

A Coach's Journey: Successfully Instructing Readers Struggling in the Intermediate Grades

By Jennifer Rios Alers | Categories: Reading Intervention and Acceleration

In the 2012 report *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners* published by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, the authors state that “[w]hile some students are more likely to persist in tasks or exhibit self-discipline than others, *all* students are more likely to demonstrate perseverance if the school or classroom context helps them develop positive mindsets and effective learning strategies.”^[1] The report distills much of the research on mindset into four key beliefs that, if adopted by students, may yield academic perseverance:

1. I belong in this academic community.
2. My ability and competence grow with my effort.
3. I can succeed at this.
4. This work has value for me.^[2]

One of my goals as an instructional coach is to help older struggling readers embrace these four key beliefs. I also see my job as a coach as making connections between theory, research, and existing schema for teaching and learning within our school district.

Self-determination theory asserts that when we create environments that foster competence, autonomy, and human connection, students are more intrinsically motivated to persevere. While considering an existing practice at the Greeley-Evans School District, I discovered several aspects of self-determination theory already incorporated into daily practice. Take, for example, the SIPPS Challenge Level program (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words): this program is my district's primary intervention for increasing students' ability to decode multisyllabic words. The SIPPS Challenge Level program equips our students with skills in structural analysis that help increase reading achievement. We consistently see upward trends in students' mastery of foundational standards in English language arts and, more importantly, in their ability to apply these skills independently to increasingly complex texts.

In years past, even as most of our students experienced success with the SIPPS Challenge Level program, I was discouraged by the fact that we still had a small number of fourth- and fifth-grade students who were unable to decode single-syllable words and who were therefore unable to benefit from the intervention. We tried our best to support these students by providing instruction in basic phonics using a variety of programs, but year after year I found it difficult to find connected texts that both engaged and honored our older struggling readers—that is, until last year, when I stumbled across a dusty second-edition copy of the book *Dreams on Wheels*, the decodable reader provided in the SIPPS Plus kit, on a shelf in one of our instructional closets. As I flipped through the pages, I was immediately drawn in by the appealing photographs, engaging text features, and high-interest topics. One chapter is devoted to leeches; another explores the science behind laughing. Both chapters, I was sure, were certain to captivate even our most-reluctant readers.

During the 2017–2018 school year, I partnered with a fifth-grade teacher to support a small group of students who were not yet ready for the SIPPS Challenge Level program. After administering the SIPPS 4–12 Placement Assessment, we decided to pilot the SIPPS Plus program as an intervention. Given that SIPPS Plus is designed to support older struggling readers, we were thrilled to introduce *Dreams on Wheels*, a decodable book that an 11-year-old would be interested in reading, as the accompanying text. The book did indeed turn out to be sophisticated enough to engage our fifth-grade students, and the progress monitoring and mastery tests confirmed that our students were growing as readers (see data below). Daily instruction was driven by listening to students read and by our daily observations during the lessons.

Beginning- to Middle-of-Year DIBELS Growth Data After Four Months of SIPPS Plus

Name	BOY Rate/Accuracy	MOY Rate/Accuracy	Difference
**Heidi O.	99/91%	115/95%	+16/+4%
**Ana Z.	81/92%	106/95%	+25/+3%
**Sebastian S.	127/98%	120/98%	Retell 26 to 61/ DAZE 19 to 25
Brianna P.	56/89%	81/95%	+25/+6%
Ivana C.	62/91%	77/95%	+15/+4%
*Serenity	89/97%	110/97%	+21/same
*David H.	95/96%	117/96%	+22/same
**Aljiah G.	106/95%	113/96%	+7/+1%
Kevin	49/79%	71/95%	+22/+16%
**Sara T.	90/94%	113/98%	+23/+4%
Daniel	35/78%	75/89%	+40/+11%
Totals	Average increase in rate: +19.63 points Average increase in accuracy: 4.45% 64% of students increased categories in one or more DORF components		

*Student moved to a new category, red to yellow or green to blue in one or more areas.

Why had the success we found with this program eluded us with the other programs we had tried? I now believe that it goes back to self-determination theory. As I reflect on the *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners* report's four key beliefs that yield perseverance in students, I realize they are all present in SIPPS Plus lessons; through engaging comprehension questions leading to deep discussions about *Dreams on Wheels*, our older struggling students were able to adopt these four beliefs.

Students' perceptions of their own intelligence and capability improve as they progress as readers. An important characteristic of every SIPPS Plus lesson is active student involvement. Throughout the intervention, students come to understand that their reading success depends on the effort they make. They have multiple opportunities to demonstrate this understanding as they engage in the program's routines. These clear, consistent, concise routines enable students to respond together, contributing to their sense of belonging—particularly when teachers expect the group to respect one another as learners. As students develop their reading ability, they begin to see that the work has value for them.

Given our struggles with other programs, I was at first unsure about how students would respond to the SIPPS Plus program; now I can't imagine teaching older struggling readers without it.

[1] Farrington, C. A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T. S., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O. (2012). *Teaching adolescents to become learners. The role of noncognitive factors in shaping performance: A critical literature review*. Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.

[2] Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson, & Beechum. *Teaching adolescents to become learners*. 10.