

*Thank you*

FOR YOUR  
INTEREST IN  
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Teaching Foundational Skills to Adolescent Readers.

[LEARN MORE](#) about this title!

**CORWIN**

# Introduction

## Who Are Adolescent Readers?

*The Kid Who Doesn't Try*

I don't see what the other kids see  
They look at the words on the page  
And it means something to them  
Their eyes widen  
Faces of understanding  
Faces of meaning

My eyes hopelessly scan the page  
Looking for what they see  
But I can't put it together  
Desperately disconnected  
Unable to see what they all see

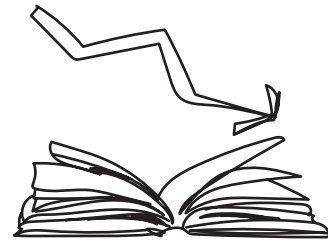
—Carlos, Age 15

© Corwin, 2025  
POUCHENRY.



In this book, we delve into the lives of adolescent readers, exploring their struggles and the impact that reading skills have on their academic journey. We share stories like Carlos's to shed light on the daily battles faced by students who, for various reasons, find it difficult to connect with written words. Educators of adolescents stand at the forefront of a monumental task: teaching content while nurturing the reading skills needed to access that content. And in the meantime, these same educators are often trying to rekindle the joy of learning for those who have lost enthusiasm.

Despite continued dialogue about the importance of literacy and literacy instruction, troubling reading data continue to hang over our nation. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for fourth- and eighth-grade students' reading comprehension have been declining, reaching levels lower than those observed in all previous years since 2005 and 1998, respectively (NAEP, 2024). Substantial disparities persist according to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. However, the decline in scores is not limited to students of color or students receiving special education services. Lower-performing scores come from students from a variety of backgrounds (NAEP, 2024).



To make matters worse, secondary school learners with gaps in their reading skills often suffer from insecurities about their capabilities and intelligence, and many have lost confidence in their ability to learn. Some of these students are sitting silently in our classrooms, hoodies up and heads down, trying to disappear into their seats. Others who appear angry and defiant opt for confrontation as a distraction from their academic struggles. Some learners are chronically absent because they are frustrated and failing (Malkus, 2024).



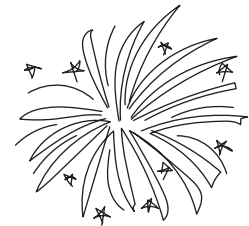
Looking beyond these behaviors, we find students who do not want anyone to discover they cannot pull the words off the page. They are desperately trying to avoid being exposed as students who can't read or who can't read well enough to comprehend their academic texts. These students use a range of strategies to hide the fact that comprehending text is difficult for them. They tend to rely on verbal information—from the teacher and from their peers—to gain content knowledge. Some of these students may

get passing grades in their classes, but their relationship with school changes over time. School is less joyful for all learners who are continually compensating for not being able to read well. Thus, secondary teachers are required to teach content aligned with state standards, prepare students for state and national exams, prepare students for higher education and professional life, *and* teach reading skills so students can access the content.

The good news is that it's never too late to learn. From an equity standpoint, we believe that all students can read and read well, and from an empathy standpoint, it is devastating that they can't do so yet. Part of our role as educators is to first overcome this idea of "They should know this by now" and then move into the idea "But they don't know it yet, so I'll teach them."

If we agree that people's values influence their motivation to engage in tasks, then we can conclude that learners need reading proficiency to develop a positive self-concept around reading and the efficacy to tackle more challenging reading. For students to build a positive self-concept about learning, they need small but frequent wins in reading—little mental bursts of satisfaction that come from succeeding in a task that has proven challenging. As educators, how can we design learning experiences that allow students to experience success?

Fortunately, the evidence on the effective literacy components critical to supporting adolescent readers is well documented (Alexander & Fox, 2011; Cantrell et al., 2018; Goldman et al., 2016). But understanding how to approach literacy instruction in secondary classrooms requires more than implementing a set of instructional approaches. Literacy research must be concretely and explicitly connected with the needs of teachers who are experts in their content areas. It also must be connected to a framework that



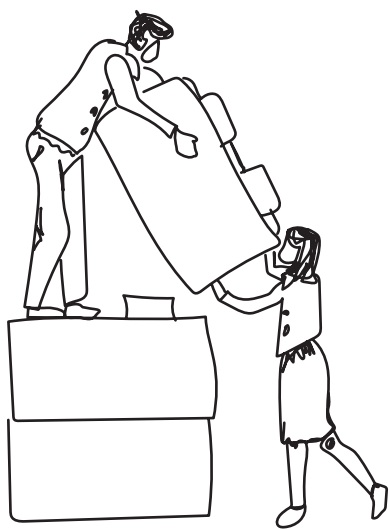
considers the human aspects of learning. To connect literacy research and classroom practice, we will explore the following questions:

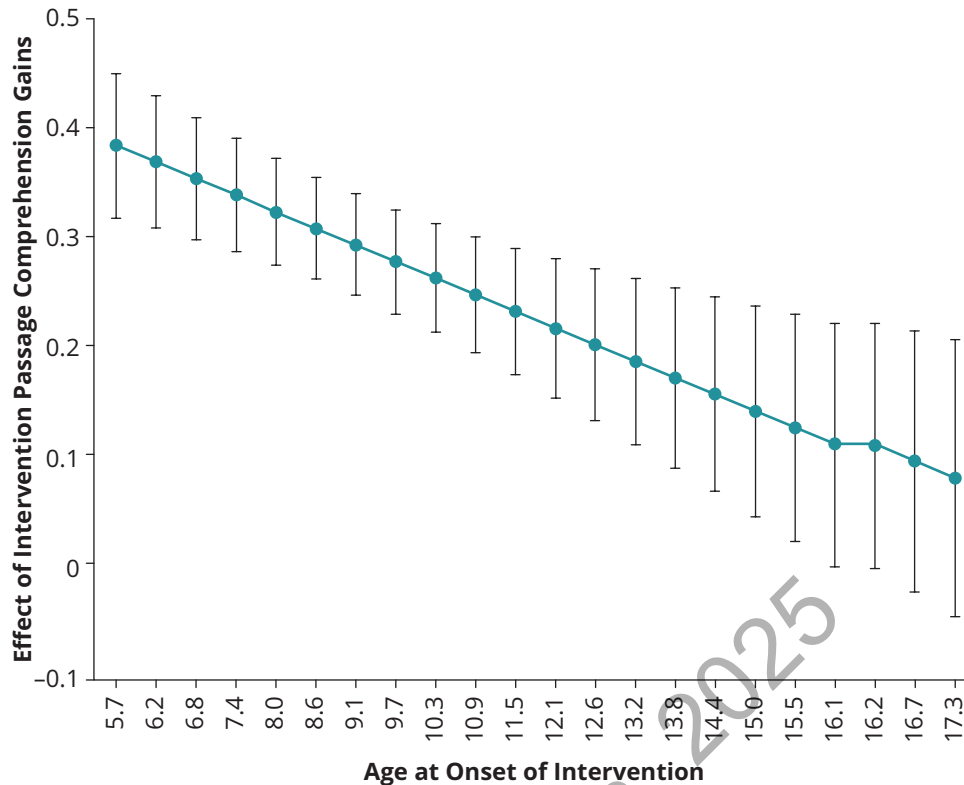
- How do middle and high school teachers perceive and understand the challenges faced by struggling readers in their classrooms?
- What approaches can educators use to simultaneously support the acquisition and consolidation of grade-level content and reading skills?
- Which instructional approaches and strategies do secondary teachers consider effective in supporting struggling readers, and how do those perceptions align with existing research and evidence?

## Extending What’s “Foundational” for Older Readers

There is a common misconception that an eighth-grade student who is assessed at the third-grade level on a measure of reading is able to read like a third-grader making expected progress. But older readers who struggle often possess a profile that is more scattered and uneven in terms of strengths and areas of need. For example, that thirteen-year-old possesses more content knowledge than the eight-year-old does. Or the older student may struggle when decoding multisyllabic words but have a higher-than-expected vocabulary. There is evidence that adult readers who do not possess solid foundational reading skills use the components they *do* have in ways that differ from children (Nanda et al., 2010). Likewise, Tighe and Schatschneider (2014a) found that models of reading development used with typically developing children proved to be a poor fit for adult readers.

The students discussed in this book are not adults, but they are not children either. Some of the approaches used in the early grades, such as attention to decoding, do not have exactly the same effect on older students. A series of four studies with students of different ages is instructive. The researchers provided 125 hours of small group intervention to students of different ages with reading disabilities, focused primarily on phonological awareness and decoding. As shown in Figure i.1, the impact of the intervention on reading comprehension among the second- and third-graders was statistically significant, but there was a decline on the impact on reading comprehension with middle and high school students (Lovett et al., 2022).



**Figure i.1** • Effect of Intervention Assignment by Age

Source: Used with permission of Elsevier Science & Technology Journals, from *Interpreting comprehension outcomes after multiple-component reading intervention for children and adolescents with reading disabilities*, Lovett, M. W., Frijters, J. C., Steinbach, K. A., De Palma, M., Lacerenza, L., Wolf, M., Sevcik, R. A., & Morris, R. D., vol 100, 2022; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

This *should not* be misinterpreted as meaning that developing the foundational reading skills of older students is a wasted effort. To the contrary, the foundational reading skills of phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency have rightly earned the name because they are crucial for older struggling readers to master; nothing replaces them. However, adolescent readers not yet making expected progress need more. They need background knowledge to read. They need stronger verbal reasoning skills to make sense of the logic of textual information and arguments. They must have opportunities across the school day to analyze passages from the level of a single sentence to much longer passages. When these are paired with traditional foundational reading skills, the impact on reading comprehension is amplified. Thus, we argue that foundational reading skills for adolescents include background knowledge, word recognition, word knowledge, sentence fluency, and verbal reasoning. Each of these plays a critical role in ensuring

that middle and high school students continue to develop their reading skills as they progress from elementary school to college and career options.

In this book we explore the extensive research behind what works best for teaching older students how to read well. Students with reading abilities that fall below grade level fall into two categories (Archer et al., 2003):

1. Those who can read basic words and have memorized some high-frequency words but struggle with decoding multisyllabic words
2. Those who have unfinished learning in foundational reading skills

We will address the needs of both groups. First, we will consider the needs of the learners who have basic word knowledge. Chapters 2 through 6 are dedicated to classroom practices teachers can use with the whole class or with small groups to integrate reading support seamlessly with content learning. In Chapter 7 we specifically address the requirements of learners who still need to attain or improve foundational reading skills.

Throughout this book we propose practical and systematic approaches to address this critical need and to reimagine a learner's connection with school and learning. Following this introduction, we focus on how secondary educators can align the research with the needs of students in their classrooms. Our goal is twofold:

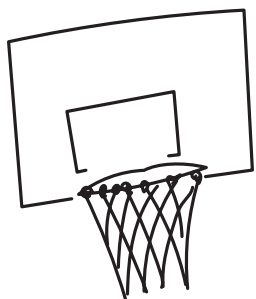
1. To equip you with the understanding of what might be happening with learners who are not comprehending grade-appropriate texts
2. To provide you with specific knowledge that can help you identify the barriers and design time-efficient, one-on-one strategies to help readers in both whole and small groups.

As we explore solutions to these pressing challenges, let us briefly turn our attention to the structure of this book and how we break down the complex nature of this topic into actionable insights and strategies.

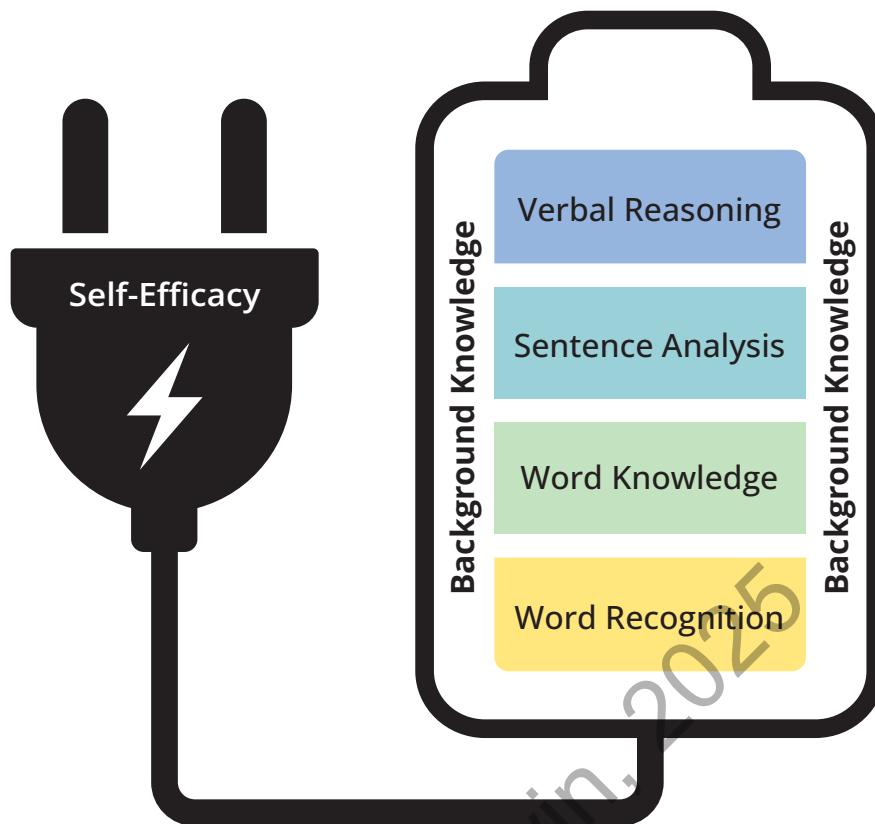
## Overview of Chapters and Framework

Let's take a moment to familiarize you with the chapters and features of the book that can support your journey of recharging reading practices for adolescent readers. Figure i.2 illustrates the important concepts of teaching reading to adolescent students; it's also the framework for this book.

The energy source is self-efficacy, representing a student's belief in their capabilities. As discussed in this chapter, educators play an important role in developing a student's self-efficacy. That motivation energizes the battery that houses the critical components of reading instruction: background knowledge, word recognition, word knowledge, sentence analysis, and verbal reasoning.



**Figure i.2** • A Model for Adolescent Literacy



**Introduction: Who Are Adolescent Readers?** In this introduction we begin to uncover the stories of students like Carlos. We present our understanding of the struggles faced by adolescent readers and the obstacles faced by the educators entrusted with their learning. This section sets the stage for a systematic presentation of the research intertwined with practical application.

**Chapter 1. Self-Efficacy: Foundational for Adolescent Success.** A holistic approach to adolescent literacy is represented by the connection to the plug labeled as *self-efficacy*, which sets the stage for students' motivation and cognitive engagement. As students gain independence at each of these levels of literacy development, their belief in their own ability to read and comprehend effectively acts as the driving force that powers the entire system. In this chapter we explore the factors that contribute to self-efficacy and the actions that teachers can take to develop students' efficacy.

1

**Chapter 2. Background Knowledge: From the Known to the New.** In the illustration of the battery, the concept of background knowledge surrounds word recognition, word knowledge, sentence analysis, and verbal reasoning. It represents the reservoir of knowledge essential for students to connect

2



new information. This chapter explains how prior knowledge contributes to improved comprehension and engagement. It also explores how teachers can activate students' background knowledge, build background knowledge, and teach students to activate their own knowledge to bridge new learning.



**Chapter 3. Word Recognition: Free Up Cognitive Space, One Word at a Time.**

Word recognition is at the base of the battery; it is a foundational component of creating skilled readers, and it is strongly connected to spelling. This stage emphasizes the fundamental ability to decode individual words, especially multisyllabic ones, by understanding how to read units of words rapidly. In this chapter we examine techniques that enable students to read with accuracy and fluency, allowing them to focus more effectively on extracting meaning from the text.



**Chapter 4. Word Knowledge: The More You Know, the More You Can Learn.**

Word knowledge involves recognizing words and understanding their meanings and the nuances. It includes knowledge of the morphemes, affixes, roots, and bases that comprise multisyllabic words. Word knowledge supports students' understanding of both universally important and content-specific vocabulary. For learners, this involves not just knowing a word but also understanding the concepts it represents. In this chapter we explore the research on and practices for word learning and morphological awareness.



**Chapter 5. Sentence Analysis: Unlocking the Structure of Language.**

Sentence analysis focuses on the ability to comprehend and extract meaning from sentences and see the connections between sentences. For students, comprehending within and across sentences is critical to understanding longer texts. Secondary textbooks and articles often contain complex sentences that are syntactically sophisticated. To gain knowledge from texts, readers connect ideas within sentences and across sentences. Sentence-level comprehension is often overlooked in secondary classrooms, but it can serve as a great scaffold to help students understand longer, complex texts.



**Chapter 6. Verbal Reasoning: Thinking With Words Across Texts.**

Students must learn to use the skills they have developed at the word and sentence levels to comprehend longer texts. Understanding the logical flow of ideas is essential in spoken and written language. It's known as *verbal reasoning* because this combination of skills allows for the transformation of ideas and information in the mind of the reader. Students need to be able to make inferences, connect concepts, and evaluate ideas to transfer their learning to new situations. Throughout this process, they are engaging with texts at a deeper level, making

connections from text to text, and thinking critically about the content. This chapter explores how we can help students navigate complex texts and extract meaning from extended passages.

We also would like to emphasize that although the vertical stacking of these components insinuates foundational pieces, it is in no way meant to send the message that students must attain a foundational level of mastery before attending to the other components. On the contrary, instruction and practice is critical for verbal reasoning regardless of a student's current reading proficiency.

**Chapter 7. Intervention: Supporting Readers to Develop Automaticity in Word Recognition.** The reading strategies outlined in this book are part of quality instruction, but some students will still need supplemental or intensive reading interventions. We might think about this as a secondary source of power, or a supercharger, that fuels the components. This chapter is designed to familiarize classroom teachers with the hallmarks of multicomponent reading intervention (MCRI) programs outside the classroom for adolescents. As members of school organizations, it is crucial for all educators to be informed about evidence-based practices in intervention so they can advocate for and support the work done by interventionists in their schools.



While our primary focus in this book is on strengthening the reading skills of adolescents, at various points throughout the book we also discuss concepts or strategies related to writing and oral language development. Written and spoken language are interconnected and, to some extent, interdependent. It's important to note that although these elements share connections, they each have their own set of processes that require specific direct instruction and practice. Our conceptual framework is designed to promote the development of reading skills so adolescent readers in our classrooms become critical consumers of content knowledge and perhaps even find a love of reading to gain knowledge and enjoyment.

## Overview of the Book and Its Features

Throughout the book you will encounter several distinctive features that enhance your reading experience.

- *Plug Into the Research.* Each chapter begins with an overview of the research that underpins the discussion and application of that section of the literacy model.
- *Power Up Classroom Practice.* In these sections we connect the dots of literacy research, classroom practice, and the human aspects of learning.

- *Voices From the Field*. These sections highlight secondary teachers and examine how they have chosen to apply a particular strategy to support grade-appropriate reading and comprehension.
- *Take Charge: Conclusion and Reflective Questions*. Each chapter concludes with key ideas that summarize the essential concepts discussed. These sections also encourage you to reflect on the chapter and consider how you could implement the tools and methods presented in your specific teaching subject or department, or with the students you support.

Thankfully, students have you and other educators like you to help transverse the gap. The job of an educator is not just to see potential but also to

- cultivate it,
- acknowledge the big dreams of students and to excel well past what they think that they can accomplish,
- disrupt the bell curve in education, and
- believe in students who don't yet believe in themselves.

In his convocation speech at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, graduate Donovan Livingston (2016) proclaimed,

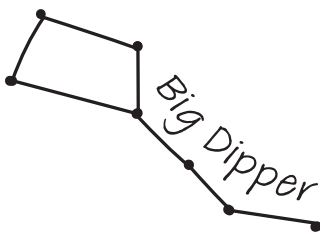
To educate requires Galileo-like patience.

Today, when I look my students in the eyes, all I see are constellations.

If you take the time to connect the dots,

You can plot the true shape of their genius—

Shining in their darkest hour.



You are the teacher your students have been waiting for. You have the passion and the desire to help students exceed the expectations they have for themselves. Our goal for this book is to help you see how.