

The Lost Children: Re-engaging Adolescent Literacy Through Structured Intervention, Relational Pedagogy, and the Identity of Success

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Abstract

Adolescent literacy presents a significant educational challenge, with many students entering secondary schooling with persistent reading difficulties and low academic self-efficacy. This paper presents the experience and findings of a literacy intervention specialist who developed a structured literacy intervention designed to address both skill acquisition and learner engagement. The program is informed by the Science of Reading (Castles et al., 2018), multisensory structured language instruction (Birsh, 2018), and research on explicit instruction, feedback, and engagement (Hattie, 2023). A key pedagogical feature is the deliberate emphasis on what is described within the program as an “identity of success,” whereby instruction is structured to ensure students experience frequent, visible success and errors are reframed as part of learning. This relational teaching approach is intended to reduce anxiety and support engagement. This paper reports practitioner-collected data from 101 students over a ten-year period. Of these, 91.5% achieved reading mastery and 84% achieved combined reading and spelling mastery, with most requiring approximately 40 or more hours of instruction. The cohort included a high proportion of students with diagnosed learning differences, including Specific Learning Disorder (SLD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Ongoing longitudinal follow-up confirms students have achieved success in a range of post-school pathways including tertiary study, vocational training, and employment. The paper argues that structured literacy approaches, when combined with relational pedagogy and repeated experiences of success, can improve engagement and literacy outcomes for adolescent learners. For students who have internalised an identity of academic failure, these changes represent a substantial shift in confidence, agency, and educational participation. Ultimately, teaching is not only about what is taught, but how learning is experienced and who the learner becomes as a result.

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Introduction

Across Australia and internationally, adolescent literacy remains a significant and unresolved educational challenge. The persistence of low adult literacy rates in Tasmania which is the context for this paper, suggests that many struggling readers are not transient educational casualties but individuals who carry unresolved literacy difficulties across their lifespan. While many education systems have improved awareness of early literacy instruction and the importance of explicit phonics teaching, students continue to enter secondary school unable to read fluently enough to independently access curriculum content. For these students, literacy difficulty becomes cumulative. The gap between their decoding and comprehension capacity and the increasing linguistic complexity of secondary curriculum materials widens each year.

In Australia, national assessment data consistently demonstrates that a significant proportion of students fail to achieve expected literacy standards during the middle years of schooling (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2024). Tasmania in particular continues to report literacy outcomes below the national average across multiple domains and year levels. These outcomes are reflected not only in academic performance, but also in school attendance, disengagement, behavioural dysregulation, early school leaving, and long-term social participation.

The consequences of literacy failure extend beyond academic underachievement. Literacy has been widely recognised as foundational to civic participation, employment, autonomy, and social inclusion. UNESCO has described literacy as a “fundamental human right” and an essential condition for lifelong learning and participation in society (Wagner, 2011). When students progress through schooling without functional literacy, they are effectively excluded from full participation in education and life itself.

The cohort included 101 students ranging from upper primary to secondary age. 85% of students presented with diagnosed or imputed learning differences, including:

- Specific Learning Disorder (SLD)/dyslexia
- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- language processing difficulties
- histories of school disengagement or interrupted attendance

Participants represented a diverse range of educational experiences and levels of literacy difficulty. A significant challenge for adolescent learners is that literacy difficulty is rarely experienced as an isolated academic issue. By secondary school, many struggling readers have already internalised repeated experiences of failure. They may see themselves as incapable learners, avoid literacy tasks, or disengage from schooling altogether. In this context, intervention requires more than technical instruction alone. It also requires a relational pedagogy capable of rebuilding confidence, agency, and willingness to engage in learning.

This paper explores the intersection of structured literacy intervention and relational pedagogy through a practitioner-developed intervention program delivered over a ten-year period in Tasmania. The paper argues that literacy intervention for adolescents must address both the cognitive dimensions of reading acquisition and the emotional and relational dimensions of learning identity. It further argues that teaching should be understood not simply as content delivery, but as a practical and relational craft in which learners’ experiences of success play a central role in educational re-engagement.

This practitioner-collected data from a ten-year literacy intervention delivered in Hobart, Tasmania involved 101 adolescent learners with persistent reading difficulties. The study adopts a practice-based research design using literacy assessment records, instructional observations, and longitudinal follow-up data to examine the relationship between structured literacy instruction, relational pedagogy, and learner engagement. While the findings are practitioner-generated rather than derived from a controlled experimental design, they provide valuable evidence regarding literacy outcomes and educational re-engagement within a Tier 3 intervention context.

I developed and delivered the literacy intervention, working primarily with adolescent learners who had persistent reading and spelling difficulties. Many participants had previously received other forms of educational support without achieving functional literacy.

I can not claim universal causation, but can present practice-based findings and observations that may contribute to broader discussions about adolescent literacy intervention, engagement, and teacher practice.

Several limitations must be acknowledged.

The findings presented are practitioner-generated and do not constitute controlled experimental research. The study lacks:

- randomised sampling
- independent assessment measures
- control groups
- standardised longitudinal tracking

As such, outcomes cannot be generalised broadly or interpreted as definitive evidence of causation. Nevertheless, practitioner evidence remains valuable in educational contexts, particularly where formal research concerning adolescent literacy intervention remains comparatively limited.

The Science of Reading and Structured Literacy

Over the past two decades, a substantial body of evidence has emerged regarding the cognitive processes involved in reading acquisition. Often described collectively as the “Science of Reading,” this research draws from cognitive psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, and education to examine how reading develops and how reading difficulties can be effectively addressed.

Castles, Rastle, and Nation (2018) argue that effective reading instruction requires explicit and systematic teaching of phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Reading is not a naturally acquired process in the same way as oral language; rather, it depends upon the development of specific neural and linguistic pathways that must be explicitly taught for many learners.

Structured literacy approaches align closely with this evidence base. Structured literacy is characterised by explicit, systematic, cumulative instruction in phonology, orthography, morphology, syntax, and semantics (International Dyslexia Association, 2019). Instruction is sequenced carefully, with concepts taught directly and reinforced through cumulative review

and guided practice. For adolescents the sequence needs to give them faster access to multisyllabic words to reflect what is being presented in curriculum standard content.

For students with dyslexia and related literacy difficulties, explicit structured instruction has repeatedly demonstrated stronger outcomes than less systematic or discovery-based approaches (National Reading Panel, 2000). Importantly, the principles underlying structured literacy are not limited to early childhood. Older struggling readers continue to require explicit instruction in foundational skills when those skills have not been consolidated in to secondary school.

Neuroscience

Neuroscience perspectives highlight that adolescence is a period of heightened neuroplasticity and incomplete executive control, meaning that educational failure during this window does not merely result in skill deficits, but may also shape behavioural trajectories through altered stress regulation, reward sensitivity, and self-control capacity (Landowski, public neuroscience lectures).

Adolescence is a critical period of neurological development, with the prefrontal cortex—the region responsible for executive functions such as planning, impulse control, decision-making, and self-regulation—continuing to mature well into early adulthood (Blakemore, 2018). During this time, behaviour is more strongly influenced by the limbic system, increasing sensitivity to reward, emotion, and environmental stress. Consequently, adolescents experiencing persistent literacy failure and school disengagement are at a time when the neural systems of executive control remain under construction. Contemporary neuroscience also demonstrates that the adolescent brain retains considerable neuroplasticity; neural pathways are strengthened through repeated use, while those that are not activated become less efficient (Blakemore, 2018; Wolf, 2018). Reading mastery develops through repeated, explicit, and structured practice that gradually establishes automatic neural pathways for decoding and language processing. The cognitive architecture that needs to be built is the same if you are learning to read at 5 or 15. The difference is that adolescents have sensitivity to reward, emotion, and environmental stress (Shulman et al., 2016).

Multisensory Structured Language Instruction

Multisensory Structured Language Instruction (MSLI) incorporates visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities into literacy instruction. Birsh (2018) argues that multisensory approaches support memory consolidation and engagement, particularly for adolescent students with language-based learning difficulties.

Although multisensory teaching alone is not sufficient without explicit structure and sequence, it can strengthen student participation and reduce cognitive overload for learners who have experienced repeated difficulty. In adolescent contexts, multisensory instruction may also assist in reducing avoidance and increasing willingness to engage with literacy tasks.

The KSE Adolescent Literacy Program draws conceptually from multisensory structured language traditions associated with Orton–Gillingham-informed practice, while integrating relational pedagogy and adolescent engagement strategies. This study’s intervention consisted of a 100-lesson structured literacy sequence designed for adolescent learners incorporating:

- systematic phonics instruction

- phonemic awareness
- morphology and word study
- spelling instruction
- cumulative review
- diagnostic assessment
- fluency practice
- multisensory teaching techniques

The intervention also placed strong emphasis on relational continuity, consistency, and emotional safety within learning interactions.

Adolescent Literacy and Learner Identity

Adolescent literacy intervention differs from early intervention in important ways. Older struggling readers frequently present with a combination of academic skill deficits, accumulated frustration, low self-efficacy, and school disengagement. Many have experienced years of perceived failure before intervention occurs.

Research on self-efficacy suggests that repeated experiences of success are central to the development of learner confidence and persistence (Bandura, 1997). Hattie (2023) similarly identifies feedback, visible progress, and clarity of success criteria as significant influences on educational achievement.

For adolescent learners, literacy intervention therefore involves both instructional precision and relational trust. Students who perceive themselves as incapable often require opportunities to experience competence in small, visible, and achievable increments.

This aligns with Freire's (1970) argument that education is fundamentally relational and connected to human agency. Literacy is not simply the acquisition of technical skills; it is also connected to identity, participation, and empowerment. Those young people who enter the justice system are not only socially marginalised but educationally abandoned long before offending occurs. A Victorian Parliament speech recounts the case of "Tom," a 15-year-old who left school unable to read, write, or even spell his own name (Heath, 2023).

Relational Pedagogy and Educational Engagement

So educators in this space need to turn their attention to relational pedagogy which emphasises the role of connection, trust, emotional safety, and mutual respect within learning environments. For students with histories of academic struggle, relational teaching approaches reduce anxiety and increase willingness to persist through challenge.

Within the intervention discussed here, relational pedagogy is not separate from explicit instruction, but as the emotional and interpersonal framework that allows explicit instruction to become effective. Many adolescent learners presenting for intervention have experienced repeated educational failure, behavioural correction, exclusion, or embarrassment around literacy tasks. Consequently, the intervention intentionally seeks to eliminate anticipatory anxiety through predicatability which in turn increases psychological safety. This is what makes the Tier 3 space crucial. In Tier 3, there are no witnesses, no judgement, no comparisons.

A key practical feature of this approach involves suspending conventional behavioural-management responses where possible in favour of acceptance and regulation support. Learners within the cohort presented with ADHD, ASD, trauma histories, anxiety, or language-processing difficulties. Some demonstrated behaviours such as fidgeting, pacing, hand-flapping, avoidance, delayed response time, or difficulty retrieving information quickly from memory need to be accepted. Rather than interpreting these behaviours as non-compliance, the intervention approach treated them as part of the learner's regulatory profile. Students were permitted movement, processing time, sensory regulation strategies, and prompting without reprimand. This approach sought to separate literacy difficulty from shame and behavioural escalation.

Language itself also formed an important part of the relational pedagogy. The intervention relied upon highly consistent instructional scripting and predictable lesson structures. Inclusive collective pronouns such as “we” were used intentionally:

- “This is what we know...”
- “Last time we were here...”
- “I’m going to say some words...”
- “This is everything we know so far....”
- “How do you write the sound...”
- “Have another go at this one...”
- “Nothing is a test — it is just practice.”

The repetition and scripted nature of the instructional language served several purposes. First, it reduced cognitive and emotional uncertainty by making lessons highly predictable. Students knew how sessions would begin, what sequence would follow, and how sessions would conclude. Second, it provided cognitive cueing, allowing students to prepare for participation in different sections of the lesson. Third, the use of collective language positioned learning as collaborative rather than evaluative. Fourth, it builds new neural pathways that create automaticity that leads to fluency. It is not boring it is predictable.

The intervention also deliberately avoided adversarial testing language and public correction. Errors were reframed as expected parts of learning rather than evidence of failure.

A recurring phrase stated in every lesson within the intervention was: “If you can correct it, it is correct.”

This phrase reflected a broader pedagogical principle: that success should remain accessible even after error. Students were consistently guided toward correction through reminders of explicitly taught concepts and scaffolded prompts. One example of this is intentionally ignoring letter reversal.

The intervention additionally relied upon very high rates of encouragement, affirmation, and visible markers of success with tangible rewards. The student response booklets provide tangible proof to the student that they have progressed and are learning. Praise was intentionally concrete and immediate. Students regularly received written affirmations such as “100% correct” or “A+”, alongside tangible reinforcement including stickers, tokens, or treats. This was found to work with all ages including adults.

While these strategies may appear simple, their purpose was deliberate. Many learners entering intervention had experienced years of perceived academic inadequacy. The intervention

therefore attempted to construct what became known in practice as an “identity of success”, where students repeatedly experienced themselves as capable participants in learning. Success is something you need to try on. Often a learner will not actually know what it feels like.

I argue that explicit instruction and relational pedagogy should not be viewed as oppositional frameworks. In public debates about literacy instruction, there can sometimes be a false dichotomy between explicit teaching and relational or student-centred approaches. However, in practice, adolescent intervention requires both. Explicit instruction provides clarity, structure, and cognitive scaffolding. Relational pedagogy provides emotional safety, trust, and willingness to persist. For adolescent learners who have experienced repeated failure, these dimensions are deeply interconnected.

This aligns with Bandura’s (1997) work on mastery experiences and self-efficacy, as well as Hattie’s (2023) findings regarding the significance of teacher-student relationships, feedback, clarity, and visible success in educational achievement.

Professor Pamela Snow has similarly argued that effective literacy instruction requires both explicit teaching and strong teacher knowledge regarding oral language, decoding, vocabulary, and language development. As she puts it in the title of her lecture “The Reading Crisis we can fix”. She frames literacy as a social justice issue. Snow contends that literacy failure is not simply an inevitable consequence of disadvantage or neurodiversity, but often reflects insufficiently explicit instruction and delayed intervention (Knowledge Society, 2023).

Social Justice

The relationship between literacy and social justice has also been examined through sociological perspectives on educational inequality. Literacy has been described as a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for full participation in society (Annan, 2003; Wagner, 2011). Persistent literacy failure represents not only an educational problem but an issue of equity and social inclusion. Van Krieken et al. (2022) argue that educational institutions can contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities when some students in our society do not have access to “the elaborate code of language” which facilitates higher order thinking. Drawing on the work of Bernstein and Bourdieu, they suggest that schools often reward forms of communication and cultural knowledge from the elaborate code, students with middle-class backgrounds. Consequently, students who begin school without access to these forms of cultural capital can experience cumulative educational disadvantage. “Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope” (Van Krieken et al., 2022). Relational pedagogy can therefore be understood not only as a teaching strategy but also as an equity practice by giving a student an identity of success through access to the elaborate code.

The concept of an “identity of success” therefore reflects the intersection of instructional design, emotional safety, engagement, learner identity and social equity.

Data Collection

Data was collected through my practitioner records including:

- lesson records
- literacy assessment data
- reading and spelling mastery outcomes
- attendance and participation observations

- longitudinal follow-up communication where available

The limitations of practitioner-generated data must be acknowledged. The study did not include a control group, randomisation, or independent external assessment measures. As such, findings should be interpreted cautiously as practice-based evidence rather than generalisable causal research.

Practitioner-collected data indicated that:

- 91.5% of students achieved reading mastery within the intervention framework
- 84% achieved combined reading and spelling mastery
- most students required 40 or more hours of intervention instruction

While outcomes varied according to learner profile and complexity of need, all students demonstrated substantial growth following sustained intervention.

Conclusion: Engagement and Confidence

One of the strongest themes emerging from my observations, was the relationship between literacy success and learner identity.

Many students entered intervention presenting with high levels of anxiety, avoidance, or resignation around reading tasks. Some openly described themselves as “stupid,” “bad at reading,” or incapable of learning.

As students experienced repeated success through structured and scaffolded instruction, they demonstrated increased willingness to attempt unfamiliar tasks, improved persistence, and greater participation in learning.

Although these observations are qualitative rather than formally measured psychological outcomes, they suggest that literacy intervention influences broader educational engagement when students begin to experience themselves as capable learners.

The Lost Children described in this paper were never incapable of learning. Years of unsuccessful educational experiences had taught them that they were unsuccessful learners. While structured literacy provided the instructional pathway to reading, it was the deliberate construction of an Identity of Success that enabled many students to re-engage with learning. Through repeated mastery experiences, relational consistency, explicit teaching, and predictable success, students gradually replaced narratives of failure with identities of success. This suggests that effective adolescent literacy intervention is not solely concerned with teaching students to read. It is equally concerned with helping them believe that they can.

Furthermore, my findings suggest that adolescent literacy intervention involves more than remediation of technical reading deficits alone, literacy difficulty often becomes intertwined with identity. For these learners, successful intervention may depend partly upon whether instruction creates opportunities for students to experience themselves differently as learners. The concept of an “identity of success” emerged from practical teaching experience and formal psychological theory. When students experience repeated correction without humiliation, visible progress, and achievable success, they re-engage not only with literacy tasks, but with education more broadly.

If we accept that literacy failure is not merely an academic deficit, but an identity-forming experience that impedes a person's participation in life, then we must step up and find a way. I found a way and here it is: a Tier 3, structured, multisensory literacy program, delivered through an appropriately accelerated, cumulative sequence, using relational pedagogy to provide an intentional experience of tangible success.

Adolescent literacy remains one of the most significant unresolved equity issues in education.

Ultimately, it is not just what you teach. It is how you teach it — and who that person becomes as a result. The Lost Children can be found.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

In accordance with IAFOR's policy on the ethical use of artificial intelligence, I acknowledge the use of OpenAI's ChatGPT during the preparation of this paper. The tool was used in refining the structure and clarity of writing, improving grammar and style, and providing feedback on draft sections. All scholarly judgement, critical analysis, interpretation of evidence, and conclusions are my own. I reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final submission.

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