

7 Misconceptions About Teaching Adolescents to Read

The scale of the problem of students leaving secondary school unable to read is an unnecessary tragedy. This entirely preventable situation is exacerbated by some common misconceptions:

1 If students haven't learnt to read by the time they reach secondary school, it is too late.

Secondary schools usually have two responses regarding these students. First, they believe that it is the role of primary schools to teach reading. It most certainly is - ideally students will be well on the way to becoming confident readers by the end of KS1. However, this does not relieve secondary schools of their responsibilities to all their students. The second response is: if students haven't learnt to read by the end of KS2, there must be something wrong with them, so the school will need to put in place additional supports to compensate for this problem.

Surely, the most fundamental aim of schools is to teach children to read. Blaming the preceding teacher or school (or the home) does not absolve anyone of this requirement. There is enough evidence available to put this excuse to rest. Most of these students are 'instructional casualties' - the result of having been taught to guess using Whole Language multi-cueing strategies.¹ Research clearly supports the use of phonics-based programmes.² The sooner students are taught using a high-quality reading intervention with proven results, the sooner they can begin to make up the deficit and begin to access the full curriculum.

2 Low reading ability equates to low intelligence.

Students can be perceived as 'low ability' because their lack of reading skills has denied them access to reading materials that would have developed their knowledge of the world. Poor reading is inevitably linked to poor writing and spelling, and so teachers again conclude that the student is 'less able'. But what if the barriers to reading, writing and spelling were removed through well-designed teaching? All that frustrated potential is unlocked when students have access to the code that we all need to negotiate the world. This classic article by Keith Stanovich explains Matthew Effects - the tendency of lower performers to fall further and further behind.³

3 Intelligence is innate and fixed.

If intelligence is defined as the ability to learn, and we have seen previously failing students learn very quickly when given systematic teaching, does this mean that the intervention made them smarter - or had insufficient teaching *created* reading problems that prevented them from showing their intelligence? In this famous film Siegfried Engelmann demonstrated how children with low IQs, whose older siblings

were all in special education programmes, could make dramatic gains with systematic instruction⁴. Shepard Barbash comments: “Confounding the belief that intelligence was hereditary, Engelmann found (and others later confirmed) that the mean IQ for the group jumped from 96 to 121 in one year—the largest IQ gains ever recorded in a group of children.”⁵

4 The student has a processing deficit that prevents them from learning to read.

Julian Elliot has estimated that while around 20% of students have a label of dyslexia, the true percentage of those with a genuine, innate difficulty is about 2%.⁶ The students who are suffering from what Engelmann calls ‘dysteachia’⁷ are ‘instructional casualties’. Misattribution of the cause of reading problems leads to a passive attitude that ‘nothing can be done’. In fact, there is an enormous amount that can be done.

5 Some students will always need supports such as overlays or assistance given by a reader-writer.

There is a wealth of research that has shown that the use of overlays and tinted lenses does not work. While it is understandable that teachers seek to use whatever adaptations will help a student, we can easily assume that what we are doing is helping. If it boosts a student’s confidence, it may even help a little. But does it help enough, and does it have long term results? This summary gives an overview of the research on Irlen glasses and overlays.⁸

In *Keeping an eye on reading: is difficulty with reading a visual problem?* Kerry Hempenstall reviews the research literature on interventions based on adapted materials or equipment, and finds that there is no credible scientific evidence to support such a view. The social and psychological functions of this approach, though, are clear: the ‘condition’ removes the sense of failure from the student: “it’s not their fault, their eyes don’t work right” – while at the same time exonerating teachers from the responsibility for not having addressed reading problems with properly designed instruction.⁹

Finally, the need for a reader-writer is superfluous once the student is taught to read for themselves.

6 We cannot expect weaker students to make rapid progress.

Low expectations are a blight on students who are able, but have encountered difficulty with reading. We need to have high expectations, start believing in them before they do, and not allow them to fail or coast. This is not mere idealism: careful programme design, including careful calibration of next steps, enables us to create the conditions for learning: thorough assessment to individualise the intervention; only teaching what the student needs to know; making incremental steps that are challenging but neither too easy nor too hard. We need to have the skills to determine whether a problem stems from a true lack of knowledge, a lack of fluency or low motivation. We need to give continual feedback and correction, with lots of practice opportunities. We need to teach to fluency, and to provide opportunities to generalise skills. These graphs will give you an idea of how rapidly students can progress when challenged and supported by a strong programme.¹⁰

7 Introducing students to interesting books will motivate them to read which will lead to them becoming more competent readers.

It would be fair to say that most secondary school literacy co-ordinators and English teachers have a love of books, which is wonderful. We have seen kids get hooked into reading when they find an author or a series of books that they really enjoy. Surely, that is the answer – find the right book? I love the concept of Drop Everything and Read and Sustained Silent Reading as a reader – that precious uninterrupted 20 – 30 minutes to bury one’s head in a book. But imagine for a moment, the student who can’t yet read: being forced to sit in silence, looking at some squiggles on a page. Then consider why he or she always moans or kicks off during DEAR.¹¹

Yes, keep creating wonderful, magical reading spaces, inspiring and encouraging kids to read, and introducing them to great books. But please do something about the ones who can’t yet read. Don’t leave them on the outside looking in. Make sure that they are taught – it’s not too late!

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