



The Teacher's Guide

by

Stephen Rickard





Goal! The Teacher's Guide

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1 About the Goal! Series

Goal! is a reading series designed to support the early stages of learning to read. It is designed specifically for older readers who are struggling with reading – i.e. those with a high ‘interest age’ but a low reading age.

The books in the series are designed primarily for readers with an interest age, or actual age, of approx. eight – 14 years, although there is nothing in the books that makes them unsuitable for readers who are older or younger than this. A six-year-old keen on football is likely to find the books fascinating and accessible, as would an adult with literacy difficulties and an interest in football.

The reading age of the books is approx. five – seven years. For further details on the reading age, see *Section Three: What is Letters and Sounds?*

There are 48 reading books available in the *Goal!* series (with one additional, higher level book – *Cup Final Day*), plus seven photocopiable workbooks. All of the books in the series are on the topic of football.

One of the many problems in helping struggling or reluctant readers to learn to read (or to improve their reading) is the simple problem of finding books that they actually *want* to read (i.e. that are age-appropriate and ‘cool’). Resistance to reading, arising from lack of confidence, from the almost certain ‘knowledge’ that failure is inevitable and from the universal truth (in their eyes) that ‘books

are boring' is all-too-often reinforced by the simple fact that too many educational reading books *are* boring. The *Goal!* series aims to remedy this.

This series does not target boys exclusively (many of the books are either written by or feature women players). Nevertheless, it is true that the majority of struggling and reluctant readers *are* boys, and football is one of the few topics that seems to inspire a real spark of interest. If motivation is the key to reading (and at this age it is!), then starting with books that are genuinely interesting (and that cater for the appropriate reading level) is no bad thing.

The 48 reading books in the *Goal!* series are split equally between non-fiction books and fiction stories about football. The range of story contexts and illustration styles hopefully maintains the reader's interest as they move through the series.

The *Goal!* series takes a synthetic phonics approach in the structuring and the levelling of the texts. Specifically, the *Goal!* books are tied to the phonics programme *Letters and Sounds*, produced in 2007 by the UK Government. However it must be stressed that it is not necessary to be using – or even aware of – *Letters and Sounds* in order to be able to use these books effectively.

According to strict synthetic phonics criteria, the *Goal!* texts are not 'fully decodable' within *Letters and Sounds* (but then again, very few books are – or should be!). Rather, the texts are carefully structured and 'highly decodable' – with any exceptions always following a consistent pattern. This is a complex and controversial issue, especially when working with older, struggling readers, and the approach taken to the texts in the *Goal!* series is explained further in *Section Five: Using Goal! with High Interest Age Readers*.

The *Letters and Sounds* phonics programme comprises six phases, starting with Phase One and working up to Phase Six. The *Goal!* reading series ties its books closely to these Phases. Thus Level One of *Goal!* links to Phase One of *Letters and Sounds*, Level Two to Phase Two, etc. The *Goal!* series does not at present extend to cover Phase Six of *Letters and Sounds*, although the additional reading book *Cup Final Day* is broadly at this higher level.

The 48 reading books in the series break down as follows:

Level 1 of <i>Goal!</i>	6 reading books (3 fiction, 3 non-fiction), 1 workbook. – corresponds to Phase 1 of <i>Letters and Sounds</i> .
Level 2 of <i>Goal!</i>	16 reading books (8 fiction, 8 non-fiction), 2 workbooks. – corresponds to Phase 2 of <i>Letters and Sounds</i> .
Level 3 of <i>Goal!</i>	14 reading books (7 fiction, 7 non-fiction), 2 workbooks. – corresponds to Phase 3 of <i>Letters and Sounds</i> .
Level 4 of <i>Goal!</i>	8 reading books (4 fiction, 4 non-fiction), 1 workbook. – corresponds to Phase 4 of <i>Letters and Sounds</i> .
Level 5 of <i>Goal!</i>	4 reading books (2 fiction, 2 non-fiction), 1 workbook. – corresponds to Phase 5 of <i>Letters and Sounds</i> .

4 Working with High Interest Age/Low Reading Age Students

The *Goal!* series is designed primarily for children (or *students*) aged approx. eight to 14 years, who have a reading age of approximately five – seven years. Of course, as has already been said, there is no reason why older or younger readers cannot enjoy these books.

Working with higher interest age struggling readers raises a number of particular issues, which are worth highlighting here.

Interests

In simple terms, older readers have interests that are different from those of younger readers. Obviously stories about party balloons and going to the park with Mum and/or Dad are entirely inappropriate, and will do nothing to stimulate the desire (in an older reader) to learn to read! Clearly, any books will need to have age-appropriate content (stories/topics) and illustrations. Even age-appropriate stories can be let down by illustration styles that are simply too young and are felt by the reader to be patronising.

In addition, however, older readers are usually more discriminating than younger readers. Older readers generally know what they do and do not like. Whereas most six-year-olds are pretty happy to read (appropriate) stories on

any topic, older readers are often more fussy. Football may be acceptable as a topic, for example, but not rugby or motor racing. Science fiction might be fine, but not 'ordinary' fiction.

This is an important issue because, as discussed below, for older readers motivation is an essential element in successfully learning to read. Therefore, for each individual reader, it is worth spending time trying to find out what topics actually interest them (and which do not).

Motivation/disaffection/resistance

Any student aged (say) 10 – 12 who has a reading age of approx. six or seven years has, clearly, been spending quite a few years making little or no real progress in developing their reading skills. As frustrating as this may be for the teacher, it is much worse for the student. They have probably spent four or five years being exposed – repeatedly – to the same teaching methods and the same old books (often age inappropriate). They have seen it all before.

As a result they are likely to be extremely hostile to the business of learning to read (hence the refrain 'Don't do books, Miss!') or simply resigned to repeated failure. They failed the last x times; they're obviously 'thick' and there's no reason why this time it will be any different. They can't read and that's the end of it. So why go through the pain and embarrassment of trying?

Without going into the various mechanisms for teaching reading that these students might have been exposed to (and I'd guess the mechanisms are many and varied), it is fair to say that they have likely become switched off. Whatever methods are tried (new or old), the real trick is to switch them back on to reading: to create something that makes them *want* to engage with a book or a text, and to make them think that this time it is different: this time it will work. This 'switching back on' has as big a positive impact on reading as any reading scheme.

So how to switch the student back on? How to create a situation whereby, instead of *you* sitting down with them with a book, saying 'OK, today we're

going to read this', *they* come to you with a book, asking 'This looks wicked! Can you help me read it?'

Part of switching students back on is to create opportunities for them to drive the agenda, rather than your attempting to drive it in the face of resistance. Leave a range of cool books around. If they like the look of a book (and if it has a structured approach, an appropriate reading age and the right interest age), then there is a strong chance that they will make greater progress.

Force-field analysis

In the field of business change management there is a tool, or concept, known as force-field analysis. I think it offers a useful lesson in the context of helping older struggling readers. The idea is that any status quo (such as a student not reading) is a balance between forces *driving* a change in that situation (e.g. the teacher trying to get the student to read) and forces *resisting* a change in that situation (e.g. the student resisting attempts to get them to read, because they 'don't do books').

Traditionally, the way to make the change happen – here, to get the student reading – is to *increase* the forces driving change (i.e. for the teacher to try harder with the student, being more supportive, spending more time with the student, etc.). However this often results in the resisting forces equally becoming stronger, to compensate – i.e. the student resists even harder. So it becomes a stalemate and nothing changes – except that the teacher and student relationship becomes more adversarial.

In fact, the solution lies not in increasing the forces driving change, but in focusing on the forces *resisting* change – and trying to reduce, or dismantle these forces. By reducing resistance, without increasing the driving force, the equilibrium position is upset and change – i.e. reading – begins to happen.

This sounds very theoretical, but what it boils down to is the idea of focusing primarily on the student's resistance to reading, and trying to overcome it. And the best way to do this is to let the student become engaged with some-

thing that they *want* to read: a ‘wicked’ or ‘cool’ book (or comic), a car parts manual, whatever. Just something that they want to read. One student I know would not read books, but actually used shopfronts and traffic signs as a way to learn to read: he wanted to understand the world around him, but had decided that books were definitely a no-no. That was fine: it worked for him and he engaged positively with reading.

Sophistication

Despite the simplicity of the texts they engage with, older readers are sophisticated. This affects the types of books they choose to read, but it also affects the way that they approach the reading and decoding of texts.

Despite what any ‘hard core’ synthetic phonics advocates might argue, older readers, like most of us, do use pictures and context to ‘guess’ what an unknown word might be. They don’t guess at random, though. Rather, they use the resources available to them to deduce what the unknown word might be. If it a long word beginning with ‘com ...’, for example, in a book about TV coverage of a football match, and there is a picture of a man talking into a microphone, then the word might well be ‘commentator’. Rather than making a wild guess (as younger readers often do), encourage the student to test the ‘hypothesis’: are there any parts of this word they can read that would indicate that it could be commentator: e.g. the ‘or’ at the end, or the ‘ent’, which is easily decodable.

This isn’t guessing: it’s bringing their knowledge and experience of the world together to help understand what is difficult for them. It’s what we all do all the time. (For more on this, see page 30.)

‘Greenfield sites’

A 12-year-old student with a very low reading age is not the same thing as a five or six-year-old with the same reading age. Apart from age-related issues

described above (interests, sophistication, etc.), there are key differences in terms of what they have been taught. A five-year-old is akin to a 'greenfield site' – a child who has been exposed to very little formal literacy teaching, and therefore who, with the right teaching, is likely to be able to learn to read as well as any other child of that age (unless of course they have any special needs).

A 12-year-old, on the other hand, is not such a straightforward 'greenfield site'. Apart from any specific special needs that they might have which might be affecting their reading skills (e.g. dyslexia), they have also been exposed to five (or more) years of this business of learning to read. It is inevitable that they will have picked up a number of bad habits along the way – especially if a number of increasingly desperate teaching methods have been attempted. Such bad habits might be as simple as persistent *b* and *d* reversals, for example, or they might relate to the *process* of reading – e.g. repeatedly guessing without attempting to decode, or read, a difficult word.

Thus, for a high interest age reader, learning to read is often as much about unlearning bad habits or 'wrong' rules as it is about learning to read.