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Tell me, why don't my students read?

It is a common complaint of teachers worldwide that their students do not read enough. Yet, as we all know, reading is at the heart of learning, and a student who is reluctant to read is instantly at a disadvantage. This is something that most students themselves know, so it is often curious to us that, despite our continual encouragement, they frequently only read when they are specifically required to do so, and rarely engage in what we might call 'independent reading'. In short, there is often a significant gap between *knowing how to read* and then making a step further towards *becoming a reader*. The question I want to look at in this brief article is what is it that makes the transition towards *becoming a reader* such an elusive one?

One of the most important points to realise in understanding a reluctance to read is that there are at least two key factors involved: cognitive abilities that we use when we read, and the *socio-emotional experience* of reading itself. Typically, teachers have emphasised the development of cognitive abilities, and it is indeed this which underpins the ability to read. It is the socio-emotional dimension, however, that affects a desire to put these cognitive abilities into action.

From the perspective of what the brain actually does when we read, we now know that numerous different realms of knowledge are drawn upon. At its most basic, reading involves decoding symbols – turning them into sounds in our head. But the ability to extract meaning from the sound-symbol relationship requires much, much more – knowledge of how the language is used, of how grammar works, of vocabulary, of the structure and conventions of texts, of background knowledge related to the content involved, and so on. Thus, we say that reading is an *interactive* process – in which the text not only conveys meaning to the reader, but the reader also brings meaning to the text. The extent to which a developing reader is able or unable to do either of these things will directly affect how much 'work' is involved in reading. If, for example, a reader is unfamiliar with the vocabulary of the text, the type of text or the topic itself, they may expend greater effort in trying to make sense of it. It is likely that the amount of 'work' involved will have a direct effect on motivation to read, so it should not be surprising that students who do not have adequate cognitive skills steer clear of reading when they can.

There are at least two lessons for us from this. First, teachers involved in reading skills development need to ensure that students are adequately prepared in all aspects of the reading process – not only in sound-symbol decoding but in building lots of experience with different types of text, different genres and ways in which written language differs from spoken language. Secondly, teachers also need to think carefully about *what* they ask students to read since it is important to develop a sense of competence, of success in reading to stimulate a desire to read more. A feeling of failure in reading is likely to exacerbate negative emotions towards reading.

While weak abilities in the cognitive aspect of reading may have a dampening effect on motivation to read, we also need to recognise that attitudes towards reading may have a much deeper origin. Research, for example, has found that the single greatest predictor for success in reading, and for ultimately going on to *become a reader,* is the extent to which children are read *to* in their early years. It seems that the formative experience of being read to is a major factor in shaping a child's attitude and approach to reading in later life. It is not difficult to understand why this is so. The bedtime story, for example, is packed full of learning experiences, all largely positive. Not only does the pre-literate child learn through simple exposure that those strange black marks on a page can convey interesting, engaging meanings, and that text and pages move in a particular direction as the adult reads through the story. They may also learn to associate all of this with emotional warmth and closeness. The parent sitting on the bed or sofa, a blanket over both of them, with an arm around the child embracing both the child and book – all this produces positive emotional experiences which become bound together with the act of reading in such a way that it will last a lifetime.

Unfortunately, such positive experiences of reading and being read to are not universal. If reading is experienced as an alien, taught skill which involves hard work, rather than as something to share and enjoy, it is unlikely that the same positive feelings will be stimulated when an opportunity or requirement to read presents itself. Thus, a reluctance to read may have a deep rooted explanation. We can't simply expect that those who know *how to read* will somehow miraculously become *people who read*.

The realisation that the socio-emotional dimension of reading plays such a powerful role means that teachers not only need to teach the skill of reading; they also need to 'sell' reading itself. It needs to be presented as a rewarding, engaging, and positive experience. There are many things that teachers can do in this regard. In schools, for example, attractive, changing book displays which engage curiosity can draw students towards reading. Similarly, the animated reading aloud of the beginning of a story can encourage students to read the rest of the story. Through ways such as this, reading can be experienced not simply as something that needs to be done, but as something which stimulates thought, interaction, enjoyment and learning, and which provides reasons to become a reader.