

Every Student Wants to Be a Scholar!

By Tamara Williams | Categories: Being a Reader, Implementation

Educators! What is our desired goal? How do we achieve it?

As I begin each school year teaching fifth graders, I ask myself how I can support my students in becoming better readers and ultimately, help them fall in love with reading. But each year, I notice more students coming to my class never having engaged in authentic reading experiences. They haven't been given the chance to grow the reading habits we wish our students would display, making it tough to answer those initial questions about our desired goal for these students and how to achieve it. In all segments of the school day, we expect students to perform with independence, engage in thoughtful class discussions, and impress us with their abilities to be scholarly. These expectations are no different when it comes to them being independent readers and lovers of books. Students need consistent practice in the skills and behaviors we associate with scholars. This doesn't just happen; these behaviors must be modeled, practiced, and nurtured in order for students to master *the art of being a scholar*. Our hopes for our students are challenged when we set out to foster this love of reading within students who seemingly lack the motivation and ability to meet our expectations. However, they can get there with our guidance!

For many years, I have spent the summer teaching third graders facing mandatory retention in our district's summer school program. As you can imagine, the students in attendance struggle with reading for a multitude of reasons. Their "next step" in education comes down to their ability to prove they can read and comprehend at their grade level within the short window of time allotted for remediation in the summer. Somewhere in their short elementary school career, gaps have been created in their foundational literacy skills, leading to undesirable behaviors and attitudes. The repeated struggle to find success brings out the worst in many of the students, even when it is not the part of themselves they want to show. Sadly, these behaviors become the accepted norm for struggling students and the cycle of unmotivated, stagnant academic growth continues.

In the summer of 2017, I decided to use *Being a Reader Small-Group Reading* with my third-grade students. They were a particularly challenging group whose lack of success with anything that had to do with school and academics was made even more evident to me through their especially confrontational social behaviors. Good thing I enjoy a challenge! I placed students into groups based on lexile levels. Each group consisted of no more than four students and used a specific set from Small-Group Reading. I was now ready to try something new and engaging with my students who could not have cared less about the district-provided activities I was mandated to use. The results of using the Small-Group Reading sets were positively shocking! These same students who held books instead of reading them during independent reading time, who tuned out during read alouds, and who just clicked their way through lessons on the adaptive computer program they were required to work on started asking me first thing each morning if we were going to have reading groups that day! They quickly joined me when it was their turn for small-group instruction. They shared thoughtful comments with each other on the content they were reading about in the books. The amount of effort they put into writing brief responses, even if only on a sticky note, was *inspiring*. It was the only time during their summer school day that they behaved like scholars!

My group of third graders during that summer school session were engaged in books one to two grade levels below their expected

benchmark. However, because they had access to an engaging text, they were able to use their cognitive energy to comprehend and enjoy the text. They were able to start the habit of conducting thoughtful book conversations! My third graders could finally be described as scholarly. Though many of them did not meet the end-of-summer expectation to move on to fourth grade, the progress I saw in their academic behavior over the 15 days I taught them was encouraging. *How many more students can become independent readers and thinkers if given the appropriate instruction and support?* Scholarly students want to hold smart conversations and talk about books they enjoy, and I got to witness these behaviors grow within my scholars that summer. I am filled with hope for so many other struggling students—that they, too, will experience academic success. This experience motivates me to continue to provide quality instruction using best practices for my most vulnerable students. Scholarly students achieve success and that is what we, as educators, hope for every child.