Working with struggling readers is not necessarily a separate aspect of a reading workshop, but creating ways in which to support the most vulnerable readers in a class does occupy much of a teacher’s planning and thinking. We can’t teach reading with an eye toward social justice if we don’t address both the equity issues and some strategies for working with the students who need the most support. If we do not pay attention to how we work with these students, we run the risk of ignoring them entirely, thus setting up conditions in which only some students will benefit. The students already richest in reading capital will get richer while the poor get poorer. In so doing, we would reproduce the unjust callousness toward the vulnerable of the larger society—and of course, very often, they are the same people.

Who is a struggling reader? The term itself is suspect, since it implies that all struggling readers belong to a single category. Anyone can struggle, and no one struggles all the time. No two readers struggle in the same ways. A poor score on a test may mean simply that a reader struggles with tests, not with reading something she is interested in. Often the perception of struggling is not coming from the reader at all, but from grade-level expectations or similar setups of the system. However, even if we don’t buy into these standards, there are still readers we would rightfully identify as “struggling.”

People who, for one reason or another, misapprehended the reading process and have not put a reading system together that adds up to meaning, these are struggling readers. Looking at the words on the page, they feel as if they are trying to follow a conversation in a different language, and it does not add up to understanding. Perhaps they believe that reading is sounding out letters. Or they may spend all their mental energy recognizing words without internalizing the total sense of what the text is saying. They may put in time with text, their eyes going over every word and perhaps their lips uttering each one correctly, but never thinking the thoughts. When these problems occur in a text written in the reader’s native tongue, about a topic of which the reader has some knowledge, we would say that reader is struggling. Struggling is not, however, the same thing as failing. Struggling implies trying, intentionally putting forth effort. When we watch readers in trouble, we see them struggle. Struggling implies that the effort expended is unnecessarily great, that reading should be easier and more energy efficient. It always involves a loss of meaning.
Teachers have classes in which some kids are struggling, in any number of ways, and others are not; this makes for instructional complexities (there are all these different kids and just one teacher). More than that, it turns a misunderstanding about reading into a social difficulty. The student looks around at his peers and realizes that their struggles are not like his. Certain tacit conclusions come to mind: I’m behind in some way; or I missed something; or I’m no good, but if I pretend, maybe no one will notice; or what can I do to avoid this?; or, the worst possibility, I’m not the kind of person who reads (Smith 1988). This measuring of self against others may be unavoidable in our society, but if reading is taught realistically, in all its diversity, the comparisons need not be this detrimental.

Investigating ourselves as readers (see Chapter 4) helps open a conversation about what makes reading hard for different people at different times. The point is for everyone to accept the reader she or he is and to develop an agenda for becoming the reader she or he wants to be. That we are all different as readers becomes very clear in this inquiry, and this realization is essential to a teacher’s ability to talk honestly about difficulty and growth with individual struggling readers. If all the students bring in books they have found hard going, for example, talking about difficulties won’t feel like “singling out” or tracking the students who need support. Understanding that anyone can struggle as a reader can awaken the whole community to the realization that these struggles are not a function of intelligence, ability, or age. Some teachers extend this inquiry through a brief whole-class study of difficulty, inviting students to read texts they find difficult, reading some short sections of texts that everyone in the room finds hard to make sense of, and talking together about how we handle difficulty and how it feels. This shared inquiry should be brief because reading at a “frustration level” makes everyone frustrated, and pretty soon, it becomes evident that readers aren’t exactly enjoying themselves. Discipline problems sometimes become more pronounced, especially during extended reading sessions. (Adults asked to read material too difficult for them act up, get silly, go off-task, and generally misbehave in just the ways kids do, or worse.) Nevertheless, a little time spent looking closely at reading difficulty provides a set of shared experiences, a common vocabulary to use when working with individual students. It also helps teachers learn to recognize what difficulty in reading looks like from the outside.

Struggling readers need to choose books for independent reading very carefully (Bomer 1999). Because reading is so often confusing for them, they need to monitor closely whether they are experiencing understanding or confusion. If the book they are reading feels confusing, they need to find one that makes them have a feeling of understanding. The teacher needs to interrupt their reading frequently, reminding them to monitor for sense and helping them assess continually whether they have chosen wisely. It helps to narrow the selection process with these students, to make books they are likely to find friendly easily available, either in a special section of the classroom library or by developing independent reading agendas limited to texts they are likely to understand.

In many classrooms, in fact in many schools, books easy enough for struggling readers to get through successfully just aren’t there. This is unfair, and it reproduces too-common injustice in the society at large. Money for books is one of the resources schools and teachers must allocate with an eye toward justice. If there is to be an imbalance, it should be in favor of the most vulnerable, not against them. It is hypocritical to attempt to teach for social justice and democracy without having enough easy books available to struggling readers.

A type of reading conference peculiar to struggling readers can be likened to running alongside a child learning to ride a bicycle (Tharp and Gallimore 1988). Teacher and student externalize the act of reading in conversation. The role of the teacher is to prop up the world of the text, to keep the reader’s attention focused on what the text is saying, and to cue particular strategies for figur-
ing out the words and meaning in the hard parts. Sometimes, the reader reads aloud, and the
teacher coaches in response to long pauses and miscues. Most of the time, the teacher asks questions
that encourage the reader to monitor for sense (Does that make sense to you? What could it be?).
When a reader seems especially careless about the print on the page, the teacher might ask, Does
that look right? When a reader seems unconcerned about whether a sentence sounds like language,
the teacher asks, Does that sound right? Is that the way we say it? (Clay 1991, 1994; DeFord, Lyons,
and Pinnell 1991). However, most often the problem is one of bad habits related to making mean-
ing rather than with visual or syntactic cueing systems.

Very often, oral reading is not the issue: the reader utters most of the words written on the
page, and the miscues they do make fit fairly well within the sentence and make some sense. Nev-
ertheless, we know a reader is struggling because she is insecure or really wrong in her retelling
of what she has read and her answers to questions about the text are unreasonable. In that case,
the most useful kind of externalization is talking about meaning as it evolves. The student reads
a bit, then reports on what she is thinking—what the text says and how she understands it. Then
she reads a bit more and reports, and so on. Thinking aloud like this, in dialogue with the teacher's
thinking and questioning, positions the reader actively and forces the reader to make something
of what she is reading. When, as perhaps a follow-up to the conference, the reader is partnered
with another to extend this work, there is a chance of rehabilitating the student toward active
meaning work rather than passively putting in time with eyes on print.

Reading with a partner, when it includes frequent interruptions to think aloud, is perhaps
the most helpful structure for struggling readers. The two readers should plan ahead a few places
to stop. At first, these stopping points will need to be frequent, perhaps every couple of paragraphs,
but as time goes on, over weeks, the stops can be less frequent—every page, every couple of pages,
every chapter. (This progression is too complex for a teacher to control; the detailed decisions
should be in the readers’ hands.) The social situation—having a partner waiting to hear what I
think—requires a more active focus on meaning.

Scheduling conferences during reading workshop is a constant process of decision making
for teachers. Clearly, struggling readers need more up-close assistance than others do, as well as
more careful monitoring and more redirection from their avoidance behaviors. Direct attention
is not the only way we educate, but it is an important way. Therefore, it is one of the resources
distributed in the public of the classroom. As in the case of allocation of funds for texts, it is most
fair that the balance be tipped in favor of the most vulnerable members of the population: teach-
ers should give a little more time to those who need them most. Of course, the other children in
the room mustn’t be neglected—all children are members of a vulnerable class—but fairness does
demand that we respond to need.

Spending a little time getting parents and other volunteers to read with kids who need sup-
port can free the teacher for other kinds of work. If volunteers are going to help, though, it is impor-
tant that they understand how. Lester Laminack’s Volunteers Working with Young Readers (1998)
is a very valuable resource. Figure 5–1 lists a quick set of guidelines.

Along these same lines, it need not take anything away from the more powerful readers in
a community for them to be helpful to the more vulnerable readers. The classroom community
as a whole can provide a safe and supportive environment for struggling readers by:

- Launching a scavenger hunt in the school and community for easier and more inter-
esting reading materials.
- Regularly checking up on one another to make sure the books we are reading feel like
understanding in our minds.
• Speak softly, gently. Think of yourself as a voice inside the reader’s head—because you will be.
• Interview first to find out what the reader is thinking and doing with this book. Find out how he is participating in the world of this book and how he is expecting it to go on from here.
• Aim through the reading for meaning. Act as if the child is telling you something that’s supposed to make sense, rather than acting as if the student is performing “reading.” Ask, What did you say?? or He did what?? as you would to yourself if you read something that didn’t make sense to you.
• If the reader stops, wait. After humming something silently (maybe the Jeopardy song?) to yourself, ask what she is thinking.
• Ask, What would make sense? or What could that be? This asks the reader to make a sensible guess.
• If the reader seems not to be paying attention to the letters and words on the page, ask, Does that look right? This cues the reader to see whether the letters, based on the sounds they make, could represent the word they guessed from meaning. Then move on, get back to the story.
• If the reader guesses something that does not fit in the sentence grammatically, say, Does that sound right? or Is that how we say it? If it sounds okay to the reader, get back to the story.
• Occasionally talk about strategies for figuring out:
  • Reaching for more of the sentence, then trying the word again.
  • Going back to the start of the sentence and turning your mind on higher.
  • Make a guess that makes sense and go on to see if the sentence feels okay.
  • Try out the first sounds and see if it seems like a word you know.
  • See if you understand the whole sentence, and if you do, keep on reading.
• If the reader is skipping or miscuing senselessly one or more words in each sentence, then the conference has to be about honestly assessing what books are good for this reader. Visiting the bookshelves together and finding a book (or better yet, a set of books) the reader can make sense of is a good way to spend time.
• In addition to all this hard, close-in work, talk with the reader about bigger things, such as:
  • How this text is different from or the same as other things he has read or movies and television shows he’s seen.
  • What kinds of times and places he is finding (or could find) for reading outside school.
  • How the two of you relate to particular characters.
  • Things you and the reader know about the book that aren’t explicitly in the text.
  • What you and the reader are reminded of, from your own lives, and feelings you have in response to the text.
  • Important ideas you think the author is trying to say here.
  • Things that are fair or unfair in the book; times when people are or aren’t free; ideas about people getting together and caring about one another.
• Encouraging each other to find books that feel right and even being on the lookout for books for each other.
• Talking openly and often about experiences of difficulty and ways to handle it.
• Being willing, at least some of the time, to be a partner for someone else’s reading choice—putting down my book to read with a friend for a while.

What we’d most like to avoid is creating a position analogous to that of a typical person in the United States public: ignoring the struggles of others, leaving it to the authorities to take care of as long as it doesn’t reduce our comfort or privilege. A classroom concerned with social justice has to involve members in a continual inquiry into “what can we do in response to people who need help?”

Predictable Problems

We have so succumbed to the notion that ability tracking creates or reinforces injustice that we can’t think about giving special attention to struggling students without becoming immediately anxious about creating a stigma. But if reading is one of the main things we do in the classroom and certain students are visibly less good at it, then those students are at risk of feeling embarrassed sometimes. A struggling reader may become visible in a number of ways: by virtue of the books he selects, by being overheard in conference with the teacher, or in situations where a number of readers are sharing a text. However, if everyone in the class understands that every person is different as a reader, with her own strengths and habits, there is no single “reading” standard that everyone is expected to “achieve.” If difference is an assumption in the community, and if standardization is not required in order for a person to participate, then there is less pressure to blend in and make oneself invisible. In addition, if the whole class participates in finding easier texts, and anyone might be seen reading one of them, and the teacher occasionally reads an easy book aloud, the notion that we define ourselves as readers by particular levels of text is disrupted.

Difficulty and ability are not defined purely by some objective measure of text complexity. Difficulty is a function of the relationship between the reader’s experience, identity, and knowledge and the assumed experience, identity, and knowledge in a text-world. A reader who seems to be struggling through a Katherine Patterson novel or a history text might seem to sail through an article about fishing, machines, anatomy, or baseball. When we lived in New York City and wanted to go out dancing, we would sometimes look at the “Clubs” listings in *Time Out New York*. We’d laugh as we read aloud to each other descriptions like:

Ultraverbose DJs Two Lives . . . and Timeblind return to clubland aiming to “put the ‘static’ back in ‘ecstatic’ and ‘open the realms of unfettered beauty to those who cannot or simply do not peer into it very often.’ ” Where we come from that’s a gussied-up term for mooning, but these guys surely have something loftier in mind. Musically, it’s an eclectic mix of abstract, minimal techno; underground hip-hop; funk and soul; “synapse-frying (gently-so) psychedelic stuff (rock and spacey sounds)”; heavy dub and more. (*Time Out New York*, April 13–20, 2000)

What the . . . ? Sure, we could read each of the individual words, but we lacked the experience, knowledge, and identity to make much meaning of it. Of course, the discourse was set up to exclude not-that-cool, middle-class teacher types from Queens. If discussion about such distances between particular texts and particular readers is a common part of the classroom conversation, then reading “improvement” is diversified, and there is less shame at having trouble understanding a particular text.
Shame is at the heart of another problem with teaching struggling readers. Often, by the
time they get past third grade, they have developed complex abilities to hide and masquerade as
more fluent readers. We see their low test scores, and even though we may not give those much
credence, we do want to inquire into what is going on with these readers. When we ask them to
retell something they have read, we may get verbose smoke screens and personal responses tan-
gentially related to the text. Are these students inarticulate because they didn’t comprehend what
they read or because they’re nervous about being put on the spot? And if they have successfully
convinced other students of their pretended reading identity, they stand to lose face if we make
them confront their need to work with easier text or any kind of text other than the one they’ve
become famous for reading. These readers are living on credit, posturing beyond their means, and
an intervention, a confrontation with where they really are and what they need to do to move for-
ward, is crucial for them to grow. Readers can’t grow by staring at text they cannot make sense
of. Most of the time, it helps to get this reader together with a friend, have them choose a book
together, and read as partners.

A completely different set of problems arises when struggling readers participate in shared
reading. At any point in the curriculum, at least half of a particular student’s reading experiences
should involve print of which he can make sense, powerfully. The remaining half of the time (or
less) he should be participating in conversations about literature and nonfiction, reading with oth-
ers, and receiving full acceptance as a member of the community. If a teacher maintains a balance
like that, she can feel confident that the student is becoming a better reader, while also knowing
that he is participating in bigger kinds of interpretive, collaborative thinking. He has time to be
the reader he is at present, while also acting like the reader he will become. He is reading his own
book independently, while also participating in reading clubs and whole-group shared texts.

If shared texts are more difficult than a reader can handle alone, there are a number of
options. If the teacher reads a text aloud to the whole class, difficulty with print is not an issue,
and everybody has equal access to the conversation. When a reading club has chosen a book too
difficult for one member, that student might listen to the book read aloud—by a parent, another
adult, a willing friend, or on tape. Or the student might read with a partner: a group of four divides
into two pairs, the partners reading together and reconvening as a foursome for discussions a cou-
pel of times a week. On occasion, one or two group members may struggle through a book on
their own—read at the book without having it make too much sense—but still be able to partic-
ipate in the club conversations once they catch on to what they missed. (A lot of students get
through high school English this way!) While these aren’t ideal ways to improve one’s reading,
they do permit a reader to participate actively as a full member of a dialogue group or class discus-
sion without worrying too much about what is happening in her mind minute by minute as she
reads. As long as the student also has occasions when she reads more successfully and indepen-
dently, this kind of reading isn’t harmful.

As much as possible, though, students should choose others who read like them when they
form clubs and partnerships. Collaboration is most helpful when participants are working on
close to the same thing, and book choice is less complicated when club members have both sim-
ilar topic interests and similar levels of comfort with difficulty. We stress this when talking with
students about how to make their clubs. This is significantly different from tracking. An author-
ity is not dictating where you belong by some mysterious assessment and against some fixed standard.
Rather, the learner himself, in relationship to other readers, reflects on, inquires into, investigates,
and revises grouping decisions. This involves self-assessment and goal-setting and is therefore an
inherently educative process, not an imposed judgment.
These practical problems and possible solutions center on identity: how will students wrestling with institutional expectations come to view themselves? “Struggling reader” is a role, and the institution of school has created it and will always fill it with someone. Those cast in that role will play it, often to perfection, adopting ways of behaving and thinking created by their interactions with significant others in the institution. Our task as educators is to make alternative identities available to these kids, to support them in their literacy growth even as we provide opportunities to perform differently, to “act smart,” to feel entitled to membership in a democratic community.

We are told we live in a time of great literacy crisis. A bill introduced in the U.S. Congress in 2000 stated:

America has a reading deficit. According to the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics every ten years, 41,000,000 adults were unable to perform even the simplest literacy tasks. The 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 69 percent of fourth-grade students are reading below the proficient level. The 1998 NAEP found that minority students on average continue to lag far behind their nonminority counterparts in reading proficiency, even though many of the minority students are in programs authorized under title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. . . . Reading scores continue to decline or remain stagnant, even though Congress has spent more than $120,000,000 over the past thirty years for such programs, a substantial portion of which has been dedicated to improving the reading skills of disadvantaged students.

Some adults in the United States cannot experience the enjoyment of reading novels and poetry. Some cannot read and understand a newspaper or a magazine. Some lack the skills to accomplish literate tasks such as voting, filling out tax returns, following directions, or completing job applications. They cannot read books to their children or write letters to their relatives.

There are also people who cannot read the bark and silhouette of trees when they stand in the middle of the woods. There are people who cannot make sense of the binary code that is the foundation on which their personal computer works. Some adults cannot hear the difference between the B section and the recapitulation in the allegro movement of a sonata. Some people cannot look at a river and know where the fish are, others are helpless at telling whether a wall is square or plumb. There are reports of people who cannot make meaning of a stock market ticker. You may know someone fairly well but be unaware of his inability to find anything to say about a painting by Rothko. Research has shown that some adults, and even some children, cannot open up their television set, their computer, or their automobile, read what is wrong with it, and repair it without getting specialized help from people with adequate skills. There are so many deficiencies in this society, one hardly knows where to begin.

Some of the nonprint types of “reading” mentioned here are every bit as functional and practical as reading stories or nonfiction text. Some are just as rich and rewarding aesthetically. They are not all that different from what you are doing right now. But only one kind of reading, which boils down to answering particular kinds of test questions, is considered a social deficit if we can’t do it. This deficit is so limiting to one’s life chances that it is worth diminishing children’s life chances further, in response to it, by keeping them from proceeding through the school system. We do not have to think that the reading of print is unimportant to ask why it is so important. We can understand that making meaning of print is almost universally convenient in our culture and still ask, Why bear down so hard on those who struggle with this one device for thinking and communicating?
Print reading, especially when it structures claims about truth, rather conveniently separates people by race and culture and by economic advantage, especially in early childhood. Language, the primary tool by which communities identify and exclude outsiders, and glue themselves together, is surely the most vulnerable spot to target if one wants to privilege some and exclude others. Moreover, children with the most stable, trusting, orderly (but varied) environments are in the best position to have concepts and capacities add up. The children of those who struggle economically and socially are obviously more likely to be neglected or harmed, to risk having weaker bonds of trust, especially as generation after generation suffers the same traps.

To read, one has to pull together in the present moment all one knows about the world that is predictable and likely. One must have faith in meaning, believe that a word one day means the same thing it did the day before. A reader, a thinker, uses all that he is in bringing will and hope to the effort of taking the risk to guess at what a text is likely to say. Reading is an audacious act. Think about a child who has not been able to rely on adults in his life, who has even been harmed by them. How is he able to predict the rest of a sentence, to reconstruct an author’s thoughts? Think about a child whose home language, the tongue in which she asked for more milk, spoke her first words, for which she was celebrated by those who love her, is not good enough for school. How is she able to make the thoughts on the page stand still and speak to her? For teachers watching the complicated struggles of many such children day after day, it is awe-inspiring that so many of them learn to read.

So why the overselling of literacy? Could it be that doing so privileges the privileged? Panicking about children who don’t read at the same time and in the same way as others separates those children by ethnicity, language, and class. Maybe that’s how it’s supposed to work, maybe it’s not done on purpose. Maybe people are looking out for their own, loving their children, wanting the best for them, assembling the resources and connections to make it all happen.

We have all bought into a metaphor for reading development. We think of it as a line on a graph that shows nothing but profit, continual improvement in a predetermined direction. When we see readers struggling, we imagine that they are at a lower point on the line than those who don’t struggle. Similarly, imagine people standing in line to buy tickets to a concert. Some people are ahead of others, and being ahead is better than being behind, especially because it means that soon those people will not have to be in line any longer.

An improved metaphor, though still imperfect, would be a three-dimensional one that sees reading as a mountain. Readers could be high on it or low on it but in many different places. In that metaphor, assessing and helping a reader would involve knowing just where on the mountain he is, what the terrain is like, and what path upward would involve the least risk and effort for him. The topography would be complex enough that a reader could, at a particular moment, be losing elevation but still making progress up the mountain. The apex of this mountain is large and offers varied vistas from different perspectives. Shifting the metaphor like this helps us think about reading growth more realistically. We get rid of our notion that there is a single entity called “reading” and a single path to growth. It’s still more limited than it should be, though, because the direction of progress still seems deceptively unified. In reality, there is no apex of reading that, once attained, is secured once and for all.

A better metaphor still would be to see reading as a country, a big one. There are varied landscapes, some mountainous, some marshy, some at the edges of oceans. Making progress through these varied terrains, and partaking of the pleasures they offer, involves different processes, depending on where one is located. When we start out with a reader, they might be anywhere in that country, and our job is to help her explore more of it and to notice more about the landscape in which she is at present. There is no single direction that everyone must go, and no one is ever
Struggling and Difficulty in Reading

finished with the journey. To thus diversify the possible locations in which we imagine all the
readers in our classrooms would mean letting go of the binary notion of success/failure and the
linear continuum between those two poles. We would let go of the language we use to describe—
and think about—struggling readers, and we would gain a richer image of the progress they
might make. A struggling reader in this metaphor would be someone paralyzed, frozen in place,
immobile and unable to explore—a condition caused more by the linear metaphor for reading
and our responses to it than by anything in the reader.

According to Hervé Varenne and Ray McDermott (1999), the linear metaphor of progress
in which we now work is part of American culture:

[S]chool success and failure are not simple consequences of the way the human world must be. It is
a cultural mock-up, what we call a cultural fact. The success and failure system, as a cultural fact, is
real in its connections to the political economy, exquisitely detailed in its connections with the every-
day behavior of the people who make up the system, and in both these ways massively consequen-
tial in the lives of all. Yet it does not have to be this way, and if everyone stopped measuring,
explaining, and remediating, school success and failure would in a significant sense disappear. Other
ways to stratify would soon evolve, but this evolution would have the virtue of separating education
from resource allocation. (xiii)

From this perspective, all linear gradations of reading achievement, all leveling of texts and readers,
is harmful. It does not mean that readers should waste time with books they don’t understand. It
does not mean that we should neglect to support the students most vulnerable to the system’s
judgments and punishments. But it does mean that we should stop talking about some books and
readers as higher and some as lower, that we should stop assuming that there are fourth-grade
reading levels and second-grade books and eighth-grade readers. We should not think of a par-
ticular reading club as the low group and expect that their inquiry and conversation will be any-
thing less than engaged, difficult, and intelligent.

Yes, the states will go on testing and the system will go on ranking and sorting. But our
classrooms can be small, temporary (but still significant) disruptions in that system (Flannery
1990). The language we use there can be less hierarchical and more democratic, less competitive
and more collaborative across differences. When we use language that way, we create a place
where all young people can expand their potential as individuals within communities, and we
invite every kid, without discrimination, to begin a lifelong exploration of the country of reading.
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