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## Factors that Impact Successful Reading: Student-Related, School-Rated, and Text Related

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When we are reflecting on those many factors that impact the ability to be a successful reader, and to develop other literacy skills such as writing, listening, and oral communication, it is important to note that not all students learn at the same rate or in the same way. Why you may ask, do all students not learn at the same rate or the same way? This is a question that has frustrated educators, and in particular, reading specialists, for many years. It is a difficult question to answer, but one to which many stakeholders and other constituents, such as parents, need to know the answer.

The emphasis on accountability at the national level has become so pronounced that many school districts and teachers are almost to the point of desperation in their efforts to improve performance in the classroom, and increase reading scores on high-stake assessments. Several stakeholders are unaware that many factors impact a student's ability to become a successful reader, because quite often the more vocal and engaged stakeholders were successful readers during their school experience, and their own children are successful readers. Other stakeholders may not have experienced as much success as they would have liked, but are now focused on their own children's needs and want them to be successful. Stakeholders are especially concerned that students may not gain necessary skills in school to become successful in the global marketplace. The emphasis on turning out students who can

compete at high levels as adults has created an environment where the product outweighs the process, and the product is evaluated on test scores that meet a level of success mandated by certain stakeholders, such as legislators and the federal government. An example of an attempt to more or less standardize learning is the Common Core State Standards, an idea with merit, but which has been misinterpreted by some stakeholders as a mandated curriculum, rather than a guide to learning, as it was originally intended. Most of the states adopted CCSS, but now backlash against its use has begun in some states and is spreading to others. Some of its earliest supporters now contend that it is an attempt by the federal government to supersede a state's right to mandate educational policy. Now you may be asking yourself what does this have to do with the factors that impact learning to read? The simple answer is that this brief national discussion of CCSS illustrated our inability to agree on specific measures to eradicate illiteracy in this country. This brings us back to our primary focus on factors that impact the ability for students to be successful readers. It is our contention that by focusing on those factors, we can develop more effective learning environments for students. The factors we want to explore are student-related, school-related, and text-related.

In examining student-related factors that impact reading success, it is important to note that most of these factors are outside the purview of the student. There are many factors that cannot be controlled by students, some of the more critical ones are home environment, socio-economic status, parental support, engagement with print, and the opportunity to engage in a myriad of experiences. The importance of environment cannot be understated. Environment impacts both home and school in ways that can

either nurture the student's learning, or negatively impact the student to the extent that it is injurious to their ability to be a successful reader. Elements of a student's environment that can adversely affect learning are parental support that is not adequate to support a positive learning environment, physical and psychological abuse, instability in the home and poverty (where a student's nutrition and daily routines of life are disrupted). These factors further impact the availability of print in the home and the opportunity to expand knowledge through experiences, both concrete and vicarious. Because experiences enhance prior knowledge, a positive environment where students have the opportunity to interact with print and build background knowledge is crucial.

School-related factors revolve around effective instruction in the classroom. What is the teacher's role in assisting students to become successful readers? The teacher is responsible for providing instruction that encourages learning by providing a positive environment that motivates students to want to learn. Some key ingredients in a successful classroom are that it is well organized and managed effectively, and that all students' reading levels are accommodated by analyzing assessment data and matching materials to each student's instructional and independent reading levels. There should be a variety of reading materials available to students, and every effort should be made to determine students' interest so appropriate materials are provided in order to motivate them to become more active readers. The goal of effective instruction is to engage the students as active participants in reading through a collaborative process that involves maintaining a high level of interest and motivation

Although students may be highly motivated and engaged in school learning activities, there are many variables of text-related factors that can impact their efforts to become successful readers. The primary objective in becoming a successful reader is to understand text. To understand text, comprehension is critical. When engaging with text, the instructional process must include appropriate vocabulary (technical, specialized, and general).

Understanding text is not only dependent on vocabulary development, but the activation of critical thinking skills in understanding the nuances involved in interpreting text, as well. In addition to the actual engagement of the text and readers as a cognitive process, other purely text-related factors can impact the reading process. These involve a variety of issues that emerge as the materials with which students are engaged become more complex. This is particularly relevant in the transition from narrative to expository text. These issues include the number of concepts that students encounter as materials become more complex, dealing with numerous reading sources, organizational patterns of text structures, compare-contrast, cause and effects, and readability level. Certainly, there are other text-related issues that impact reading success, but this brief discussion serves as a reminder that interaction between the student and text is significantly crucial to successful reading.

Our intention in this column was to briefly highlight those factors that we believe are relevant to a student's understanding of text. We believe that these factors can be categorized as student-related, school-related, and text-related. Furthermore, we believe that the awareness of these factors will strengthen the

instructional process, resulting in a more actively engaged and successful reader.

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