



Big Is Beautiful

For struggling readers, large-print books may make a huge difference

DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOUR STUDENTS, BUT MOST OF MINE AREN'T WILD about reading. I teach at a middle school in a lower socioeconomic area of Tucson, AZ, where I work primarily with fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-grade students who have special needs or are struggling to learn English. A few years

ago, I had a chance to use a set of large-print books for a reading unit, and I found that my kids loved it.

Before I brought large-print books into the classroom, it was more difficult to get my students to read. What they were willing to read were titles below grade level, like the *Cam Jansen* series (Viking), *Bunnicula* (Atheneum, 1979), *Black Beauty* (American Humane Society, 1878), *Charlotte's Web* (Harper, 1952), and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Macmillan, 1950). I knew something wasn't right because the kids could read and wanted to learn to read better—but that wasn't happening.

After I implemented the large-print program, several kids just took off. For example, Alex was a girl with a great deal of potential, and an equal amount of frustration. When I met her in fifth grade she had a second-grade reading ability. I knew she could do much better and so did she.

I introduced her to reading with large print. Granted, it has taken a great deal of time and effort. She came in at lunchtime each day to get extra help and read with a group of students. Within nine weeks, her reading rate and comprehension scores started going up. Now in the sixth grade, she reads on a seventh-grade level. At her last Individualized Education Program meeting, the conversation was whether she should be dismissed from Special Education. Sure, the instruction made a difference, but I think the change of print size was a huge help for her.

Last year, Ray had a 150-word vocabulary in the fifth grade and read at a pre-primer level. He was still struggling with sound blending. He too took off when we started using large print. Now he's reading in the late third-grade range with a working vocabulary of over 750 words, and he actually volunteered to read out loud in class last week.

At this point, I have only anecdotal evidence based on my own experiences—although this year I have begun a more formal study. Nevertheless, approximately half of my stu-

dents with special needs have increased their reading levels by 2.5 or more years in just a year and a half—or since they began reading large-print books. Of the 30 kids in my classes, all but two have had their scores improved to approaching or meeting grade-level standards. And their scores on standardized tests, such as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or DIBELS, and state tests have improved significantly. In fact, some of my kids' results outpaced the regular education population for that year.

More importantly, my students are reading more challenging materials. This year, my fifth and sixth graders are reading the large-print editions of Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (2005), Carl Hiassen's *Hoot* (2003), Christopher Paul Curtis's *Bud, Not Buddy* (2003), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2003), and Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (2005, all Thorndike).

Why is large print more successful for my students? It's impossible to say with certainty. Certainly, larger print is

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easier on students' eyes, something that may be a factor with kids who have undiagnosed vision problems.

There may be a psychological factor as well. When kids first learn to read, they use large print. As their reading acuity grows, the type size shrinks, and some students may perceive the smaller print as harder to read. The use of large print may unconsciously help them to return to their earlier learning experiences, when they perceived reading as easier and more enjoyable.

Whatever the reason, because of large print some of my students are now outperforming their general education peers in reading and writing. These gains, as well as their change in attitude about reading, are very rewarding. Has anyone else had similar experiences?

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