

Be That Teacher!

BREAKING THE CYCLE
FOR STRUGGLING READERS

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Forewords by Richard L. Allington & Timothy V. Rasinski



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Preface

It is time to break the cycle of reading failure for students who experience reading difficulties. For we all know students who return to school each year hoping that this is the year, that you are the teacher who will help them become successful learners, readers, and writers.

We advocate for instruction that is sensible, grounded in authentic reading and writing engagement, and designed to position students as successful learners. Richard Allington (2011b) argues that “sensible” instruction insures that students read something they like and understand every day, have opportunities to talk with peers and adults about their reading and writing, and receive instruction from expert classroom and reading teachers. In too many schools, students classified as struggling readers have little time to read connected texts, limited access to books, and few or no opportunities to choose what they are reading. And far too often these students receive instruction that does not address their strengths and needs.

Struggling readers are not a homogenous group; rather they vary in understandings, skills, and strategies they have acquired and those they need (S. W. Valencia, 2011). Yet across SES levels and different cultural and linguistic histories, struggling readers benefit from high-quality and differentiated instruction (Allington, 2006).

The disparities in reading achievement due to poverty and racial and ethnic differences are well documented (J. Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Racial/ethnic and gender gaps in student performance for eighth-grade students and the dropout rate for Latino and African American students remain higher than the rate for White students (Planty et al., 2009). Students living in poverty and representing racial and ethnic differences are overrepresented in special education (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007), underrepresented in gifted education programs (Ford, 1998), and often positioned in classrooms as disabled (Collins, 2011). Despite a decade of major educational reforms aimed at closing the achievement gap and addressing reading difficulties, these problems persist. This is partly the case because schools emphasize the wrong things (Allington, 2011b; Collins, 2011; National Endowment of the Arts Annual Report, 2007). Skill drills, for example, replace

authentic reading and writing opportunities. Consequently, the need to address gaps in reading achievement between and within various groups of students at the classroom and school level must continue to be a priority.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

This book is for classroom teachers and reading specialists and ultimately their students who may be experiencing reading difficulties, and for undergraduate and graduate students preparing to teach, to advance their understandings of literacy instruction, or coach those who teach.

This book focuses on changing the trajectory of struggling readers' learning in school and repositioning them as abled readers. We view good, sensible reading instruction as the vehicle that makes reading and writing work for each student. It builds on students' own curiosity, interests, prior knowledge, and cultural and linguistic experiences rather than denying them or treating them as deficits.

More specifically, our book is organized as follows. In Chapters 1–3 we attempt to put a face to the tens of thousands of struggling readers in today's schools. We begin, in Chapter 1, with a case study of Colin, a fifth-grade student in Ms. Schull's class, and consider possible reasons why Colin is experiencing reading difficulties. Like new and experienced teachers everywhere, it is important that we understand the reasons why students struggle in reading, as well as the type of instruction needed to accelerate their progress. In Chapter 2 we address this question: What cultural and linguistic considerations must we understand to provide the robust and responsive instruction that students like Colin need? In Chapter 3 we address assessments that are useful and usable in the classroom to pinpoint students' strengths, resources, and difficulties to assist teachers in providing robust and responsive instruction.

In Chapters 4–9 we introduce other primary and intermediate students whose struggles differ from Colin's yet whose instructional needs must be met. We analyze each student and instructional situation to identify directions for appropriate instruction. We provide specific instructional recommendations that can make a difference in the reading development of students in elementary and middle grades. These recommendations are grounded in research that occurred in real classrooms with real teachers and real students. Chapters 1 through 9 have a section entitled Case Analysis, where we analyze the students and instructional situations; starting with Chapter 4, another section, Conceptualizing

Instruction, focuses on our instructional recommendations. In Chapter 10, we provide a summary of instructional features that are powerful and robust for reducing student failure.

The cases we describe throughout this text are composites of students, teachers, and families who have impacted our thinking about reading instruction. No one case completely represents one student, one teacher, or one situation that has singularly or collectively influenced and extended our thinking about struggling readers. Descriptive information embedded in the case analysis sections of each chapter represents typical information shared by teachers and/or parents. We have gathered data across individuals and situations and organized these data thematically as individual cases to give voice to the multiple and representative instructional issues and dilemmas that we face as literacy educators. Pseudonyms are assigned to the teachers and students we describe.

Guided by the voices of many teachers and students who have influenced our thinking, we provide authentic examples of how instruction can be implemented and adjusted to accommodate students' individual differences—differences that are influenced by their school and instructional background, their cultural and linguistic histories, their interests and out-of-school activities, their reading and writing habits in and out of school, and their understandings and misunderstandings about texts, print, and digital media. We invite you to analyze and reflect about each case presented as you chart a course toward independence and success for the struggling readers in your classrooms and schools.

Each chapter begins with an overview of major chapter ideas and concludes with a summary and questions to guide reflection and analysis of issues we pose. Text highlights and figures provide explicit examples of teaching principles, materials, and instruction.

Our book differs from other texts addressing struggling readers in at least two ways. First, many texts addressing reading difficulties focus primarily on building students' motivation and positive attitudes, assessing students' skills and strategy knowledge and needs, and providing instruction that supports students' literacy development and targets students' needs. While these areas are central to the content of our book, we situate these areas in a consideration of students' lives. We take an ecological approach to our recommendations for instructing struggling readers as we consider the knowledge and experiences in multiple communities—home, neighborhood, peer group, church, and school—that influence students' identities as readers and writers and how their knowledge can be used as a resource for teaching skills and strategies and disciplinary knowledge.

We draw on research indicating that instruction of skills and strategies without considering the larger world in which students live and learn is highly ineffective, especially for students with diverse cultural and linguistic histories.

Second, the book differs from texts that challenge us to look at the larger issue of school improvement. We are firmly committed to the urgency of taking social actions needed to promote educational and social changes that will remove the inequities in school funding, resources, and achievement in high-poverty schools. Yet we believe that critical action must also occur at the classroom level. This is especially true for struggling readers who are found in all classrooms, but found in greater numbers in high-poverty schools. To initiate change at the classroom level for struggling readers, the needs of these students must be examined through the following six critical lenses: student-focused, motivational, sociocultural, constructivist, diagnostic/assessment, and instructional.

We apply these lenses to authentic classroom cases to promote critical thinking about the individual nature of the students who struggle in reading. We address factors affecting student motivation in reading and explore ways to increase intrinsic motivation to read. We analyze the sociocultural factors that affect student learning and explore ways to change trajectories in reading achievement. Ultimately, we want to explore how teachers can use students' individual and cultural backgrounds, as well as the results of diagnostic/assessment measures, to provide the type of differentiated instruction that struggling readers need. We invite you to consider our instructional recommendations in an effort to provide forms of instruction that matters the most for students who continue to fail in reading.

OUR HISTORY

We have been interested in students' reading problems since we began teaching. Vicki's first teaching assignment was first grade in an urban school in a small industrial town in western Pennsylvania. Doris's first teaching assignment was in a first-grade classroom in an urban school district located in a mid-sized city in central Kentucky. Starting with those first teaching assignments and in subsequent years when we taught in the fourth to sixth grades, and continuing in our years as teacher educators when we collaborated with many teachers and reading specialists, we have learned valuable lessons about students who experience reading difficulties. We've learned that our students responded favorably to some aspects

of our literacy instruction and had difficulty with others. Some were interested in the daily reading and writing activities of our classrooms, and others were far more interested in activities that they created for our classroom (e.g., the fourth graders who wrote plays during lunch for all to perform or the first graders who found books in the school library for us to read aloud) or that occurred out of school. Mostly, we have learned that our students have many capabilities that often are not realized or developed fully during reading and writing instruction, and that students often are thought to be less than capable or sorted into groups or special placements that designate them as having disabilities. Too often school situations and high-stakes assessments lead to quick (and often negative) judgments about students' capabilities, and students are sorted into groups of being either "able" or "unable"—labels that often negate the importance of a more comprehensive understanding of students' capabilities and instructional needs.