

Reading: The Foundation for Success

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Kindergarten teachers are often presented with a great challenge when attempting to create learning experiences appropriate for each student in class, because every student arrives at a different level. Some students are provided opportunities to learn at home, while others are not even aware of how to properly hold a pencil. After considering all factors of student backgrounds in multiple situations, teachers and psychologists have consistently recognized the impact early reading has on student success in school. Students who are introduced to books before entering school are typically higher in academic standing than students who have never read or been read to before school. Children develop an interest in reading and begin to explore literature outside of school when they are introduced to books at an early age. By pursuing a hobby in reading, students inadvertently receive multiple educational tools. Teachers and parents must strive to instill a love of reading in their children at an early age because recreational reading is the key to academic success.

The importance of reading has been emphasized for decades. The formal curriculum in 17th century America included religion and reading (Sadker & Zittleman, 2010, p. 187). Religion in schools has disintegrated over time, but reading prevails as a key component of the common core seen in today's classroom. Reading is one of the first skills taught due to its role in all subjects. Teachers of every school subject use reading in their classrooms. Instructors create PowerPoint presentations, hand out articles for review, and develop word problems for analysis. Due to time constraints, textbooks are provided to encourage students to further their knowledge in the subject. These are all instructional techniques requiring students to read. It is no secret that reading is a skill all must learn in order to be successful, but many do not recognize the extent at which reading impacts academics. People read in order to relax, pass time, or to

escape. It is an activity that many consider enjoyable. However, reading is also a learning experience. It has the means to improve cognition and awareness of those who participate frequently. Students will benefit greatly by partaking in daily reading.

Children benefit from books even prior to knowing how to read. If parents and teachers read children's books aloud, children can take part in the active reading experience without understanding the actual reading process. Since children's books are often constructed by repetition, young listeners are able to predict what will occur next in the plot. This repetition is seen in Robert Munsch's book, *Love You Forever*, as the mother continues telling her son, "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, as long as I'm living my baby you'll be" over the course of the story. After a few pages, a child will recognize the repetition and tell the story along with the reader. If a child finds a favorite book, he or she will ask for it to be read constantly. Children memorize the story and begin reciting what will occur before the reader can turn the page. The ability to fill in the blank builds confidence in students because children enjoy feeling included and important. Confidence is necessary for student success. Research conducted by Tavani and Losh (2003) recognizes a "positive, statistically significant correlation" between academic performance and student self-confidence (p. 145). When a student is self-confident, academic achievement will be the result. If a student feels inadequate or unworthy, he or she will perform likewise. When a student believes in himself or herself, the task at hand is more likely to be accomplished successfully. If children can impress adult readers by explaining future events of a story, they feel ready to achieve in other areas as well. The more a child is exposed to books, the more he or she will develop this readiness.

One is able to identify the student who has been raised in a home with books versus the student who does not have access to a home library. Students who come from families of readers

are not necessarily taught how to read, but just by witnessing reading, they are one step closer to learning. How the adults in a child's life respond to reading often determines how the child views the activity. According to Mulan (2010), "A parent who reads reveals an enjoyment of reading, which is then transmitted to their children (p. 416). When children are around adults who participate in daily reading, they begin to associate reading with positive thoughts. Since children tend to mimic the behavior of those they admire, when they watch family members reading, they aspire to do the same. Children often "[pretend] to read books, signs, menus, and cereal boxes" far before they are taught because they are aware of the "critical importance of reading" (Berg & Stegelman, 2003, p. 47). They become motivated to learn the skill. This love of books can help students overcome the initial obstacles associated with the challenges of learning to read. The confidence and motivation blossoming from reading achievement will encourage students to set high goals in future facets of learning as well.

Readers are goal setters. True recreational readers know what book they are reading, what they read last, and what they will read next. In order to make time for the books recommended by a friend or the literature found in the new stacks of the library, they know how much time they have to read their current book. All dedicated readers, young and old, set these goals. Readers set higher expectations for themselves than the average student, causing them to work harder. Teachers stress the importance of reading by requiring testing over student readings. Accelerated reader is a common program used to assess individuals in a reading class. Students are given the opportunity to choose their own books for the program. Since recreational readers always have a book on hand, they enjoy the opportunity to read, be assessed, and receive points. Avid readers participating in the accelerated reader program will impress teachers by accumulating points and exceeding average goals because they are self-motivated to work hard

and perform well. They read higher level books because they enjoy the challenge. Goal setting is only one of many skills developed from reading that promotes academic success.

Another outcome of frequent reading is the development of an expansive vocabulary. Of all the positive products of reading, this is the one many recognize. Dedicated readers view uncovering new books as an adventure. After reading one, they almost immediately move to the next in line. Every book tells a story, and all stories require different words to be told. Therefore, reading has a greater impact on student learning than conversation or television watching. Parents recognize almost anything is a better use of time than time spent in front of a television. However, comparing the influence television watching has on language development versus the language learned from reading makes the distinction between the two more evident. Cunningham and Stanovich (2001) recognize that children's books introduce 30.9 rare words per 1000 compared to the 2 rare words per 1000 in children friendly shows such as *Mr. Rogers* and *Sesame Street* (p. 139). The fact that reading is more educational than television watching is not surprising. Although, since *Sesame Street* has been in the educational show category for almost half a century, it is indeed startling that this highly rated show introduces such an insignificant number of words. The characters teach life lessons and present new words, letters, symbols, and numbers to kids, but children's literature still introduces a significantly greater amount of information.

Writing is more scholastic than the average conversation. Conversations often consist of simplified language. Cunningham and Stanovich (2001) conclude conversation cannot take the place of reading because common academic terms such as "portray, exposure, and dominant" are not often included in conversation vocabulary (p. 140). Books are unique in this sense because authors are some of the most fluent speakers due to their natural way with words. Their grasp of

language is conveyed through their writing. Children must be exposed to this form of language because they will encounter such words in classes, and they must be able to understand basic definitions. The words encountered are typically simple, and children are usually familiar with synonyms. However, students will not recognize this relation unless they have previously heard or seen the word in context. Not experiencing this type of language will negatively impact school achievement. When an assignment requires students to portray the emotions of a figure through a drawing, students cannot complete the activity without knowledge of the word “portray”. Successful authors and speakers read in order to refine their language, and students should do the same. An extensive vocabulary will allow students to communicate successfully with peers and adults. Reading will expand their knowledge of language and their understanding of the world as well.

Children can learn from books and experience new parts of life through reading. The lives of storybook characters do not always mesh with the lives of student readers. Kids who are raised in areas without diverse populations may not realize there are other people outside of their boundaries. By reading about children from different backgrounds and life experiences, children will grow to understand people are unique. Anderson (2010) recognizes reading “broadens children’s background experiences which builds their schemata” (p.313). Teachers do their best teaching when lessons are built on students’ schemata, or prior knowledge. When introducing a new topic in any content, the teacher must compare the new idea or vocabulary word to something the student already knows in order for comprehension to be realized. If a student has never heard of Native Americans, he or she will not be interested when the teacher introduces the topic in a social studies class. However, if students have read about a Native American child, they will be more engaged and interested in the subject. Hearing something they have already

seen or heard of once before will help them make connections. Students will be encouraged to pay attention in class as a result of familiarity with the subject. Therefore, a greater awareness leads to more effective learning experiences. The more a child reads, the more he or she is introduced to different lifestyles, events, and ideas. How prepared a student is for school is determined by the amount of time he or she dedicates to reading each day.

Beginning readers must put forth a great effort when learning to read due to the inconsistent rules of the English language. Phonics and structure must be analyzed when trying to interpret text. Consequently, reading helps students develop critical and creative thinking skills. As students advance in reading, their focus shifts from trying to decipher the text to analyzing its purpose and meaning. Plot, speaker, theme, and setting must be considered when reading. Movies and television shows set everything up and leave no room for creative thought. Viewers are only required to watch. Reading is quite different because readers must think about who is speaking, how he or she feels, and where the story is taking place. Each of these factors must be taken into account when attempting to understand the story. Students try to understand text by “relating information to their past experiences, interpreting figurative language, determining authors’ purposes, [and] evaluating the ideas presented” (Cheek, Flipppo, & Lindsey, 1989, p. 8). By thinking, imagining, and paying attention to detail, readers recognize more than most are able to see and have the tools necessary to outshine peers in various subjects.

Since reading encourages the brain to search for answers, solve problems, and make predictions, being a skilled reader can aid students on exams. The relation of reading skill to successful academic performance was recognized decades ago. Through detailed research, Finck (1935) concluded that 63% of students receiving assistance in reading made greater improvements on exams than the control group which did not receive reading guidance (p. 266).

Current studies have similar outcomes to prove reading improves cognition and reasoning. Research conducted by O'Reilly and McNamara (2007) analyzes science test scores of skilled readers versus non-skilled readers, concluding "reading skill help[s] compensate for low knowledge" (p. 183). A skilled reader who is a poor science student can perform better than a knowledgeable science student who does not read. These findings are significant because they stress the importance of reading on academics. Recreational readers are active readers with reading abilities that surpass the average student. Having strong reading abilities can make the difference in a letter grade. No other activity has such a significant influence.

Reading is a unique learning experience because it provides students with information in a meaningful context. The majority of teachers use lecture as their main method of instruction; however, teachers cannot expect students to retain specifics just by listening and recording. The information must connect to the lives of the students in some way in order for them to remember what is taught. Authors typically create main characters to match the age of their readers because they understand students appreciate the link. For instance, Barbara Pook's *Junie B. Jones* series is centered on a young, five-year-old girl, and appropriately, the writing is designed for students ranging from kindergarten to second grade. Students are therefore able to relate to the character. Learning new vocabulary and developing reading skills is not a hassle because students can enjoy reading about the entertaining experiences of a student like themselves. Students are unaware that the learning process is taking place because they are too concerned with getting to the next page to find out more. The result is students become more willing to learn.

Since reading is such a key component of learning, teachers and psychologists are still attempting to uncover the most effective way to teach the skill. Some classrooms are literature

based while others focus on skills. The best approach has not yet been agreed upon, and reading pedagogy remains a controversial issue. However, all have come to the consensus that learning how to read is not possible without the presence of books. Teachers must use literature as “a foundation of [the] reading classroom” in order for progress to be made (Danielson & LaBonty, 1994, p.3). Teachers must scaffold students in their learning. They can guide students along the way, by providing tools for learning, but the students must do the majority of the learning through individual practice. Teachers and parents must make students aware of the joys of reading so the children will read on their own time.

Some children are brought up in environments that do not promote reading. Since students without access to books do not recognize the importance of reading, they can be reluctant when first introduced to the skill. These students are at risk and can even be labeled as exceptional learners if the issue is not addressed at an early stage. Once reading instruction begins the gap between the student from a print-rich home and the student from the home without books widens. It becomes the job of the teacher to recognize this problem and step in immediately. By providing tutoring opportunities, storybook reading experiences, and direct instruction, teachers can guide students to a better understanding. Early intervention has the ability to recover these struggling readers. Reading is the foundation of learning, and no student should be excluded from the experience. Teachers must recognize the option of intervention and never accept a student’s lack of willingness to try. All students can learn to appreciate literature when given proper encouragement. Teachers must create environments that promote reading for all students. They can foster a love of reading by providing unique learning experiences. Allowing students to bring pillows and blankets for a designated reading day introduces students to the relaxing and enjoyable side of reading. By taking time to consider each individual child,

the teacher can help students find books to match their lives or interests. Only then will students recognize the opportunities books provide.

Books allow one to travel to distant lands and encounter interesting people without ever leaving the beanbag chair. Reading can help a person cope with problems, understand an issue, and make difficult decisions. Spending a few minutes reading everyday can help students learn about the world around them and also how to succeed in school. Being aware of the possibilities reading allows is enough to convince even the most unwilling student to convert to a recreational reader. If students are shaped into avid readers, parents will witness hard working children, teachers will recognize a willingness to learn, and administration will see higher test scores. The skills developed by frequent reading aid students during schooling and will remain within close reach throughout a lifetime.

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