

Transcending the Curricular Barrier Between Fitness and Reading With FitLit

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Teaching with an integrated curriculum (i.e., teaching two or more content areas together) is an idea long embraced by educators. The overriding goal is to help students learn better by showing them how different subjects are interrelated. Through integration, sometimes called *interdisciplinary learning*, students' understanding goes deeper and, therefore, has staying power.

Professional books such as *It's the Story That Counts: More Children's Books for Mathematical Learning, K-6* (Whitin & Wilde, 1995), *Science Workshop: Reading, Writing, and Thinking Like a Scientist* (Saul, Reardon, Pearce, Dieckman, & Neutze, 2002) and *The Power of Picture Books: Using Content Area Literature in Middle School* (Fresch & Harkins, 2009) provide detailed explanations about how to integrate reading and the other language arts with specific content areas such as mathematics and science. Yet very little has been written about how to integrate reading with fitness.

Why Integrate Reading and Fitness?

The alarming statistics regarding childhood obesity in the United States are reason enough to extend the idea of integration to fitness. A sad coincidence is that while we are beginning to recognize the problem, we are so obsessed with leaving “no child behind” *academically* that we may, in fact, be contributing to the obesity epidemic. In our desk-bound race to higher test scores, recess is often cut and physical education programs are scaled back, if they exist at all. Inactivity contributes to obesity (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001; Welk & Blair, 2000); thus,

integrating fitness and reading can combat this problem. The two can join forces to increase children's learning capacity and fight obesity.

The findings of researchers who investigate motivation, fitness, and the brain suggest two additional reasons for integrating reading and fitness. First, motivation plays a powerful role in learning (Gambrell & Marinak, 1997; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). As it relates to reading and fitness, sometimes an interest in fitness motivates reading. At other times, reading motivates fitness. Take, for example, the many readers who like to read the sports section of the newspaper—an interest in organized sports is the driving force behind the reading.

On the other hand, reading about fitness can motivate readers to become more fit. For example, when reading about how to increase running speed, readers may sprint from their armchairs to their neighborhood track to try out those ideas. Then, too, as they read about nutritious meals and how to prepare them, readers may be tempted to eat more healthfully at home.

Second, we have long known that physical activity improves circulation while strengthening bones and muscles. Just as important, though, is compelling

evidence from fitness and brain researchers that when students engage in physical activity, their *reading test scores are likely to show greater gains* (Castelli, Hillman, Buck, & Erwin, 2007; Jensen, 2000; Ratey, 2008). Without a doubt, children's overall health and success in school are connected (Wechsler, McKenna, Lee, & Dietz, 2004).

Finally, when considering the thought processes that transcend reading and fitness (i.e., physical, nutritional, social, emotional) as shown in Table 1, integrating the two seems only natural. To accomplish

PAUSE AND PONDER

- What concerns might you have with integrating the many areas of fitness and reading?
- Which FitLit text selection might you use to design your own integrated fitness and reading lesson?
- How might you work with other professionals to integrate fitness and reading?



Table 1
Thought Processes That Transcend Reading and Fitness

Attribute	Reading	Fitness
Active	Readers read the text, bringing their own experiences to it to construct meaning. They make predictions, make decisions such as what to read and reread, and decide when to slow down or speed up.	One component of fitness is physical activity, which calls for active participation. Participants also have to engage the intellectual aspect of fitness as they think about how to complete the exercise and what they might already know about it or similar exercises to do so.
Purposeful	Readers have purposes in mind when they read a text. For example, they might choose to read for enjoyment or entertainment. Other times, they might read to discover specific information.	Fit individuals have definite purposes, which is what makes them select specific exercises, eat certain foods, and determine how to interact with different individuals.
Evaluative	Readers evaluate what they are reading, asking themselves if the text is meeting their initial purposes for reading. They evaluate the quality of the text and whether it has value. They react to the text both emotionally and intellectually. Readers also evaluate their interaction with others in different instructional groupings as well as their ability to function as both leaders of and followers in the group.	Fitness participants evaluate themselves when doing an exercise to determine their level of performance. They react to their level of performance both emotionally and intellectually. Other times, they evaluate their diets to determine the appropriateness of food choices. In addition, they evaluate their interaction with others and their ability to function as both leaders and followers.
Thoughtful	Readers think about the text selection before, during, and after reading. Before reading, they think about what they might already know. During reading, they think about how the text relates to what they already know. After reading, they think about what the text offered and their interpretations of it.	Fitness participants think about the physical activity they are engaged in. They also think about other areas of fitness. For example, they think about which foods are the best choices for their diets. They consider their feelings as they approach given tasks. They think about how they interact with others.
Strategic	Readers use specific strategies such as predicting, monitoring, and visualizing to ensure that they comprehend the text.	Fitness participants use strategies such as predicting, monitoring, and visualizing to ensure that they are completing a task correctly. They use monitoring when they record their gains. They use visualizing as they see themselves performing an activity. They use predicting when they determine how they might improve their performance in the future.
Persistent	Readers keep reading a difficult text if they feel that it is helping them to accomplish a set purpose.	Fitness participants stay with a task as long as it helps them to accomplish a specific goal.
Productive	Readers are productive in more than one way. For instance, they bring their own experiences to the text at hand to construct or produce their understanding of it.	Researchers report over and over again that fit individuals are more productive at work and play. They also experience lower stress levels and have fewer bouts with illnesses, which enables them to be more productive.

Table 2
FitLit Titles

Category	Title and publication information	Grade level
Physical fitness	■ Calabresi, L. (2007). <i>Human body</i> . New York: Simon & Schuster.	3–5
	■ Carlson, N. (2006). <i>Get up and go!</i> New York: Viking.	K–2
	■ Chryssicas, M.K. (2005). <i>I love yoga</i> . New York: Dorling Kindersley.	K–2
	■ Gaff, J. (2005). <i>Why must I exercise?</i> North Mankato, MN: Cherrytree.	3–5
	■ Senker, C. (2008). <i>Exercise and play</i> . New York: PowerKids.	K–2
Nutritional fitness	■ Kelley, T. (2005). <i>School lunch</i> . New York: Holiday House.	2–4
	■ Leedy, L. (2007). <i>The edible pyramid: Good eating every day</i> (Rev.ed.). New York: Holiday House.	K–2
	■ Petrie, K. (2004). <i>Nutrition anyone?</i> Edina, MN: ABDO.	2–5
	■ Rockwell, L. (1999). <i>Good enough to eat: A kid's guide to food and nutrition</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	K–2
	■ Salerno, S. (2009). <i>Harry hungry!</i> Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.	K–1
Social fitness	■ Child, L. (2009). <i>We are extremely very good recyclers</i> . New York: Dial.	K–2
	■ Katz, A. (2006). <i>Are you quite polite? Silly dilly manners songs</i> . Margaret K. McElderry.	K–4
	■ Keller, H. (2007). <i>Help! A story of friendship</i> . New York: Greenwillow.	3–5
	■ Robinson, S. (2006). <i>Safe at home</i> . New York: Scholastic.	3–5
	■ Sauer, T. (2009). <i>No baloney!</i> New York: Dutton.	K–1
Emotional fitness	■ Campbell, B.M. (2008). <i>I get so hungry</i> . New York: Putnam.	1–3
	■ Dungy, T. (2008). <i>You can do it!</i> New York: Little Simon Inspirations.	2–3
	■ Hughes, L. (2009). <i>My people</i> . New York: Atheneum.	K–5
	■ Robberecht, T. (2006). <i>Sam is not a loser</i> . New York: Clarion.	K–1
	■ Snow, T. (2007). <i>Feelings to share from A to Z</i> . Oak Park Heights, MI: Maren Green.	K–3

of completing the Dragon Stretch. Now it is your turn to teach others additional exercises.”

During Reading

Once the students were in their buddy groups, I explained, “I am going to give each group a card. What you need to do is prepare the exercise for the rest of us. I’ll be around to help.” After 10 minutes elapsed, I called the class back together to the large group area and had students teach their exercise to others.

After Reading

During this part of the lesson, I took students back to their knowledge rating and had them take another

look at the terms: “Now that you have experienced different yoga exercises, take another look at your knowledge rating. Let’s talk about the terms.” After discussion, I invited students to rate their new understanding by individually marking the columns using a different colored pen.

I closed the lesson by stating, “Today you learned some words about yoga and you also learned about different ways to stretch so that you can remain flexible. You can now use these at home as one way to be physically active.” Figure 2 shows a lesson tracking form that was sent home with students to help them track their practice.

Figure 1
Yoga Knowledge Rating Form

Your name: _____

How much do you know about these words?

Word	A lot	A little	Not much
Dragon Stretch			
Cat Stretch			
Twisting Dragon			
Pretzel			
Lying Twist			
Cobra Backbend			

Figure 2
Bend a Little! Lesson Tracking Form for At-Home Practice

Your name: _____

Directions: Bend a little! Track your practice of yoga moves you've learned from *Yoga Pretzels* by adding a check mark for each day you complete an exercise.

Exercise	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Dragon Stretch							
Cat Stretch							
Twisting Dragon							
Pretzel							
Lying Twist							
Cobra Backbend							

Transcending Curricular Boundaries

Children need our help to become fit, and I remain optimistic that we can do our part. I agree wholeheartedly with Wechsler and colleagues (2004), who stated, “Schools alone cannot solve the obesity epidemic on their own, but it is unlikely to be halted

without strong school-based policies and programs” (p. 6).

As this lesson illustrates, there is a reciprocal relationship between fitness and reading, and using FitLit is one way to weave the two together. In so doing, we transcend the curricular boundaries between reading and fitness, making optimal fitness and reading more likely.

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