

The right book at the right time

Inspiring young readers takes hard work to overcome formidable obstacles many students face

Inspiring Reading Success: Interest and Motivation in an Age of High-Stakes Testing, edited by Rosalie Fink and S.

Jay Samuels, appears to be the right book at the right time to help teachers working with students who are struggling readers or failing to learn as they should. In answer to the question "Why did we write this volume now?" the authors explain that while methodology is important, at times it can be too narrow a focus. Now may be the time to "consider other factors that influence the success or failure of even the best reading methods."

Today's classroom has gone global. No matter whether a teacher is in an urban classroom or in the heartland, likely there are English-language learners; students who come from poor families with few educational resources; students with physical, behavioral, and neurological handicaps that make learning to read difficult; and stu-

dents whose backgrounds include violence, drug addiction, or lack of adult supervision.

Editors Fink and Samuels, in their own chapters, address these concerns in compelling fashion—Fink by focusing on a study she undertook at the Harvard Graduate School of Education of "66 successful men and women who had struggled with severe reading problems as children yet ultimately succeeded in fields that demand sophisticated reading." One was a Nobel laureate in medicine and physiology, one an artist, one a television personality.

The common factor in their stories, according to the study, was the "burning desire to know more about a topic of passionate personal interest." Another tool in their reading toolbox was their use of context to decipher meaning in texts. Because they read so deeply and widely in a particular area, they developed "deep background

knowledge and schema familiarity." Their transformation, however, was not on a seamless trajectory. They took longer to become fluent, still had problems with various aspects of decoding language—including word recognition and sound analysis—and, of course, the ones who were most successful started earlier in their childhood.

Fink wonders how these 66 individuals would fare today under NCLB. Despite their ultimate success pre-NCLB, she speculates that "some of these individuals would have failed today's high-stakes tests and, consequently, been denied high school diplomas."

Other factors in their success included their resiliency—their ability to "bounce back after failure"—and the presence of mentors during their school careers. Fink offers teachers and families strategies to help students develop into strong readers, and assessment strategies that are more helpful than the formal, "system centered" high-stakes testing. She is optimistic, above all: "Striving readers can learn to read well, even if they learn differently from others—especially if we use motivating materials about their interests."

Because high-stakes reading assessment under NCLB is for all students,

teachers today are being asked to do what almost seems impossible—as Samuels says in his contributed chapter in *Inspiring Reading Success*. "Some of the chronic problems the students face in their day-to-day living are so formidable that the best reading methods are no match." Poverty, low level of parental education, frequent moves, street violence, homelessness, and hunger all must be faced by many students and addressed before they can even begin to think about learning.

The miracle is that some students do cope and manage to become successful learners and successful in life. That is because they are "stress-resilient" and have the benefit of a mentor or role model who provides constant, predictable emotional, financial, and psychological support, and who steers a child to the best education possible. Samuels compares the challenges of these students with child prodigies who, though possessed of great natural abilities, may not find the success they seem destined for. Again, mentoring is key as is the belief that hard work and perseverance pay off, and that what happens is, to a large extent, within a child's control.

Samuels also recounts the story of a successful inner-city teacher who helps her students achieve success with her own toolbox of reading and language techniques. They include daily oral language exercises, promoting the development of good moral values, establishing personal relationships, and reading aloud to stuffed animals!

Five more chapters follow, each by gifted scholars who share their understanding of the importance of motivation and how best to inculcate self-confidence and a love of learning in all students.

In addition, there are lists of resources, checklists, assessments, and a whole array of tips and tricks to get students to connect their reading with real life and real success.

Fink and Samuels say they are excited not only by the creative approaches of each of the authors but about the materials they recommend. Their enthusiasm is unflagging: "By understanding common threads found in the diverse perspectives in this volume, we hope that teachers will come away with a new outlook on teaching and learning."

Inspiring Reading Success is available now for US\$19.16 for members, US\$23.95 for nonmembers. Order publication number 682-448. This is the December 2007 Book Club selection. Contact the Call Center, IRA. Tel. 800-366-7323 (from the United States and Canada only); others call 302-731-1600. Fax 302-737-0878. You can also visit the IRA website at www.reading.org.

