A Classroom Teacher’s Guide to Struggling Readers

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Contents

Acknowledgments iv
Asking and Answering the Tough Questions v

1 Reading Workshop: A Structure That Supports All Students 1
2 Creating Print-Rich Classrooms 11
3 Structures and Strategies for Effective Instruction: Reading Aloud and Minilessons 17
4 Continuous Assessment Makes the Difference 37
5 Individual Support and Direction for Struggling Readers 55
6 Self-Directed Learning Activities 66
7 If You Have to Use a Basal 78
8 Revaluing Struggling Readers 91
References 103
Index 111
This book is about teaching struggling readers—students for whom reading and learning to read are especially difficult. Some of these students have acquired learning disability labels and receive special instruction in resource rooms. Other struggling readers receive remedial assistance through programs like Title I or Reading Recovery. Many struggling readers, however, receive no special assistance and depend on the instruction their classroom teachers are able to provide.

What struggling readers have in common is the need for “frequent, intensive, explicit, and individualized support and direction” (Rhodes and Dudley-Marling 1996) informed by careful, ongoing assessment. The challenge for teachers is to create structures that enable them to provide the individualized support and direction struggling readers require. These same structures allow teachers to routinely collect the assessment data needed to provide reading instruction that responds to the specific instructional needs of all their students—struggling readers and the most able.

In this book, we show classroom teachers how they can support struggling readers via the organization of time and space inherent in a reading workshop. We present a wide range of effective instructional strategies. We also consider how commercial reading programs can be adapted to better meet the needs of struggling readers. But, however organized, instruction must be linked to appropriate, ongoing assessment; therefore, throughout this book we detail assessment strategies that produce the rich data needed to plan appropriate instruction for struggling readers.
Let’s begin with some questions and answers about the “big ideas” of working with struggling readers.

### Why can’t Jeremy read?

We want to be clear—we explicitly reject deficit models that pathologize struggling readers by situating learning problems *in the heads of individual learners*. There’s little point or value in attributing reading difficulties to learning disabilities, attention deficits, or dyslexia, for example—these labels do not lead directly or automatically to any particular instructional strategies. Nor is there any evidence that remedial or special education students—or any other struggling readers—have *unique* instructional needs demanding reading instruction that is qualitatively different from instruction provided to their more academically successful peers (Rhodes and Dudley-Marling 1996). Struggling readers are, however, more likely than their peers to require reading instruction that is *intensive, explicit, and individualized*.

The question for us is not, *what’s wrong with Jeremy?* but rather, what does Jeremy need to learn in order to continue his development as a reader and what can we do to support his reading development? The key to this support is careful, routine assessment that seeks to identify what struggling readers already know about language and literacy as the foundation on which reading instruction will build.

### What are the primary goals for teaching struggling readers?

The primary goal for teachers of reading must be to push *all* their students as far as they can go as readers. Struggling readers progress by learning the skills and strategies more proficient readers use as they work to make sense of different kinds of texts. Struggling readers learn, for example, how to use sound-symbol relationships, predictable gram-
matical structures, and their knowledge of the world to make sense of texts. They learn comprehension strategies like predicting, skimming, visualizing, and rereading. They also learn to relate what they are reading to their personal experience, background knowledge, and other texts. Struggling readers do not, however, learn to read “once and for all” (Gee 1991), since different purposes and genres demand different skills and strategies. Therefore, effective teachers of struggling readers offer the support and direction students need to read as wide a range of genres (realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, nonfiction, biography) for as wide a range of purposes (reading for pleasure, for literary experiences, for information, to perform a task) as possible.

Goals set for individual struggling readers must reflect state and local language arts frameworks; state- and district-mandated reading tests; the recommended standards of professional associations like the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE); and, most important, careful, ongoing assessment. The Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework (Massachusetts Department of Education 2001), for example, states that in first and second grades students should learn to “make predictions about the content of a text using prior knowledge and text features . . . and explain whether they were confirmed or disconfirmed and why.” This is a reasonable expectation for all readers, but classroom teachers need to determine the appropriateness of this goal for individual first and second graders through their ongoing assessment of the students’ reading development. Still, even a struggling reader who cannot read text independently may be able to “make and evaluate” predictions of texts that are read to him.

Which approaches to reading instruction work best for struggling readers?

Arguably, a book for teachers about struggling readers ought to focus on instructional strategies that have been proven to work with students for whom learning to read is a struggle, especially given the emphasis on “scientifically based” instruction in the No Child Left Behind Act.
But which approaches to reading instruction work best for struggling readers? is the wrong question. First, as we have already argued, it is doubtful that the instructional needs of struggling readers are unique. Further, what works? needs to be qualified by at what? for whom? and compared to what? A strategy deemed to “work” because it helps children sound out nonsense words, for example, may have little effect on reading comprehension.

Similarly, it is generally unhelpful to know that a strategy “works” for a generic group of students, as determined by “scientific research.” Ordinarily, a reading strategy or method is declared effective or research-based on the strength of statistical comparisons of average performances of two or more groups, one of which has been instructed using the method being touted. However, such comparisons reference average performance only, and teachers work with individual children, not statistically constructed average children. Further, claims of effectiveness, because they are based on comparisons between relatively small numbers of programs or strategies, are always limited. No matter how well students taught using program A perform compared to students taught with program B or program C, no claims can be made about program A relative to programs D, E, or F if these programs were not part of the original comparison.

In any case, no reading method, no matter how many studies are cited to assert its effectiveness, has ever been found to “work” with all students, in all settings, all the time (e.g., Allington and Johnston 2001; Dykstra 1968; Pearson 1997). As Duffy and Hoffman (1999) put it, “no single method or approach has ever been proven to be a cure-all” (11). Certainly, research offers general guidance for teachers as they design appropriate instruction for children in their classrooms, but individual teachers must determine what works by carefully monitoring their instruction of individual children. Therefore, routine assessment of children’s reading development must include ongoing appraisal of how children respond to various instructional strategies. In the end, teachers are accountable for their performance and the performance of their students; specifically, they must provide concrete evidence to parents and supervisors that they made appropriate instructional decisions—based on careful, ongoing assessment—that pushed each child in their classroom as far as he or she could go as a reader. It would be ludicrous for teachers to claim they are providing appropriate instruction merely by pointing to research evidence supporting the instruc-
How do I find the time to provide “individualized support and direction” for struggling readers?

Time is crucial for already overburdened teachers, who are well within their rights to resist taking on “one more thing.” The only way to address the needs of struggling readers successfully is by creating classroom structures that enable teachers to do ongoing assessment and provide students with frequent, intensive, explicit, and individualized support and direction as needed without adding to the already overwhelming demands of teaching. Our preferred approach to creating organizational space congenial to the diverse needs of struggling readers is a reading workshop. In a reading workshop teachers can address the individual needs of all their students without expending unreasonable amounts of time. Since many teachers are required to follow basal reading programs, we also suggest ways to adapt them to be more considerate of the needs of struggling readers.

Do struggling readers need more structure?

All learners, including struggling readers, require predictable, well-ordered learning environments. All students also benefit from some degree of explicit and individualized support and direction. The International Reading Association (IRA) has declared that every student has a “right” to appropriate reading instruction based on his or her “individual needs” (IRA 2000). Effective teachers carefully structure time and learning spaces in their classrooms in order to meet the various learning needs of their students. To the degree that struggling readers are more likely to require “frequent, intense, explicit, and individualized support and direction,” structure is especially important.
It all depends, however, on the meaning of structure. Teachers need to structure time and space in their classrooms to support struggling readers. Too often, however, structure equates with fragmented, decontextualized skill instruction. This kind of structure benefits no student, especially a struggling reader, who requires instruction in a context that routinely demonstrates that reading is always meaningful and active (Smith 1998).

What does “frequent, intensive, explicit, and individualized support and direction” mean?

All students require some individual support and direction, and we expect struggling readers to need more of it than their classmates. Similarly, all students benefit from some form of explicit instruction, and, again, struggling readers will be more likely to require this direct instruction.

Most children come to school having learned a great deal about what readers do when they read. They generally know how to orient books. They have learned that the pages of a book must be turned from front to back. They have made the discovery that print represents meaning. Most also have developed at least a rudimentary sense that letters represent sound. A relatively smaller number of children come to school as fluent readers.

In most cases, the knowledge children acquire about reading before they come to school comes from being read to by their parents and from their own experience with books and other sources of print (signs, labels, etc.). In contrast, school-based literacy instruction often focuses on explicit skills, separate from the reading of books. Although struggling readers do require some explicit instruction in the skills and strategies used by mature readers, such instruction should generally be embedded in a rich program of reading a wide variety of texts (Allington 2000). An overemphasis on decontextualized skill instruction is tedious and denies emerging readers vital information about how reading skills and strategies are used in the context of reading texts. (Examples of how teachers provide explicit instruction within the context of meaningful reading are provided throughout this book.)
Will a reading workshop lead to chaos and confusion in my classroom?

For many parents, administrators, and teachers, center- or workshop-based classrooms conjure up images of children wandering from place to place, perhaps reading, perhaps chatting with friends or daydreaming, perhaps participating in required activities, perhaps just fooling around, perhaps talking about the books they’re reading, perhaps gossiping or talking about their favorite TV programs. In short, we worry that if we allow too much freedom of movement in the classroom, we will lose control of both our students’ learning and our sanity.

There are, certainly, reading workshops in which the children are “out of control” or at least have not been given sufficient direction. But more often, reading workshops—whether in well-funded or poorly funded schools—are planned, well-organized sessions in which students are actively engaged in a range of profitable reading experiences. Successful reading workshops are run by teachers who carefully organize time and space in their classroom: the physical space is thoughtfully laid out, and reading activities are both meaningful and consistent with children’s developmental needs. But most important, successful reading workshops are set up by teachers who take the time to teach their students the routines. Attention to routines is vital.

Should I teach phonics or not?

Teachers—and the general public—have been led to believe that there is a war going on (i.e., the “reading wars”) for the hearts and minds of teachers between educators who favor the teaching of phonics and those who do not. This is a false and grossly misleading dichotomy. All reputable reading educators and researchers acknowledge an important role for phonics in the reading process and in early reading instruction. No one imagines that children or adults read with their eyes closed, as if the print on the page doesn’t matter. Children and adult readers all attend to the print on the page; therefore, decoding is a crucial aspect
of reading. There are, however, differences among reading educators over how, when, and why students are taught phonics.

It is generally agreed that explicit teaching of phonics skills is necessarily a part of early reading instruction, but, again, there are strong differences of opinion about the nature of this instruction. Most reading educators take the position, supported by research, that teaching children how English orthography works—sometimes explicitly—must be part of early reading instruction. However, an exclusive emphasis on the orthographic aspects of reading denies struggling readers access to other linguistic cues that are always part of the process. Even the two federally sponsored reports that are most often cited in support of explicit phonics instruction—Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998) and Teaching Children to Read (National Reading Panel 2000)—are clear that such instruction must be embedded in a rich and varied program of reading (Garan 2002; Pearson 2001).

Should I group students for instruction?

Although whole-class activities are often useful, a heavy emphasis on whole-class instruction is rarely congenial to the needs of diverse learners. Meeting the varied needs of individual learners requires both individual and small-group activities. Grouping by ability, however, frequently has a significant negative effect on the learning of students placed in lower reading groups (Opitz 1999). Children in the lower groups rarely experience the same range of reading opportunities as do students in the higher groups, which may explain why students often don't progress from lower to higher reading groups (Hiebert 1983). Therefore, we strongly recommend flexible, short-term, heterogeneous groupings that bring students together to learn particular skills, read common texts, or work cooperatively on projects (Caldwell and Ford 2002; Opitz 1999).