to delve deeper into the specific topics that interest them and to share what they learn with the class.

Front-Loading

Another way to help create relevance is front-loading information to create an instant interest for the students (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In other words, indicate the relevance at the start of the unit to compel students to want to learn. One lesson that helps front-load nonfiction is described by Donna Sharer, a national board-certified teacher who is also a Philadelphia Writing Project Scholar and a recipient of the James Madison Fellowship:

I often use political cartoons to introduce a topic/issue, whether historical or current, to have students not only interpret the message but also reinforce literary elements and figurative language which is often in cartoons.... I’ve found some reluctant students more willing to read accompanying primary documents and secondary sources because it helped them interpret cartoons.

Sharer created a website for teachers to help them develop similar lessons, and it can be accessed at www.learningbycartooning.org.

Model Good Reading and Thinking Behaviors

Read-Alouds

Researchers have documented many benefits of teacher-conducted read-alouds, including increasing students' comprehension of texts (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2008; McGee & Schickendanz, 2007; Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008), students' understanding of text structures (Fisher et al., 2008; Santoro et al., 2008), students' vocabulary (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Fisher et al., 2008; McGee & Schickendanz, 2007; Santoro et al., 2008), and students' critical thinking skills (Pantaleo, 2004). Middle school students also report that teacher read-alouds are one of the top activities that they value in their language arts classrooms, and as such read-alouds can be used by teachers to scaffold students' understandings of other texts (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). An additional benefit has been identified by Kathleen Mueller, recipient of Princeton University's Distinguished Secondary Teaching Prize: "Beyond [numerous academic benefits of reading aloud], it has proven to be a significant community building device, much as I imagine was the case when pre-literate people told stories as part of the oral tradition in literary history."

Fisher et al. (2004) observed expert teachers to identify the essential components for teacher read-alouds. Texts should be selected on the basis of students' interests and needs, and the books should be previewed and the read-alouds practiced by the teachers in advance. Teachers should model fluent oral reading, using animation and expression during the reading. Equally important, however, is the teacher's ability to establish and communicate a clear purpose for the read-aloud, making a connection to the students' independent reading and writing. For example, a particular text could be read to analyze the author's use of figurative language to create mood, and then students could be asked to practice a similar technique in their own writing. Finally, the text needs to be discussed before, during, and after the read-aloud. It needs to be appreciated and enjoyed as an art form as well as a hermeneutic that can help students strengthen a particular skill (Sipe, 2000).

Think-Alouds

Having students learn how to become more metacognitive is another way of helping them improve their own reading abilities. When students are able to recognize what they struggle with in reading and then access a range of cognitive strategies that might help them work through their problems, they are independent readers, and that is the goal of most reading instruction. Teachers can help their students develop these metacognitive skills by explicitly modeling them for their students. Kimberley K. Curran, 2007 Teacher of the Year at Sandalwood High School in Jacksonville, Florida, echoes many teachers' concerns when she says,

I want [my students] to know what to do when they do not understand. I use embedded questions where I "interrupt" a reading with the questions most effective readers process

internally. This helps the struggling reader, and I find most of them during the course of the year start to automatically ask these questions themselves.

Coté and Goldman (1999) found when analyzing science students' think-alouds that "unless readers actively apply strategies to resolve problems they identify, they are likely to end up with fragmentary representations" (p. 189). Therefore, merely recognizing a problem is not enough; students need a skill set that helps them resolve problems when they are encountered. Here lies the appropriate instructional place of teacher think-alouds: By modeling strategies that can be used to solve reading problems, teachers can directly show students how to solve the problems that they encounter when reading.

Looking Ahead

One of the largest obstacles that teachers may face in trying to motivate reluctant adolescent readers stems from the testing culture that currently permeates most schools. Prescribed programs of study and mandated standardized tests can, contrary to their ostensible purpose of raising student achievement, actually stifle teachers' abilities to bring the most appropriate activities into their classrooms (Shannon, 2001). However, dedicated teachers continue to find ways to ensure that their students receive what they need. Teachers can help these adolescents achieve greater success by matching assignments to students' interests and needs; building relationships with students; giving students more choice and control over their learning by incorporating activities like literature circles, sustained silent reading, and alternative assessments in the curriculum; being more explicit in demonstrating the relevance of literacy tasks to students' own lives; and modeling what accomplished readers do through read-alouds and think-alouds. Successful teachers find ways to differentiate instruction even when rigidly defined curriculums are prescribed.

EXTEND YOUR THINKING

- Reflecting on what you've learned in this chapter, describe three suggested actions that you think will have the most impact if you incorporate them with your own teaching repertoire. Why did you choose these?
- Reflect upon a specific lesson that you have recently taught. How can you alter this particular lesson to increase motivation for struggling or reluctant readers?
- Based on the information presented in this chapter, can you think of an additional action or activity that was not mentioned but that would have been consistent with the information presented? Explain why you chose this action or activity and how it would help motivate struggling or reluctant readers in your classroom.

REFERENCES

- Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understanding about writing, reading, and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Banks, J.A. (1994). Transforming the mainstream curriculum. *Educational Leadership*, 51(8), 4–8.
- Bean, T.W., Valerio, P.C., Senior, H.M., & White, F. (1999). Secondary English students' engagement in reading and writing about a multicultural novel. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 93(1), 32–37.
- Beck, I.L., & McKeown, M.G. (2001). Text talk: Capturing the benefits of read-aloud experiences for young children. *The Reading Teacher*, 55(1), 10–20.
- Coté, N., & Goldman, S.R. (1999). Building representations of informational text: Evidence from children's think-aloud protocols. In H. Van Oostendorp & S.R. Goldman (Eds.), *The construction of mental representations during reading* (pp. 169–193). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Cumming, P. (1997). Drop everything and read all over: Literacy and loving it. *The Horn Book Magazine*, 73(6), 714–718.
- Daniels, H. (2001). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Dressel, J.H. (2005). Personal response and social responsibility: Responses of middle school students to multicultural literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(8), 750–764. doi:10.1598/RT.58.8.5
- Dutro, E. (2002). "Us boys like to read football and boy stuff": Reading masculinities, performing boyhood. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 34(4), 465–500. doi:10.1207/s15548430jlr3404_4
- Fisher, D., Flood, J., Lapp, D., & Frey, N. (2004). Interactive read-alouds: Is there a common set of implementation practices? *The Reading Teacher*, 58(1), 8–17. doi:10.1598/RT.58.1.1
- Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2008). Shared readings: Modeling comprehension, vocabulary, text structures, and text features for older readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(7), 548–556. doi:10.1598/RT.61.7.4
- Glazier, J., & Seo, J.A. (2005). Multicultural literature and discussion as mirror and window? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48(8), 686–700. doi:10.1598/JAAL.48.8.6
- Ivey, G., & Broaddus, K. (2001). "Just plain reading": A survey of what makes students want to read in middle school classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(4), 350–377. doi:10.1598/RRQ.36.4.2
- Ketter, J., & Buter, D. (2004). Transcending spaces: Exploring identity in a rural American middle school. *English Journal*, 93(6), 47–53. doi:10.2307/4128893
- Lindfors, J.W. (1999). *Children's inquiry: Using language to make sense of the world*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Louie, B. (2005). Development of empathetic responses with multicultural literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48(7), 566–578. doi:10.1598/JAAL.48.7.3
- McGee, L.M., & Schickendanz, J.A. (2007). Repeated interactive read-alouds in preschool and kindergarten. *The Reading Teacher*, 60(8), 742–751. doi:10.1598/RT.60.8.4
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2006). Resolution on increasing secondary school graduation rates. Retrieved July 29, 2008, from www.ncte.org/positions/statements/increasinggradrates
- Newkirk, T. (2002). *Misreading masculinity: Boys, literacy, and popular culture*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Pantaleo, S. (2004). Young children and radical change characteristics in picture books. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(2), 178–187. doi:10.1598/RT.58.2.6
- Pilgreen, J.L. (2000). *The SSR handbook: How to organize and manage a sustained silent reading program*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Poole, J.A. (2005). Journey toward multiculturalism. *English Journal*, 94(3), 67–70.
- Santoro, L.E., Chard, D.J., Howard, L., & Baker, S.K. (2008). Making the very most of classroom read-alouds to promote comprehension and vocabulary. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(5), 396–408. doi:10.1598/RT.61.5.4
- Shannon, P. (2001). Every step you take. In P. Shannon (Ed.), *Becoming political, too: New readings and writings on the politics of literacy education* (pp. 175–179). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Shepard, L. (2000). The role of assessment in a learning culture. *Educational Researcher*, 29(7), 4–14.
- Sipe, L.R. (2000). The construction of literary understanding by first and second graders in oral response to picture storybook read-alouds. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35(2), 252–275. doi:10.1598/RRQ.35.2.4

- Smith, M.W., & Wilhelm, J.D. (2002). *Reading don't fix no Chevys: Literacy in the lives of young men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Sullivan, M. (2004). Why Johnny won't read: Schools often dismiss what boys like. No wonder they're not wild about reading. *School Library Journal*, 50(8), 36–39.
- Turner, J., & Paris, S.G. (1995). How literacy tasks influence children's motivation for literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 48(8), 662–673.