

Viewpoints

Let's Stress the Fun in Fundamental



By
Jane Quinn

Everyone knows that reading is fundamental; we even have a national organization by that name. Yet a recent report from the National Endowment for the Arts, "To Read or Not to Read," makes the case in no uncertain terms that we are quickly becoming a nation of non-readers.

While this study points to negative trends among older readers, it calls particular attention to adolescent literacy:

"The story the data tell is simple, consistent, and alarming. Although there has been measurable progress in recent years in reading ability at the elementary school level, all progress appears to halt as children enter their teenage years. ... As Americans, especially younger Americans, read less, they read less well. Because they read less well, they have lower levels of academic achievement."

Here are a few of the report's more compelling facts about literacy and

teens: Reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement; voluntary reading rates diminish from childhood to late adolescence; teenagers and young adults spend less time reading than do people of other age groups; reading scores for 17-year-olds have declined since 1992 (while reading scores for 9-year-olds, who show no declines in voluntary reading, are at an all-time high); only 35 percent of high school seniors read proficiently; good readers generally have more rewarding and better-paying jobs.

The report is available at www.nea.gov/research/ToRead.pdf.

Maybe this sounds like an education issue. But if reading is so central to achieving productive adulthood, what role should youth agencies play in helping young people, particularly adolescents, develop and maintain literacy skills?

The answer is *not* to do more of what schools do. We have ample evidence that many schools are turning kids off to reading with their low-interest content, overly standardized instructional processes and stifling emphasis on test preparation. Even good readers are likely to become bored in this environment.

The problems are magnified, how-

ever, for struggling students – the ones youth workers should actively seek to serve. Consider this cycle described by David O'Brien, an adolescent literacy teacher, in the 2006 book, *Reconceptualizing the Literacies in Adolescents' Lives*: "Low achievement led to low perception about abilities, which resulted in increasing disengagement from reading, which, in turn, resulted in lack of practice, low fluency, lagging decoding skills, and the absence of strategies."

In contrast to this all-too-familiar scenario of failure, consider these recent innovations designed to appeal to teenagers' interests, needs and thirst for relevance:

- **Real Stories, Real Teens** is an after-school literacy curriculum that uses peer-written stories to promote literacy and social-emotional learning. Created by Youth Communication in partnership with Development Without Limits, this program incorporates chapters from the Bluford High School Series of young adult novels, which deal with "urban" themes in ways that are both realistic and pro-social.

- The **Comic Book Project** lures young people into reading, writing and drawing by giving them opportunities to create their own publications. Started in 2001 by Michael Bitz, a former elementary school teacher,

the project encourages creative teamwork, offers leadership opportunities and sponsors recognition events when youths complete their projects. (See "Holy Youth Work," April 2005.)

- **Classroom Inc.** uses computer simulations to create a "virtual workplace" and engage adolescents in tackling real-world challenges, such as how to run a magazine, a community health center or a small foundation. Working in groups of three, the youths employ reading and other academic skills to resolve work-related dilemmas. Often used in after-school and summer programs, Classroom Inc. offers 15 simulations of various industries, along with print materials and adult professional development.

- **BookUpNYC** is a new initiative sponsored by the National Book Foundation that brings published authors into youth organizations to encourage young adolescents to read for pleasure and to build their confidence as readers. Each author works with a group of teens for 12 weeks. In addition to engaging young readers through challenging discussions and other on-site activities, the program organizes book-related field trips and shopping excursions to local bookstores.

For more examples of youth writing programs, see *Promising Practices*, page 15.

What these initiatives have in common, besides being fun, is that they show deep respect for young people by building on their interests and providing the "voice and choice" that are so essential to any good youth development program.

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