MEETING THE NEEDS OF STRUGGLING ADOLESCENT READERS

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that additional reading instruction is necessary to support struggling adolescent readers. In addition to time allocated for reading and access to appropriately leveled texts, many students need teacher support in learning and implementing a range of reading strategies. As a high school English teacher and a middle school Social Studies teacher pursuing advanced degrees in literacy, Allison and Carolyn were familiar with current trends in literacy research but lacked practical experience in helping struggling adolescent readers. It was not until working with a struggling reader in a one-on-one tutoring setting that they began to understand how to identify areas of weakness and develop differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms. Following a discussion of Allison's and Carolyn's stories, the authors offer suggestions for transferability to the larger classroom setting.

Many struggling adolescent readers hide behind apathy or rebellion. Behaviors such as sleeping in class, texting during instruction, or not completing assignments are common characteristics of struggling older readers. These students rarely ask for assistance and avoid participation in class, and, consequently, teachers mistake their struggles with reading for behavioral problems. Their narratives have already been written and, as a result, many view themselves as unsuccessful (Vlach & Burcie, 2010).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores (2009, 2011) indicate that only 38% of 12th graders and 34% of 8th graders are considered to be reading at a proficient level or above. More than eight million students in grades four through 12 are identified struggling readers (Fisher & Ivey, 2006). In addition, the Writing Next Report reveals that 70% of adolescent students are considered low achieving writers (Graham & Perin, 2007). Furthermore, one in four secondary students struggles to read and comprehend textbooks (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Many teachers of adolescents believe their students could be successful if they only focused or cared more, but as the previously noted statistics suggest, many students need individualized reading instruction, not a change of behavior, to increase their achievement. "What they need is support for where they are in their development and the chance to feel success as readers instead of experiencing reading failure" (Miller, 2009, p. 25). It is essential that teachers build relationships with their students, assess their individual needs, and differentiate instruction to foster growth and success for every learner.

As a high school English teacher and a middle school Social Studies teacher pursuing advanced degrees in literacy, Allison (second author) and Carolyn (third author) were familiar with current trends in literacy research but lacked practical experience in helping struggling adolescent readers. They felt ineffective when it came time to helping struggling learners comprehend a complex, content-heavy text. They wondered how can all teachers be teachers of reading if secondary educators lack the knowledge and experience. It was not until working with a struggling reader in a one-on-one setting that they began to understand how to identify areas of weakness and develop differentiated instructional plans to meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms.

STRUGGLING ADOLESCENT LEARNERS

In his book *Readacide*, Gallagher (2009) argues that schools are creating expert test takers at the expense of developing thoughtful readers who engage in real reading experiences. All students, including struggling readers, need meaningful and purposeful opportunities to engage in authentic reading experiences. Yet, it is common to find struggling readers engaged in isolated skill and drill instruction and activities that perpetuate low literacy achievement. The research-based position statement on adolescent literacy from the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) suggests that inexperienced readers need opportunities as well as instructional support to read a variety of diverse texts (2004). Fisher and Ivey state that students need "significant opportunities for wide reading... access to a substantial number of readable, interesting books that focus on the content they are studying, and the opportunity to 'just read' books of their own choosing" (2006, p. 181). Interaction with a range of text helps students build background, foster fluency, and develop a reading range. Ivey & Broaddus (2001) determined that high quality, diverse reading materials in the classroom was a factor in middle school students' motivation to read. They also reveal a disconnect between in-school reading and out-of-school reading. When in-school reading doesn't match real world reading that occurs beyond the four walls of school, students lose interest and motivation to engage in the act of reading, which may influence overall comprehension.

According to Fisher and Ivey (2006), increased time spent reading increases achievement. "Students who do not read regularly become weaker readers with each subsequent year" (Miller, 2009, p.25). Additionally, when students are provided with time for reading, choice, and assistance with finding accessible text, their reading motivation is enhanced. Accessible texts should be high-interest and match students' reading levels (Tovani, 2004). As Allington (2002) noted, "...students can't learn from texts they can't read." When we provide students with text sets representing varied reading levels, genres, and topics, we are more likely to meet the diverse needs, interests, and experiences of adolescent readers (Short, Harste, & Burke, 2007). When used in content areas, text sets enhance students' understanding due to the increased accessibility of text instead of the limiting textbook typically written above grade level.

Fisher and Ivey recommend that teachers of struggling adolescent readers help students develop strategic reading skills (2006). Of struggling readers at the secondary level, 70% have been identified as having difficulties with comprehension (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). According to Rasinski and Padak (2005), struggles with comprehension are due to a lack of decoding words

effortlessly in text. Most of the texts read by adolescents contain a larger percentage of polysyllabic, low-frequency words. Cunningham posits that "because these big words contain most of the meaning, students cannot comprehend what they read unless they can pronounce and access meaning for these words" (2009, p. 308). Furthermore, these students often read at a slow pace with little expression and emphasis. Fluency is also a key factor in reading success of older students (Rasinski & Padak, 2005; Rasinski, Padak, McKeon, Wilfong, Friedauer, & Heim, 2005). "Instruction in fluency for older [struggling] readers... may open the way for significant improvements in comprehension, overall reading achievement, and achievement in content areas" (Rasinski & Padak, 2005, p. 40). Findings from Rasinski et al. (2005) reveal the need for instructional support in the area of fluency for secondary students.

Harmon, Wood, and Stover (2012) describe the importance of choice, accessibility, rereading, and supported reading across content areas for older readers. "Even with teacher support, school texts can sometimes be beyond the reach of some students, and requiring them to read such texts leads to frustration and low self-esteem, with little to no learning occurring" (Harmon, Wood, & Stover, 2012, p. 51). Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz (2011) suggest the use of a before, during, and after reading framework for reading instruction in the content areas. Within this framework, the teacher helps to "frontload" information, build background, stimulate interest, and provide a reading purpose before reading. During reading, the teacher provides support as students interact with the text. After reading, the teacher helps students extend, reinforce, and apply the learning.

The use of a before, during and after reading framework is described in Allison's and Carolyn's tutoring cases below. Tutoring occurred as part of a requirement at the University where the tutors were receiving their Masters degree. In the following sections, the authors share their experiences working with struggling readers in a one-on-one setting. Following their stories, the authors offer suggestions for transferability to the larger classroom setting.

ALLISON'S STORY

Tom, a ninth grade student at Allison's school, had a reputation for disrupting class, never submitting his work, and frequently receiving detentions and in-school suspensions. When she asked another one of his teachers for insight into his school work, the teacher told Allison, "Nothing. He does absolutely nothing." Armed with this information, she was surprised to meet a shy and respectful young man who was receptive to one-on-one instruction on the first day of tutoring.

Allison conducted a number of diagnostic assessments to determine Tom's strengths and weaknesses and created an appropriate instructional plan for him. When reading a passage from the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI), Tom omitted words, read without pausing for punctuation, and guessed wildly at word pronunciations (Leslie & Caldwell, 2010). Tom demonstrated difficulty with multisyllabic words, especially after the second or third syllable; for example, he read the word "official" as "offense." Tom's reading demonstrates what Stanovich refers to as the Matthew Effect (1986). This suggests that strong readers continue to develop while struggling readers, due

to limited access to complex text and vocabulary, remain less proficient. In this way, there is a reciprocal relationship between Tom's reading ability and his acquisition of vocabulary. Due to challenges with decoding, Tom's development of academic vocabulary suffers. Most adolescent readers identify words like "education" and "special" automatically, but because Tom struggled with decoding, he paused to grapple with these familiar words. His struggles with vocabulary and decoding hindered his comprehension, his retelling was limited, and he was unable to identify the main idea or distinguish between important ideas and supporting ideas.

Based on her findings, Allison developed an instructional plan to support Tom's needs. This plan focused primarily on decoding because his struggles with reading individual words prevented him from comprehending texts or building vocabulary and fluency. To assist Tom with word recognition, she taught him several strategies to use when he came across unknown words, especially long, multisyllabic words. Allison showed him how to break the word down into recognizable parts (Beers, 2003). Chunking the word into smaller sections helped him see how the parts made up the whole. Similarly, Tom learned how to identify roots, prefixes, or suffixes with which he was familiar. Additionally, because Tom particularly struggled with reading the endings of words, Allison showed him how to recall other words that ended in the same letters so he could figure out the sound by rhyming. For instance, Tom could not read "decade" but was familiar with "Gatorade," so he used the word family to decode the challenging word. By the end of the tutoring experience, Tom employed these strategies independently without teacher prompting. This scaffolding process was essential to foster Tom's success and is a critical component to developing struggling readers.

Word recognition and spelling are interrelated, so the syllable chunking and decoding strategies also helped Tom with spelling. He completed word sorts where he categorized words based on spelling rules, allowing him to study patterns (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2015). As a result of learning spelling patterns through word sorts and studying rhyming words, Tom began to apply the spelling rules in his own writing.

The main focus of the tutoring sessions was authentic reading using articles based on Tom's interests. Allison taught Tom comprehension strategies to employ *before reading,* such as activating prior knowledge and setting a reading purpose. They practiced reading the title and subheadings of articles to make predictions or ask questions about the text. Allison also taught Tom how to actively engage with a text *during reading* by encouraging him to underline important information, make notes of his thoughts, and circle unfamiliar words. Tom made steady progress in his ability to self-monitor. He noticed when his meaning broke down and actively worked to fill in the gaps. Beers (2003) explains that comprehension does not stop *after reading*. To this end, Tom summarized the text by writing about the passage or discussing it with a peer.

These *before, during*, and *after* reading strategies aided Tom's comprehension, but his interest in the texts, more than anything else, contributed to his progress. The texts were on an appropriate reading and interest level for Tom, unlike most of the texts he read in his academic classes. He enjoyed nonfiction articles about sports, science, and current events relevant to his life. Becsuse Tom's goal was to glean information from the texts, he had an *authentic purpose* for using the

comprehension strategies. In addition, as Allington (2002) suggests, reading texts on his instructional level with teacher support allowed Tom to independently use the strategies successfully.

Tom's overall reading level did not increase based on the QRI post-assessment; however, he had 30% fewer miscues and made progress with decoding, comprehension, and metacognition (Leslie & Caldwell, 2010). Additionally, he began to take ownership of the reading strategies and he grew more confident and empowered once he possessed the reading tools to apply independently.

CAROLYN'S STORY

Carolyn worked with Anne, a 7th grader who struggled with reading. Results of initial assessments revealed that Anne was reading at an instructional level for 5th grade (Leslie & Caldwell, 2010). She struggled with multisyllabic words, especially those ending in suffixes. Like Tom, her ability to retell the main idea and details of a text, as well as her difficulty with both explicit and implicit comprehension questions, suggested a need to develop effective comprehension strategies.

Anne did not find reading enjoyable, only read when required to, and lacked confidence and motivation as a reader. Equipped with this knowledge, Carolyn fostered Anne's confidence through the use of a self-monitoring strategy for Anne's oral reading. After recording Anne's oral reading using a feature of the Promethean Board, an interactive electronic whiteboard that allows projection and display of the computer screen, Anne evaluated her reading by listening to the recording and noting areas where she thought she could improve. This activity allowed Anne to self-evaluate and chart her own progress as a reader while improving her fluency and automaticity skills. Anne seemed to enjoy this activity. The incorporation of technology, self-evaluation, and listening to herself read improved Anne's confidence in her oral reading ability.

In order to improve Anne's comprehension of informational text, Carolyn helped her develop effective strategies to tackle the complex and dense information found in nonfiction reading. Anne practiced identifying common informational text structures such as cause and effect, main idea and details, and sequence of events. She organized information into graphic organizers designed for each text structure. By providing Anne with multiple opportunities to identify different text structures and organize the information, she was equipped with tools necessary to be successful in all future classrooms. Carolyn also incorporated the Preview, Question, Read, Recite, Review (PQ3R) organizer to provide Anne with support *before*, *during*, and *after* reading. The PQ3R can be used in all content areas and with any genre. Its versatility made it a clear choice to provide Anne with a multifunctional strategy that could be adapted to a range of reading situations. To familiarize Anne with this tool and provide her with opportunities to practice using it, Anne read a self-selected article from *Action*, a digital magazine from Scholastic. She asked deep questions of the text, extracted main ideas, made connections, commented, predicted, and clarified ideas about the text.

A third instructional focus was to improve Anne's word recognition and spelling of multisyllabic words. Anne created her own spelling dictionary focused on multisyllabic words that she came across in the texts. Anne regularly came to the sessions with words underlined in her self-selected book ready to add to her list. The K-I-M vocabulary strategy was used with Anne to help her develop an understanding and familiarity with certain multisyllabic words before reading. The K-I-M strategy requires students to identify key words, locate information about them, and create a memory trick to help remember the words. This strategy encouraged Anne not only to understand the meaning of the words but also helped her commit the words to memory. Carolyn also incorporated word sort activities to improve Anne's word recognition and spelling. The word sorts aided Anne in her discovery of different spelling rules and phonics generalizations that might increase her confidence as a reader and writer.

QRI post-assessment results indicated Anne's reading improved as the upper elementary level text previously identified as Anne's instructional level was now considered her independent level (Leslie & Caldwell, 2010). Her comprehension, fluency, and reading rate improved over the course of the tutoring. Furthermore, Anne's confidence in her reading abilities increased.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

Working with a student in a one-on-one tutoring session allowed Allison and Carolyn to deepen their understanding of ways to support struggling readers. Like many secondary teachers, reading came naturally to them, and their secondary training prepared them to teach content rather than how to read. Teaching one struggling adolescent to read was challenging enough. How could Carolyn and Allison use what they learned in a tutoring setting and apply it to the struggling readers in their classrooms of 25 or more students?

Ideally, teachers would spend extended time daily with each struggling reader to assess their needs and provide individualized instruction. Because no two students are identical in their strengths and instructional needs, there is no one-size-fits-all instructional plan that is appropriate to support all learners. Therefore, classroom teachers can use principles from tutoring to inform and enhance their instructional decisions in the larger classroom context. Since reading occurs in every content area, it is important for **all** teachers to provide reading instruction as it relates to the discipline. A short story requires a different lens than a math problem or a science textbook, so students need *before*, *during*, and *after* reading strategies specific to each content and text type. Allison, an English teacher, often observes that struggling readers who have failing grades in her class also have failing grades in their content area classes. If reading were a problem solely confined to the Language Arts, then these struggling readers would only have difficulties in Language Arts. Instead, struggles with reading prevent some students from success in all classes because reading is essential to learning all subjects.

Not surprisingly, Tom and Anne both remarked that they learned more in their tutoring session that they did in their classes. When working with only one student, teachers can carefully learn about his/her needs and use this information to drive instruction. While it may be tempting to

teach these decoding and comprehension strategies to a whole class of struggling readers, it is more beneficial for secondary teachers to incorporate opportunities for one-on-one assessment and instruction using a workshop approach. Within a workshop format, students engage in independent reading and writing to apply the skills and strategies being learned in mini-lessons. This provides an ideal time for the teacher to circulate and confer with individual students. As students work, teachers can meet with students for brief five-minute conferences, asking a simple, "How is it going?" and listening as the student reveals successes and struggles. After doing some initial research by listening to the student discuss his/her reading and writing processes, the teacher offers brief instruction by choosing one skill or strategy to explain, model and demonstrate for the student. Before ending the conference, the teacher releases responsibility to the student to apply the new learning while offering support and guidance as needed (Anderson, 2005).

With a range of ongoing assessments, teachers can determine specific areas of needed development for struggling readers. Some read too quickly to maintain fluency. Others lack background knowledge related to the topic. Hearing Tom read provided Allison with important information about why he had difficulty with making meaning of text. Tom struggled with decoding multisyllabic words. For a struggling reader, reading aloud to a group can be stressful and humiliating, as can reading aloud when he knows his reading is being evaluated. Instead, the teacher can subtly integrate this assessment of oral reading into a one-on-one reading conference. As the teacher and student discuss a topic or work to answer questions together, the teacher can ask the student to quietly read a brief passage of text aloud to search for content or read a passage of the student's own writing.

Middle and high school teachers should think beyond grade level when it comes to assigning texts. If a text is too difficult, students like Tom and Anne will often give up and read nothing. In elementary school, teachers determine each student's reading level and provide that student with leveled texts to read independently. These teachers understand that students should work mostly with texts on their independent and instructional levels. More difficult texts are known appropriately as *frustrational* level texts. This concept falls away in middle school, where teachers often require all students to read texts on grade level, or above grade level as is the case with most textbooks. Secondary educators often assume that students will fall further behind if they do not read the assigned textbooks. Instead, these struggling students have difficulty making meaning of the words and content, so they do not improve as readers or learn the required material. Students would make more progress if they read more appropriately leveled texts.

Tom's and Anne's struggles with decoding and spelling came as a particular challenge to these teachers. Secondary teachers generally do not learn about decoding or spelling in their formal training, and they feel unprepared to help students in this area. Teaching morphemes (*pre-, dict, -ate)* and word patterns (*-on* vs. *–one*) systematically may not be practical in the secondary classroom, but reading and content area teachers can still provide support in these areas. In conferences with struggling readers, teachers can instruct students in chunking syllables and using strategies like K-I-M as needed. In a whole class setting, teachers can emphasize prefixes, suffixes, roots, and word patterns as much as possible when introducing new vocabulary or encountering new words in assigned texts. For example, when introducing the term "voltmeter," a science teacher

might remind students that –*meter* means measure, much like an odo*meter* or speedo*meter*. As simple as it is, modeling this process of recognizing familiar parts of words can be helpful for a reader who feels overwhelmed by the complex language of a science textbook.

Adolescent readers need opportunities to self-select text and engage in extensive reading of diverse texts. Research supports the practice of allowing students to choose what they read (Allington, 2002). The tutoring experiences invigorated Allison and Carolyn to emphasize choice reading in their own classrooms. Tom and Anne read with increased stamina when they were interested in the material, and Allison and Carolyn found the same to be true with the other readers in their classrooms. Struggling readers find greater success when they are familiar with the topic. Sometimes students struggle with reading due to limited background knowledge or lack of familiarity with vocabulary. This situation arises often in middle and high school classrooms that rely heavily on whole class canonical texts. Even if students choose between three different texts as part of a teacher-created text set, the act of choosing will increase motivation. Allison noticed that, when given a choice, Tom and the struggling readers in her classroom typically selected appropriately leveled texts that they could read successfully.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although struggling readers may not ask for help or appear apathetic, they crave and deserve success. Both Tom and Anne were thirsty for the much needed individualized instruction. "We have to build a community that embraces every student and provides acceptance and encouragement no matter where students are on the reading curve" (Miller, 2009, p. 37). The process of learning to read is unique for each child. It is challenging but possible for secondary classroom teachers to tailor their instruction to meet the individual needs of their struggling readers. Continued training or professional development could enhance secondary teachers' understanding of the importance of reading instruction along with appropriate instructional approaches to support readers at the middle and secondary levels.

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