

Identifying and Helping Struggling Readers

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Abstract

How do children excel in learning if they struggle with the basics of reading? The question of helping struggling readers shows progress and broadening their minds with intelligent information is being researched every day. Research suggests that there are many strategies and interventions for students achieving below their reading grade level that can be utilized to promote reading effectiveness and mastery. Research also underscores that students must have a strong foundation in reading in order to adequately progress from grade level to grade level. There is an enormous amount of emphasis bestowed on our nation regarding the importance of reading; however, there are still many struggling readers in our country today. Teachers must recognize signs of struggling readers and provide relevant interventions and strategies that lead to quality reading.

Identifying and Helping Struggling Readers

Research underscores that there is an epidemic of struggling readers in schools across America. “There appears to be eight million struggling readers between grades fourth through twelfth” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). To close the achievement gap and promote successful reading, schools must adequately prepare teachers to identify struggling readers and teachers must design effective strategies and interventions to assist them in reading. According to Campbell & Crystal (1999), “studies indicate that when students get off to a poor start in reading, they rarely catch up.” The purpose of this research is to examine struggling readers to determine what types of interventions are successful in helping children succeed.

Early Education Reading Development

Early reading skills are crucial in the development of children and children who learn to read early reap the benefits when they start school. “One of the primary goals of early elementary education is the development of basic reading and literacy skills, and yet in 2003 barely one-third of a nationwide sample of fourth graders was reading at or above a proficient level” (Donahue, Daane, & Grigg, 2003). In order for children to receive a firm foundation in reading there are essential reading skills that must exist. These essential skills must be present in order for children to have equal opportunity to access the general curriculum. Thus, there are five main areas that children should learn in their early years to promote successful reading development and they consist of: orthographic, phonological, morphological, semantic, and syntactic systems.

Orthographic Systems

Orthographic processing involves the visual look of a word or string of letters. Research suggests that the ability to automatically orthographically process strings of letters as words might depend on the so-called word form system, which may develop over time with experience with words. Thus, it is imperative that this reading skill is learned in the early years of education.

Phonological Systems

Phonological systems involve the sounds of language called phonemes. In order to learn how to read, the phonemes that a child knows from spoken language (phonology) must be mapped on to the printed letters on the page (orthography). Therefore, this reading skill is imperative in building a strong and firm foundation in reading. Students who lack this skill often struggle with reading throughout the course of their learning.

Morphological Systems

Morphological processing involves [delete “s”] the smallest meaningful units of language, called morphemes; noticing morphemes can help children to understand the meanings of words. Thus, morphemes lead to strong vocabulary acquisition skills. Also, acquisition skills allow students to expand their vocabulary skills and understand the unknown words they encounter.

Semantic Systems

Semantic processing involves the meaning of words; learning new words and increasing one's vocabulary help to develop the semantic system. Some children begin school with large vocabularies based on their experiences with spoken language, while other children, who have had less experience with language, enter school with smaller vocabularies (Hart & Risley, 1995). As a result of this, some students start school with a disadvantage and often do not catch up with their peers.

Syntactic Systems

Syntactic processing involves the order and arrangement of words in phrases and sentences; children can use syntactic processing to distinguish the difference between sentences with different meanings that contain the same words. Consequently, knowing grammar can help improve reading and decoding abilities which are integral in the syntax of grammatical organization.

These underlying principles reveal that “reading is a complex process involving multiple skills and systems that must be coordinated in order to result in fluent reading behaviors” (Adams, 1990). Reading involves each of these systems working in collaboration with the others. One of the goals of learning to read is fluency or quick, effortless, automatic processing with limited use of cognitive resources. When each of the processes contributing to reading becomes automatic,

this frees limited cognitive resources to allow for higher-level comprehension and engagement with the text. If any one of the processes is weak or not automatic, it can contribute to poor reading; therefore, it reveals that teaching reading should ideally address each one of these components of the reading system.

Levels of Reading in Education

Children begin learning to read early in their education. "When children become good readers in the early grades, they are more likely to become better learners throughout their school years and beyond" (Van den Broek, McMaster, Kendeou, & Espin, 2007). A language rich environment forms the necessary building blocks for reading. These building blocks include decoding, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Preschool and kindergarten children start the reading process with some critical early skills to promote successful reading in latter grades. Also, to promote successful reading children "learning to read" start to recognize the letters of the alphabet, practice with sounds of the alphabet, form sounds to make words, and are playing letter and word games. "Research shows that children who develop the basic skills of phonemic awareness and letter-sound knowledge early on are more likely to be strong, successful readers" (Van den Broek, McMaster, Kendeou, & Espin, 2007).

Teachers start building on everyday skills with kindergarten, first and second graders who are "learning to read" by teaching basic reading skills that will be used for their entire life time. It is important that students understand print concepts, phonics, and phonemic awareness by the end of the second grade. "Children who have difficulty with rhyming games, learning the alphabet, and associating sounds, and those who fail to recognize the letters of the alphabet by the start of kindergarten are at risk of developing reading difficulties" (Hamilton & Glascoe, 2006).

According to research, students who are in third, fourth, and fifth grades should master fluency, comprehension, spelling, writing, and vocabulary in order to possess the proper skills necessary for effective reading. "A child's third-grade reading ability is reasonably predictive of overall long-term academic achievement" (Hamilton & Glascoe, 2006). To help with comprehension in middle and high school, teachers use printed material, as well as other strategies that include whole and small class discussions, student lead reading reviews, experiments, projects, and various other types of activities. "Seventy-five percent of children with reading disabilities] who are identified before the third grade continue to have reading disabilities into the ninth grade and fewer than two percent go on to participate in a four-year educational program after high school" (Hamilton & Glascoe, 2006).

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is what allows the reader to interact with the text in a meaningful manner. It's the path from passive reading to active reading and from letters and words to characters and contexts. Reading comprehension is a vital link to effective reading and it is a strong factor in our educational and professional lives. For many, reading comprehension also unlocks the door to a lifetime of reading recreation and enjoyment. "It matters little what else they learn in elementary school if they do not learn to read" (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007).

Reading is essential to every aspect of life as individuals need to learn how to read and comprehend all types of data in order to progress through society. Unfortunately, there are no quick fixes for optimizing reading abilities. “As many teachers and parents will attest, reading failure has created a tremendous long-term consequence for children’s developing self-confidence and motivation to learn, as well as for their later school performance” (Yatvin, 2002).

“Reading difficulties are common and are associated with poor long-term academic achievement” (Hamilton & Glascoe, 2006). When a student is suspected of having reading comprehension difficulties, details should be accumulated immediately to assess the level of deficiency. “Evaluation of a child’s developmental, educational, and family histories in conjunction with standardized tests (e.g., Ages and Stages Questionnaires, Parents’ Evaluation of Development Status, Safety Work Inventory and Literacy Screener) can increase recognition of risk factors for reading difficulties” (Hamilton & Glascoe, 2006). Students with below average reading levels may struggle with a variety of deficiencies. “Struggling readers encounter negative consequences such as grade retention, assignment to special education classrooms, or participation in long term remedial services” (Campbell & Crystal, 1999). Further, as they progress through the grade levels, the academic distance from those who read well grows more pronounced.

Research has proven that “reading comprehension consists of several levels of understanding, beginning with an understanding of the literal meaning of text” (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Thus, comprehension is a very complex entity and is sometimes viewed as a single skill, when in actuality it has many aspects. “While there are no easy answers or quick solutions for optimizing reading achievement an extensive knowledge base now exist to show us the skills children must learn in order to read and comprehend well” (Yatvin, 2002). This causes difficulties for teachers because it can be viewed as a combination of the student’s reading ability, as well as an understanding of the material. “These skills provide the basis for sound curriculum decisions and instructional approaches that can prevent the predictable consequences of early learning failure” (Rapp, 2007). Comprehension must go beyond reading a classroom textbook. Teachers must insist students become active learners and participants in their education. Teaching children to become active learners helps students’ levels of comprehension and it promotes self-efficacy in the area of understanding.

Important Concepts in Reading Comprehension

There are multiple levels to becoming active learners in reading that consist of using schema and prior knowledge, summarizing information, setting a purpose for reading, activating critical thinking, and using meta-cognitive awareness. These concepts allow students to form a stable foundation in reading and are necessary skills for reading effectiveness. Teachers must adequately assess and develop strategies that will ensure that all students have the opportunity to read on grade level with their counterparts.

Using Schema and Prior Knowledge

Students use the schema theory to organize their prior knowledge and experiences. A schema is an outline with different concepts grouped together under larger categories. This particular aspect of memory enables students to understand new information. Schema underscores that student's gain access to information in long term memory by following paths to other related items. "For example, reading about particular concepts triggers a spontaneous spread of activation to other concepts that are, in mind of the reader, associated with what is being read. These associations may have come about during reading of earlier parts of the text of may preexist in the reader's prior semantic knowledge" (Van den Broek, McMaster, Kendeou, & Espin, 2007).

Using prior knowledge plays an important part in a student's learning process of reading comprehension. "One of the most important determinants of how you can learn about something is how much you already know about it" (Slavin, 2006). Students often experience difficulty in comprehension because of inadequate knowledge of the subject matter. "Prior knowledge regarding the topic of reading passages is one of the most important kinds of knowledge children bring to reading comprehension" (Locke, 2002). Providing real life experiences is helpful in building background knowledge. At the same time, students with greater knowledge on subject matters will understand and learn more. It does not matter what type or how the material is presented in the lesson.

Summarizing Information

Students can also increase comprehension and learning as they summarize information. Summarizing requires one to form a brief statement that represents the main idea of the information being read. Another type of summarizing involves cooperative learning in which the student summarizes the reading material in one paragraph and gives a presentation to a group of peers. This requires the reader to read the text, summarize, and interact with other students. Summarizing data both inside and outside the classroom is an important concept of learning how to comprehend content subjects. Students sometime use rote learning or memorizing facts. This information is useless to the student because it does not tie in with other information they have acquired.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Teachers must realize that all children will not like to read and will need to have a meaningful reason to complete the task. Therefore, children need to have a purpose to get the most out of reading. The teacher must remember to have age relevant educational material. This could include reading an article about their favorite show, reading directions on how to play a video game, or reading a book about something that really interest them. As young children actively read, they must draw their own conclusions by asking themselves questions about what is happening in the story. Conversely, older students might create and form predictions and opinions, distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, determine the credibility of a source, identify logical fallacies, make analogies or write questions about the subject matter that they

had studied. When students start to think and answer questions beyond the text, they are adding information that is not necessarily stated.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is an important component of reading comprehension. “In fact, the importance of including both basic and higher-order skills in reading instruction has been reflected in reviews of the literature that distinguish between “inside-out” (e.g. decoding) and “outside-in” (e.g. comprehension) skills” (Bus & Van Yzendoorn, 1999). Critical thinking is the ability to make rational conclusions based on observation or information. Reading strategies and thought-producing questions guide the students through the process of developing the skills they need to become better at reading comprehension. This component underscores the fact that “when students are asked to think while proceeding through a text, they often give responses that explicitly reflect attempts to establish coherence” (Van den Broek, McMaster, Kendeou, & Espin, 2007).

Meta-Cognitive Awareness

“The products of comprehension are indicators of what the readers knows and understands after reading is completed, whereas the processes of comprehension are those cognitive activities by which the reader arrives at those products” (Van den Broek, McMaster, Kendeou, & Espin, 2007). Students who are meta-cognitively aware have knowledge regarding their own learning and seek to display their knowledge in various forms of assessments. These students can improve their reading comprehension because they are aware of their limitations. These students know that to become a better reader, one must set aside more time to read. These students also have an effective plan to reread a particular item that is not understood repeatedly until the meaning is clear.

Conclusion

The reasons some students struggle with reading are as varied as the students themselves. There is not a “magic key” that fits every situation because all children learn and read at different levels; however, children who are taught to read at home and at an early age are generally much more successful in school and provide a significant advantage in reading. Therefore, it behooves educators to identify struggling readers early in the stages of learning so that the problem can be addressed and fixed. Reading is truly fundamental and it is necessary for all aspects of life. As educators, it is imperative to realize that children arrive to various education facilities with expectations of learning and it is our sole responsibility to provide a sufficient education. Reading is one of the most important elements in learning and if it is not properly addressed it could force a child to fall behind with little hope of ever catching up. Researchers have studied and proven that reading can be learned if interventions and strategies are utilized. It is up to educators to meet children where they are in reading and bring them along on the reading journey.

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