

Teach Them ALL to Read

Catching the Kids Who Fall Through the Cracks

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Preface

Why do so many students fall through the cracks in reading? *What* can educators do to prevent this widespread academic free fall? Finding answers to these tough questions has consumed much of my professional career. In the early 1980s, I took a principalship in a failing school, where nearly 75% of the students were below grade level in reading. Although we were privileged to raise reading achievement from the 20th to the 70th percentile overall, many of our students continued to fall through the cracks. For them, learning to read was an agonizing process, and if help came at all, it was often too little and too late to overcome the cumulative effects of failure.

I wish I had known then what I know now. Today, there is a growing body of high-quality research to inform our instructional practices—particularly what we do with those students who are most at-risk of reading failure. Now we know that early identification and intensive intervention are essential. Waiting for students to “bloom” like Leo, the winsome Leo Lionni (1971) character, is an exercise in futility. Now we know, that for those students at risk of reading failure, immersion in well-written literature, although important, isn’t nearly enough. We have discovered some essential pieces of the reading puzzle that we knew very little about 20 or 30 years ago.

If I could only travel back in time and offer answers to those students who fell through the cracks while I was a teacher, media specialist, and principal! Ron Edmonds (1981) believed that

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far. (p. 53)

Although Edmonds was writing in the broad sense about student achievement, his statement could well be paraphrased to describe the current status of reading instruction: *We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children to read. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.*

THE GOALS OF THIS BOOK

In 1998, I wrote *The Principal's Guide to Raising Reading Achievement* and developed a workshop for principals based on my personal experiences with raising reading achievement. My goal was to share the very latest in reading research with practitioners to help them make literacy a reality for more of their students. I recently heard from one of those principals, Kathie Dobberteen, the principal of La Mesa Dale Elementary School in the San Diego, California, area.

Here is an excerpt from Kathie's message:

I haven't written to you in several years, but I went to one of your workshops in 1998. You emailed me a number of times as I was exploring what else we could do to raise our literacy levels, especially in first grade. You talked to me about the importance of phonemic awareness, reading a lot, and spending more time on reading instruction. Last year, because of your help [and Kathie's outstanding instructional leadership and powerful vision for what her school could become], we finally have 90% of our students reading at and above grade level at our Title I school (up from 42% in 1996). Ninety-four percent of our fifth graders went on to middle school reading at and above grade level, with 33% of them reading at 8th and 9th grade levels. (K. Dobberteen, personal communication, August, 2001)

Kathie and her staff have received three major awards for their significant instructional accomplishments: Title I Distinguished School, California Distinguished School, and one of six Chase School Change Awards given yearly by Fordham University and the Chase Manhattan Foundation.

Although the workshop that Kathie attended was designed for elementary school principals, there were always a number of middle and high school principals who came, looking for ways to increase literacy in their schools. To meet their needs more specifically, I developed a workshop for secondary administrators, and in 2001, I followed up with a book: *Raising Reading Achievement in Middle and High Schools: Five Simple-to-Follow Strategies for Principals*. Although my workshops were primarily intended for principals, many administrators brought teams of teachers or invited me back to present to their staff members. I discovered that many new teachers knew very little about how to teach reading. Their preservice training had given short shrift to reading instruction. Even remedial and special education teachers were frustrated at their lack of exposure to current research, best practices, and strategies that worked with their difficult-to-reach students. They eagerly pored through the roller-bag of resources I bring to each workshop, asked questions, and stayed "after class" to talk about their most challenging students. I soon realized that a book about reading instruction was needed, not only for teachers—classroom, special education, and reading—but also for the many administrators who lead schools and supervise special programs.

I have written this book with the following goals in mind:

- To give you a short course in the most current reading research regarding how students learn to read, regardless of age or grade, so that you can make informed decisions about curriculum and instruction
- To help you understand that *learning to read* is only the first step; students must also develop fluency, acquire cognitive strategies, and continue to read a lot to deepen their knowledge and understanding
- To focus your attention on the variables at work in your school and district that can be altered to create a reading culture and make a huge difference in reading achievement—especially for those students who are currently falling through the cracks
- To convince you of the power that rests in you and your colleagues to teach every child to read

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book has been written for a broad audience. There are few, if any, educators today who are not deeply concerned with literacy levels in their schools. From superintendents to the most recently hired teachers—everyone is feeling the relentless pressure of high-stakes tests combined with a growing population of at-risk students and resources that are spread too thin. This book is intended for the following groups:

- Teachers of all kinds and levels—regular classroom, special education, bilingual education, and remedial reading—who are looking for ways to teach reading more effectively
- Special education, bilingual, and Title I administrators who need assistance in evaluating and improving their district reading programs
- Superintendents and principals who need specific and timely information about how to raise reading achievement in their district and schools
- Central office administrators (e.g., those responsible for school improvement, grant writing, staff development, and curriculum selection) who need a quick-reading and practical compendium of the best practices and programs in reading instruction
- College and university professors who are looking for a beginning-level but comprehensive book on reading instruction

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

Although the reader will certainly gain a great deal that will be of practical value in the classroom from reading this book, it is not intended to be a comprehensive instructional guide, nor does it contain a recommended and “guaranteed to work for every child” program. Many children require a customized

package of instruction based on their unique learning needs. Professional educators need not only a variety of successful methods and approaches in their tool kits, but they also need the freedom to make informed professional judgments.

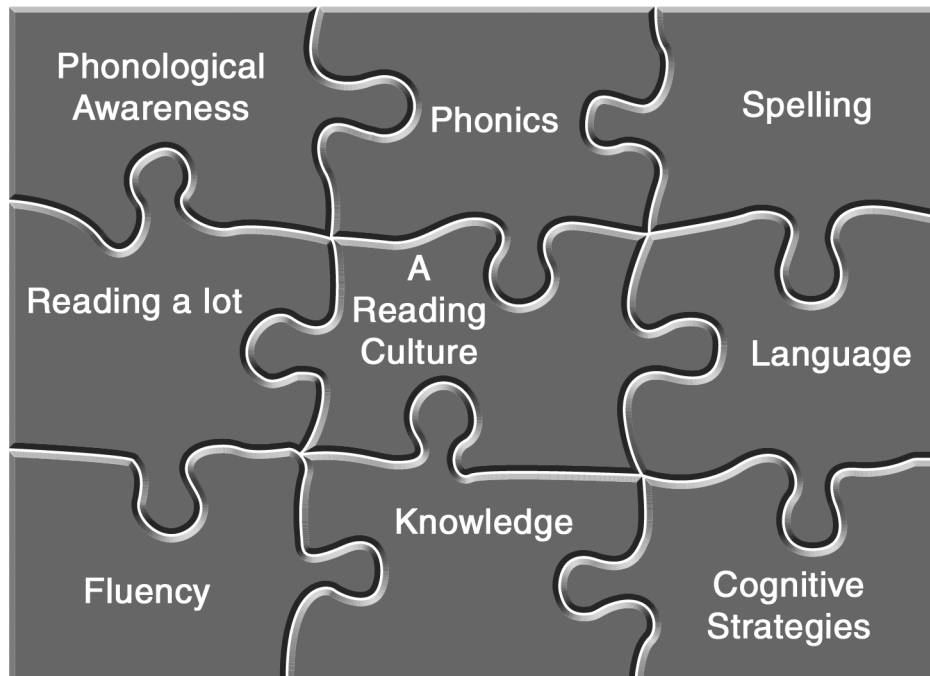
Although I do use the terms *literate* and *literacy* throughout the book when referring to the abilities to read, write, and speak at or above the expectations held for a particular age or grade level, this book is primarily about reading. Of course, if one is teaching reading effectively, one's students *must* talk and write about what they are reading every day, in every subject, and at every grade level. This book, however, is only about reading.

READING TO LEARN

Most authors write books hoping that somebody, anybody, will actually read them. I have much higher expectations than that. My hope is that you will not merely read this book but “read to learn” from this book. And my further hope is that you will take what you have learned and put it to work in your school, classroom, or district. To that end, and because this is a book about reading, I have included a number of features to help you more readily understand and remember what you read.

I have chosen a simple jigsaw puzzle to illustrate the essential components of reading instruction. Figure P.1, The Reading Puzzle, shows the assembled

Figure P.1 The Reading Puzzle



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puzzle. Throughout the book, individual pieces of the puzzle will provide visual cues regarding the subject under discussion.

You will also find other features to help you read to learn:

- *Graphic organizers* that provide visual representations or summaries of various aspects of the text
- *Short sidebars* that offer you a breather from reading to learn and give you the opportunity for reflection
- *A glossary* that defines the many technical terms that are needed to understand the complexities of reading instruction
- *A variety of resources*, including a comprehensive list of phonics readers, a set of lesson plans for teaching the four essential cognitive strategies to students, and sample forms and templates to help you set goals and plan for reading instruction
- A checklist of 50 strategies to build a reading culture

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

Chapter 1 describes the students who are falling through the cracks. You will learn who these students are and why there are so many of them. You will also have an opportunity to meet some parents whose children have fallen through the cracks as well as adults who are living with illiteracy. Chapter 2 is packed with information and ideas to get you started, including

- Brief definitions of each of the nine pieces of the reading puzzle (i.e., the components of a reading program that are essential for students to become literate at every grade level)
- A list of 10 alterable variables that when changed in research-based ways will affect the literacy levels of your students
- Twelve fallacies about reading instruction that frequently fool us and often contribute to the reading failure of at-risk students

Chapters 3 through 7 provide in-depth discussions of each of the puzzle pieces. Chapter 3 explains the pieces that are crucial to unlocking the written code: *phonological awareness*, *phonics*, and *spelling*. These three pieces, when solidly put into place, will give students the foundation they need to acquire literacy.

Chapter 4 adds another piece, albeit an often forgotten one, to the reading puzzle: *fluency*. When students do not read fluently, they do whatever they can to avoid reading. Yet students will not develop fluency without reading a lot. What is the answer to this conundrum? You will find out in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 discusses the three puzzle pieces that are essential to gaining meaning from text for the purposes of both learning and enjoyment—*language*, *knowledge*, and *cognitive strategies*.

Chapter 6 describes my favorite piece of the puzzle: *reading a lot*. As a former media specialist and voracious reader myself, I have a passion for putting students and books together. I know the importance of reading in my own life, as

well as the lives of my two children, and I won't rest until every student learns to love reading a lot.

Chapter 7 shows you how to put the final and centerpiece of the puzzle—a *reading culture*—in place in classrooms, schools, and districts. A reading culture is a schoolwide way of doing things that supports the development of literacy for every student. A highly persuasive and pervasive reading culture is characterized by 12 traits, and in Chapter 8 you will find 50 site-tested strategies for developing each of these traits in your own setting.

THE CHALLENGE

Be ready to be challenged as you read. You will be asked to examine your long-standing beliefs about reading; evaluate the results you are currently achieving; and then determine what needs to be changed in your classroom, school, or district. I am confident that *Teach Them ALL to Read: Catching the Kids Who Fall Through the Cracks* will give you the tools you need to do just that!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although I am the author of *Teach Them ALL to Read: Catching the Kids who Fall Through the Cracks*, writing this book would not have been possible without the help of others. I gratefully acknowledge the contributions and suggestions of the following educators who read all or portions of this manuscript, made substantive comments and suggestions for improvement, answered specific questions I had about various pieces of the reading puzzle, or shared their down-in-the-trenches experiences: Joseph Torgesen, Mary Damer, William Bursuck, Dennis Munk, Nettie Griffin, Kathie Dobberteen, Jan Antrim, Marcia Davidson, Becky Rosenthal, John Correll, Kathy Ryan, Jeanne Wanzek, Jan Rauth, Linda Thomas, and the thousands of teachers, principals, and central office administrators who have attended my reading workshops and *asked* all of the questions that I have attempted to answer in this book.

I must credit Ann Walker, Assistant Executive Director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and Gracia Alkema, the Founding President and Publisher Emerita of Corwin Press, for originally conceiving the idea of a workshop for principals on raising reading achievement. I am especially appreciative to Ann for the feedback she gave to me during the development and piloting of those early workshops and for her continued support and encouragement.

My profound thanks are extended to Larche Farrill, former administrator and now director of Outreach for the Missouri Council of School Administrators, for inviting me to be a part of the Readership Academy in Missouri over the past 3 years. Larche and a roundtable of principals conceived the idea of a program for principals focused on reading improvement, obtained grant funding, and then invited principals to five sites around the state to learn, share, and

network with their colleagues. The principals and teachers of Missouri have taught me much about both leadership and reading; I now count many of them as good friends.

I am, as always, grateful and lovingly indebted to my husband and business partner, E. Raymond Adkins. He plays a variety of roles during the writing of all of my books—copy editor, sounding board, encourager, supporter, and even nursemaid. He anticipates my every need, he is always there when I need him, and his advice is unfailingly sound. He is the unsung coauthor of this book.