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Introduction

For twenty years, I have laboured in the secondary school trenches, attempting to reach and stimulate the minds of students of all levels of ability. Happily, I can look back on those twenty years and realise I have accomplished much at both ends of the learning spectrum. The teaching profession itself has progressed tremendously in the area of the gifted; however, we as individuals and as a collective body have not been nearly as successful with reluctant learners.

The causes of academic “at-riskness” (“at-risk” being defined as in danger of failure) are well studied and well documented. However, fool-proof methodologies for turning these students around have yet to be discovered. Part of the reason for our inadequacy in this area is the failure to realise that these students are always at-risk; it is not a disease which can be cured and forgotten. Whether physical or learned, the causes are deeply ingrained; most have seeds as far back as preschool. Thus, the potentially “at-risk” student can only be steered away from failure and given strategies which will assist him or her throughout his or her education and later career.

Many of these students experience only minor difficulties in the early primary classroom; the potential for disaster does not manifest itself until late primary or secondary school, when the pressures of adolescence break that thin line on which these

students have been walking. Suddenly the remedial reader who has been barely able to complete assignments can no longer keep up when the homework load is heavier and outside distractions are greater. Or suddenly the easily-distracted student no longer wants to bother completing assignments which he or she sees as “busy work” in a world which now urges practicality.

After talking with hundreds of semi-successful teachers and their “at-risk” students in primary and secondary schools, I have compiled a list of ten “necessities for success” of which students must have a grasp before they reach secondary school. Although these concepts certainly apply to students of all abilities, they are particularly important for the potential “at-risk” student because without them, education seems tedious and impractical and the student is doomed to failure by Year 9 or Year 10.

Each of these “necessities for success” is accompanied by four activities which have already been proven successful in a variety of classrooms. All forty can easily be adapted to any year level. The ten “necessities” are listed in random order since the importance of each depends on the students’ individual personalities. These activities will make the job of the educator a bit easier and a bit more enjoyable. And hopefully these activities will excite a few potentially “at-risk” students and provide a basis for attitudes which will later prevent student failure.



1. Students Must Learn a Love for Reading.

Plainly and simply, reading is the most important key to a student's success. The more she or he reads in childhood, the better writer, grammarian and thinker she or he will be through adolescence. Studies show beyond a shadow of a doubt a direct link between the amount of exposure a student has to the printed word through reading and her or his ability to form clear and correct sentences and paragraphs when she or he writes. Quite obviously also, the more students read, the more knowledgeable they become, and therefore, the more pieces of information with which they have to work when forming opinions and analysing consequences. These skills will profoundly affect their performance in secondary school.

The corollary is also readily proven as true. Since about 87% of all the assignments in secondary school have something to do with reading, whether they be an actual novel or a word problem in maths, the student with a disdain for reading is doomed to failure. A student who believes himself to be a very poor reader enters each English and social science class knowing he will struggle. Thus the student's self-esteem receives a severe blow before each term even starts.

Finally, we must remember that one of the "at-risk" student's major problems is with boredom. Idle hours outside the school day only lead to more distractions from a successful time management plan. While the good reader often seeks private, alone time in which to read and think, the "at-risk" reader looks for other, "instant excitement" activities in which to engage.

And knowing all this, what do we as educators do? We pick unappealing, irrelevant works and expect our students to enjoy them. We force-feed them a steady diet of works which we hated at school and only learned to appreciate in later stages of our education or adulthood. Seldom do we give them the opportunity to read things which appeal to them as individuals. Granted, many mature students do well and learn a great deal from the classics; however, the damage we do to the potentially "at-risk" student is insurmountable.

When students see reading only as an assignment, and when students see these assignments as a drudgery, school automatically becomes a dreaded chore. Only by instilling a true love for reading during the primary years is there hope for their survival in the later stages of their education.