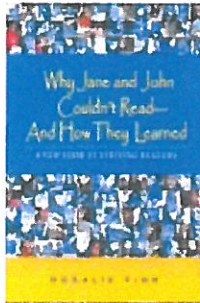


## Stories of Struggling Readers Who Succeeded!

A review of



### **Why Jane and John Couldn't Read— And How They Learned: A New Look at Striving Readers**

by Rosalie Fink

Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2006. 175 pp. ISBN 0-87207-592-3. \$22.95



Reviewed by  
[Alice Sterling Honig](#)

Worrisome numbers of children and youths have difficulties learning to read. Those whose struggles to read are unsuccessful often end up as school dropouts and sometimes as delinquents. Jails are filled with persons who have severe reading problems. This book is a hopeful beacon amid these discouraging statistics. The author set out in her doctoral research to explore what makes it possible for “striving readers” (as she prefers to call struggling readers) to succeed. Of course, there has always been, as the author notes, “broad agreement among experts about the essential elements of good reading instruction: systematic teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, oral reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies” (p. ix). But despite educators' efforts, many children with varying degrees of dyslexia still struggle with severe reading problems.

The author located 66 men and women strivers, who mostly had overcome their early reading struggles. All of them became well known in their chosen career field. Data were gathered through face-to-face, in-depth interviews of three to nine hours as well as administration of a variety of detailed reading assessments. The professionals thus

studied intensively explained how their strivings led to successes. They reminisced about how they overcame discouragement, not only from their reading struggles but also from counselors and other adults who tried to steer them away from higher professional goals. The author's research led her to write this book to reveal the circumstances that resulted in successes.

### Gender Differences

The author is forthright and clear-eyed in examining the problem of gender differences among the men and women strivers she interviewed. "Many boys are alienated by reading as it is taught in school. Many boys, in their desire to be considered 'real boys' resist reading in the belief that reading is for girls" (p. 94). The author gives creative ideas for what she calls "gender balance activities" (p. 110). For example, find fiction in which girls or women are active characters and boys and men are sensitive caregivers. Ask students to discuss and explain why these characters appeal to them. Have students write down the attributes of story characters of each gender. Have students reverse the gender roles in some television commercial advertisements. "Is a bathroom cleanser still perceived as a high-quality product if a *man* dances around the clean sink or toilet?" (p. 110).

### Early Identification of Reading Difficulties

The author gives specific details that permit early prediction of reading difficulties from kindergarten onward. She offers suggestions that are bound to increase teacher awareness of the need to galvanize early remediation efforts. Does the child have rapid and automatized naming—the ability to name letters quickly and automatically? How attentive is the child during class reading and writing activities? Does the child frequently act out as class clown? Can the child focus attention appropriately while listening to a story? How strong is letter and word recognition? How difficult is it for the child to learn nursery rhymes? Does the child have troubles finding a rhyme for easy word endings (e.g., *bat*, *cat*, *hat*)? Is there a family history of pronunciation, reading, or spelling difficulties? Normatively, some children do reverse letters from the preschool years through age

seven or eight. Thus, a teacher needs to be flexible in identifying serious reading troubles. But as children move through elementary school, those who have few words stored in memory; those who cannot read fluently, accurately, quickly, and with appropriate expression; and those who cannot remember text material or tell about the meaning of simple text contents will be a cause for teacher concern.

### Intense Interest in Subject Matter: Secret of Success

📖 The author quotes extensively from her subjects' own recollections of their struggles and efforts. Even as adults, some of the persons studied still could not read well in other fields but were intent and concentrated when the reading materials, such as manuals or journal articles, were in the field of their intense interest and pleasure. A profound secret of success for the professionals interviewed was how important it was to read material of interest to them personally. This strong research finding of the crucial importance for successful strivers of reading to satisfy personal curiosity and interest should be generously shared with parents as well as teachers.

### Novel Strategies

📖 Those successful professionals who still could not automatically distinguish between words (e.g., *horse* and *house*) revealed other strategies they used for reading. One professional explained that he would "scan the page for a familiar word, such as *but*, then match the b in *but* to the b in the unfamiliar word and decipher its letters" (p. 79). Thus, even with a continued lack of coordination and automaticity in reading, the striving readers in this study found ways to decode text.

### Implications for Teachers

📖 What are the implications of the findings of this research for the classroom? Teachers need to teach phonics and phoneme-grapheme correspondences. But they also need to make different text choices for struggling readers and individualize their efforts to encourage student reading for pleasure. The author suggests targeting special books for girls and boys to

meet differing interests. She suggests the use of "twin texts"—one fiction, one nonfiction—to encourage striving readers to tackle material of personal interest in their favorite genre. Time for silent reading practice should be generously provided. For younger children, the author stresses the importance of rich play experiences to provide context for reading content. She encourages multisensory instructional methods (as is recommended by the Orton-Gillingham method) that incorporate visual, kinesthetic/motoric, and auditory modes. She suggests the use of computer-assisted programs and books on tape. She urges teachers to get students writing about topics they care about, are enthusiastic about, or are troubled about. Students relate to topics that interest them, such as sexuality, adoption, terrorism, kidnapping, school shootings, and making friends. Get them writing about topics that they care about intensely. Accept student writing despite spelling difficulties, whether the writing be about favorite TV stars, drug dealers in the neighborhood, the death of a family member, cliques in school, skateboarding, rocket building, math puzzles, or any topic of their intense interest.

Teachers are urged to create content areas in setting up libraries in their classrooms. Striving readers can more easily find materials that match their personal interests. Youths may be particularly motivated to read materials about topics of personal salience. The students may still show huge discrepancies between their high and low reading skills depending on topic areas. But encouraging reading in children's areas of interest will prevent educators from thinking they have to "dumb down" the curriculum for a struggling reader. Avid reading in a given field will give the student a large vocabulary about this specialized area and make further reading in this area even more pleasurable and engaging. The student may never read as fluently and rapidly in other areas as in the area of extreme interest and expertise. Thus, teachers need to realize there may be huge differences in literacy abilities depending on the student's special domains of interest. The author labels this phenomenon "content area-dependent fluency" (p.79) and speculates that perhaps there are multiple fluencies. She conjectures that reading ability may be a more complex phenomenon rather than one that is

unidimensional, and she compares this idea with the concept of multiple intelligences rather than a single concept of intelligence.

### Mentors Are Crucial

☞ Mentoring proved critical for the strivers' success. Men in this study received academic help and guidance from their family members. In contrast, none of the women received help from their family. It is troubling to note that men reported twice as many mentors beginning in middle school and into their adulthood, in comparison with the women in this study. As well, men received more attention for their dyslexia at home. Teachers need to be particularly aware of these data revealing gender bias, so that they can serve as caring and effective mentors, which would be marvelous both for male and female students.

### Resources Galore!

☞ This book is chock-full of useful references to print and online resources. The author gives more than general encouragement to educators. She gives specific titles of books (at different grade levels) that are likely to inspire early readers. This book offers specific references for youths, including biographies as well as fairy tales, folk tales, romance fiction, novels, science books and supplies, in addition to Web sites and CD-ROMs. The references for further reading by mentors and teachers are also extensive.

☞ This book will be of great help to educators. In addition, it is an important addition to the applied literature in the field of reading remediation. I highly recommend this book also to concerned parents as well as teachers who are searching for ways to promote reading success in children frustrated and discouraged by their problems in learning to read.