

Identifying Struggling Readers in the Classroom

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Unfortunately, there are students in our classroom who reach middle school and are not yet fluent, competent readers. They offer a special challenge to the teacher as most of these students will take great pains to hide this inability. These students come to your classroom with years of reading failure, years of frustration, and years of practice in behaviors to cover it up and save face. Your greatest challenge with these students is not identifying them. It is helping them to overcome the deeply entrenched negative beliefs they tell themselves such as

“I’m stupid.” “It’s too late for me to learn to read.” “I’ll never get this.”

Who are these students in your classroom? Look beyond their outward persona for clues. Sometimes they are the bad actors in your class. Those unruly behaviors may be used by the student to hide their inability to read well. They also may be the joker, the student who uses humor to divert your attention away from finding out what they can’t do. They may appear as the indifferent student who doesn’t start on a reading or writing assignment quickly. What they are actually doing is looking for clues from classmates as to what they should be doing. Possibly a student may repeatedly ask about an assignment to the point you ask yourself if they were even listening. Those students may need to hear directions enough to memorize them as they are unable to read for meaning. Often, they are the students that sit in the back of the room where they hope to be invisible or send the message of “I don’t care about your class.”

There are some practices you can incorporate into your teaching that can enable students to be more successful in your classroom despite their poor reading skills. First, let me say this; never, never, never require a student to read aloud if they do not want to. Oral reading is an entirely different skill than reading silently. Do have students follow along as passages are read along. Hearing good reading helps students to learn new words and more importantly, to comprehend what is being read.

A typical assignment in school is to read through a passage and answer chapter questions. Poor readers often do not know how to determine what is important when they read. Teach them some strategies such as reading through the questions before starting to read the chapter. Often there is a summary paragraph at the end. Instruct them to read this first and think about the content so they know what to target when they read. Another strategy is to have them look at the topic sentence which is usually the first sentence. Show them how to turn that into a question so they can read with a clear goal in mind.

Structure your assignments for success. Let students know what the learning goal is so they can aim at a target. An example would be starting the class by telling them the goal today is to learn the definition of a polygon. Then they must determine if a shape is a polygon or not a polygon and why. Perhaps you are studying the Civil War and you will be asking students about contributing causes. Let them know they are expected to cite at least three reasons for this war.

Whenever you are presenting a lesson, stop at certain points as the text is read and content is presented. Emphasize key points in the passage, then encourage students to think about what they've just heard. Show students how to write brief notes on those important points which they can refer back to later. They could write or highlight directly on the page if it is a consumable reading. Sticky notes are perfect for them to write on and attach directly to the applicable pages. Giving students a moment to think about a passage helps them make a connection to the content. This connection enables them to comprehend the lesson and be more successful and engaged in your instruction.

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Think Spell Write is a reading program for students who may have had reading instruction but are still struggling to read and write fluently. This could be special education students, students whose education has been disrupted by trauma or interrupted due to frequent moves, or students that just have not yet learned phonetic rules and their application. **Think Spell Write** can be used with upper elementary students, high schoolers, adults, and English Language learners.