

STRUGGLING READERS

Why Band-aids Don't Stick and Worksheets Don't Work

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Contents

Introduction: What Do Struggling Readers Need? 6

1 Struggling Readers Need Teaching and Texts Targeted to Their Needs 9

Conducting Assessments 9
Fitting In Individual Assessment 11
Forming Instructional Groups 12
Choosing Reading Materials 12
“Tiptoe” Texts for Instruction 13
Planning Instruction 14

2 Struggling Readers Need to Learn in Small Groups 17

Structuring Reading Groups 17
What Does Small-Group Instruction Look Like? 19
The Guided Reading Lesson Planner 21

3 Struggling Readers Need to Read a Lot More 25

Scaffolded Silent Reading 26
Launching the Independent Reading Program 28
What to Read 29
Novels and Chapter Books 29
Hi-Lo Books 30
Informational Texts 30
Functional Texts 31
E-Books 31
Audio Books 32
Graphic Novels 32
Books for Boys 34

4 Struggling Readers Need to Be Taught What Good Readers Do 37

Teaching Comprehension Strategies 37
Thinking Aloud 39
Think Aloud/Think Along/Think Alone 39
Asking Effective Questions 40
Question–Answer Relationships 41
Talking to Learn 42
Think–Pair–Share 43

5 Struggling Readers Need Comprehension Superpowers 46

Sticky Notes for Active Reading 47
The Reading Toolkit 47

Comprehension Superpower: Asking Questions During Reading	48
<i>I Wonder/I Think/I Know</i>	49
<i>From Wonderings to Questions</i>	49
<i>Question-Grid Game Show</i>	50
<i>Hand, Head, and Heart Questions</i>	51
Comprehension Superpower: Inferring	52
<i>You Infer All the Time</i>	52
<i>Making Connections to Prior Knowledge</i>	53
<i>The Inference Formula</i>	54
<i>Inferring from Pictures</i>	55
<i>Inferring from Cartoons and Comic Strips</i>	56
<i>What's Your Inference?</i>	57
<i>What a Character!</i>	58
<i>Predicting: Seeing the Future</i>	59
<i>What Happens Next?</i>	59
Comprehension Superpower: Monitoring and Clarifying Comprehension	60
<i>Remote-Control Reading</i>	60
<i>Clicks and Clunks</i>	61
<i>Fix-Up Tools</i>	62
Comprehension Superpower: Synthesizing	62
<i>I Used to Think/But Now I Think</i>	63
<i>Generating Mental Images</i>	63
<i>A Rainbow of Strategies</i>	63
<i>Strategy Bookmarks</i>	64

6 Struggling Readers Need to Be Word Wise 73

A Word-Study Program	74
Rich Language Experiences	74
Encouraging Interest in Words	74
Teaching Specific Words	74
Word-Solving Strategies	75
Lesson Routines for Vocabulary and Word-Solving	75
<i>Vocabulary MOVES</i>	75
<i>Vocabulary Squares</i>	76
<i>Storm and Sort</i>	77
<i>Vocabulary Highlights</i>	78
<i>Context Clues</i>	78
<i>Chunking Words</i>	79
<i>Powerful Prefixes and Super Suffixes</i>	81
<i>Outside the Word/Inside the Word</i>	82
<i>Word Explosions</i>	83

7 Struggling Readers Need to Build Fluency 91

Fluency Matters	91
What Can Teachers Do?	93
Oral Reading Practices that Support Fluency	94
Modeling with Read-Alouds	94
Shared Reading	94
Choral Reading	95
Paired Reading	95
Readers Theatre	95

Lesson Routines to Teach the Tools of Fluency	97
<i>Punctuation Signals</i>	97
<i>Take a Break for Phrases</i>	98
<i>Learning to Read a Script</i>	98
<i>Opera Reading and Robot Reading</i>	99
<i>Poetry Performance</i>	99

8 Struggling Readers Need to Read for Information 100

Before-Reading Routines	101
<i>Map the Page</i>	101
<i>WITIK Folders</i>	102
<i>Get HIP to Reading</i>	103
<i>Alphaboxes</i>	104
During-Reading Routines	105
Tracking Thinking with Sticky Notes	105
<i>Text Features Scavenger Hunt</i>	106
<i>Topic Sentences</i>	106
<i>One-Sentence Summaries</i>	107
<i>Race-Car Reading</i>	107
<i>Skim, Scan, or Skip?</i>	108
After-Reading Routines	109
<i>Telegram Notes</i>	109
<i>Mind Maps</i>	109
<i>Three Facts and a Fib</i>	110
What If They Can't Read the Textbook?	111

9 Struggling Readers Need to Read the World 118

Reading Websites	119
Reading Schedules and Timetables	120
Reading Directions or Instructions	120
Reading Store Flyers	121
Reading Online Maps	122

10 Struggling Readers Need to Write About Reading 123

Modeled, Shared, and Guided Writing	124
Written Comprehension Questions and Prompts	124
Forms of Written Responses to Reading	125
Personal Response	125
Summarizing and Note-Taking	126
Graphic Organizers	129
Assessing Written Responses	130

Conclusion: What Struggling Readers Need Most 141

Appendix A: Book Excerpt 142

Appendix B: Oral Reading Assessment 144

Appendix C: Readability 146

Resources 148

Introduction: What Do Struggling Readers Need?

Charlie was one of my most memorable students from the early years of my career. With his ready smile and quick wit, Charlie was popular with both teachers and students. He always had an answer for every question, and whether or not his answers were correct, they were always entertaining. Charlie was the star of the class—except when it came to reading.

Charlie came to school with limited experiences with print. In Kindergarten, when the other children were learning their letters, Charlie made towers with the alphabet blocks. In Grade 1 he struggled with letters and sounds but, with lots of help, he managed to crack the code by the end of Grade 2. In Grade 3, when most of his friends were reading chapter books with fluency, Charlie was still sounding out a lot of words, relying on picture cues, and mostly avoiding books whenever he could. When Charlie arrived at my door in Grade 4, he was clearly in trouble. He spent most of the independent reading time at the bookshelf “choosing a book.” He carried novels around like props, only pretending to read them. In content-area reading, he was totally out of his depth.

Charlie’s problems with reading were not unique to him then, and they’re not unique today. The bad news is that, despite the decades of research on reading instruction since I taught Charlie, we’ve made little progress in reducing the percentage of students who struggle with reading. Most statistics indicate that about a quarter of the students in any grade are reading below grade level. And we are quite likely to have more than one “Charlie” in any classroom. These students are often (but not always) boys. During reading time, they might fake reading, get a friend to read for them, or simply misbehave. After all, most kids would rather get attention for being “bad” than for being “dumb.”

Of course, there’s no single mold from which all struggling learners are cast. There are many different reasons readers struggle. Medical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral challenges undoubtedly interfere with learning; these are serious disabilities that are not within the purview of this book. But for most students with reading difficulties, there are a whole range of needs that can—and must—be dealt with by the classroom teacher: students whose first language is not the language of instruction; students whose life experiences do not provide the background knowledge needed to access academic or literary texts; students whose ability or speed of functioning is just a little slower than that of their peers; students who missed picking up some key skills along the way; students who *can* read, but have lost the motivation to do so. These are the “extra scoop” kids—students who often need just a little more teaching or practice or attention to get them on track with reading. And the good news is that it’s not too late, even in middle school, to provide those extra scoops of instruction that will get the great majority of these students back on track (Roberts, G. et al, 2013).

We used to assume that by Grade 6 or 7 or 8, reading difficulties were irreversible, and our best option was to provide “band-aid” solutions like week-ahead reading, reading the text aloud to students who couldn’t manage it on their own, buddying up struggling readers with more competent readers, or simply s-l-o-w-i-n-g d-o-w-n the whole process. However, the problem with band-aids, as we know, is that they simply don’t stick forever. Another outdated school of thought is that struggling readers just need more practice on discrete skills, like decoding and letter patterns. (In truth, only about 10% of struggling adolescent readers have issues with decoding.) So reading class meant lots of time with worksheets and little time with actual reading. As a result, the kids who needed reading practice the most got it the least, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “the Matthew effect,” a Biblical reference to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer (Stanovich, 1986).

What struggling readers really need is opportunities to read a lot, with texts that they *can* and *want to* read. They need explicit instruction in the long-term strategies that will enable them to tackle tough texts when a teacher or reading buddy isn’t on hand. They need to build, not just competence, but also confidence in themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers. Really, isn’t that what *all* readers need? In fact, research has shown that good instruction for struggling readers is not very different from good instruction for students reading at grade level (Torgesen et al, 2007). But struggling readers need that good instruction even more.

This book is about teaching and learning—the explicit instruction, modeling, and demonstration of the habits of effective readers; and routines for guided practice and independent application by students. It is organized around the instructional needs of struggling readers:

- the need for teaching and texts targeted toward their needs
- the need to read more—a lot more
- the need for explicit instruction and guided practice in comprehension strategies
- the need to build vocabulary and fluency
- the need to be able to read informational and functional texts
- the need to use writing to make sense of reading

In the chapters of this book, you will find a range of teaching ideas from which to choose as you plan instruction targeted to the unique needs of your students. Although most of the lesson routines are specifically designed for small-group instruction, they can be easily adapted to whole-class or individualized learning. Each lesson is focused around a specific learning goal and includes a *must-do*—a learning activity that requires students to independently practice what they learned in the lesson.

In my previous book, *Guiding Readers: Making the most of the 18-minute guided reading lesson*, I included just one chapter on small-group reading instruction for struggling readers in upper grades. But I kept hearing from teachers of upper-elementary- and intermediate-grade students that they wanted more lesson routines geared to their grade levels. This book emerged from their requests. Teachers familiar with *Guiding Readers* will recognize some of my favorite material, such as the Reading Toolkit, “clicks and clunks” reading, and the Independent Reading Log—here, they are all carefully chosen to be appropriate for students in Grades 3 to 9.

It's not enough to simply help struggling readers read today's material; they need to build strategic independence to read tomorrow's texts on their own. It's not enough to simply make some progress; we need to *accelerate* progress so they catch up to their grade-level peers before it's too late. And we need real instruction that works, since we know that worksheets simply don't work and band-aids won't stick. This book is intended to provide a collection of practical and proven teaching ideas for anyone working with struggling readers, many of whom just need that "extra scoop" of instruction that will help them become the confident, independent, and strategic readers of tomorrow.

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