Identifying and Supporting Struggling Readers

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Abstract

Teaching children to read is a complicated process. Children begin school at varying levels of ability, yet are all required to meet a set standard of achievement. It is up to teachers to assess each student, identify individual learning needs, and provide support. A motivating, literacy-rich program that includes whole-class, small-group, and individualized instruction is beneficial to struggling readers. Scripted and non-scripted literacy programs have proven to be effective, but it is the teacher who has the greatest effect on student success.

One of the goals of elementary schools is to teach students to read. Teaching reading can be one of the greatest challenges faced by teachers because of the complex nature of reading and because students learn in different ways and at different rates. The task of identifying students at risk of difficulty, and then supporting their learning, can be as complicated as learning to read itself. With multiple approaches and programs available, finding effective methods to identify and support struggling readers is a quandary that many teachers encounter.

Identifying struggling readers is a first step to providing the appropriate support needed to help children succeed in reading. In order to become proficient readers, children need to understand the association between letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes) in writing, and simultaneously create meaning of a series of words within the context of a sentence (Duff, Mengoni, Bailey, & Snowling, 2015). Learning the association between letters and sounds in reading can be considered an abstract skill that some children are not developmentally ready to acquire (McIntyre, Rightmyer, & Petrosko, 2008). Quickly determining the correct phoneme that corresponds with a grapheme can be challenging for young learners. Students who struggle with learning phonemic skills are often also the students who struggle to read. Once struggling learners have been identified, a plan can then be created to meet their specific learning needs.

Assessment and Identification of Struggling Readers

When beginning the school year, early years teachers often assess the literacy skills of their students. Common assessment tasks may include letter recognition, phonemic awareness, phonological knowledge, word reading, and spelling skills. As an alternative to assessing phonological knowledge, early years teachers could begin by assessing what is familiar to students as one way of assessing a student's degree of future reading success. Teachers can use the information gathered in a test such as the non-alphanumeric rapid naming test, in order to determine whether early supplemental literacy support is required for students who fair poorly at rapid naming of familiar objects (Kruk, Mayer, & Funk, 2014). Rapid naming of numbers, letters, colours, and objects can help predict decoding, reading speed, and comprehension. The non-alphanumeric rapid naming test consists of teachers presenting a student with familiar, concrete examples of colours and objects, and assessing the student's ability to name the objects quickly. If the child struggles to recall the names of colours and familiar objects, it is likely that the student will also struggle with letter and sound naming. Students who succeed in the non-alphanumeric test may then have their phonics skills assessed.

Children entering grade one who have not yet learned the association between letters and sounds may be considered at risk of reading difficulty, since they lack phonic decoding skills (Duff et al., 2015). One method of assessing phonics skills is the phonics screening check. The phonics screening check is a compulsory assessment instrument used with year one pupils in the United Kingdom, in order to detect students who are at risk of reading difficulty. The check includes 40 words: 20 real words, and 20 pseudowords. Words range from three-letter

consonant-vowel-consonant words to two-syllable words with consonant clusters and digraphs. Students who accurately read 32 or more words are determined to have met standards. Those who read 31 or fewer words are considered at risk of reading difficulty. In addition to this assessment task, teachers may also choose to have students apply phonics in a written task. A student who can apply written phonemic skills demonstrates mastery of the grapheme-phoneme connection. Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words is a test that measures a child's ability to phonetically write words (Clay, 2005). Teachers can see which letters and sounds a student has mastered, and which need more teaching.

Middle years students are more easily identifiable as requiring support. Teachers generally administer a reading assessment by using leveled books followed by comprehension questions. Teachers of struggling readers in upper elementary grades may also access documentation of previous interventions and educational plans that have been used with their students.

Once struggling readers have been identified, teachers then need to determine the course of action to support the learners' needs. With the many approaches to reading instruction and reading interventions available to teachers, deciding upon the appropriate approach for students can be difficult. Canadian teachers are provincially mandated to follow the local curriculum, but research from the United States has a strong influence on the lessons that Canadian teachers deliver in classrooms. After completing an extensive study, The National Reading Panel report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) recommended five essential components of reading instruction that include (a) alphabetics, (b) fluency, (c) comprehension, (d) teacher education, and (e) computer technology. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada suggests an approach that includes teaching for (a) oral language, (b) fluency, (c) comprehension, and (d) motivation (Canadian Education Statistics Council, 2009).

Reading Interventions

Response to intervention (RTI) is an American-based three-tiered model of instruction that responds to the diverse learning needs of students (Johnson & Boyd, 2012) and is mentioned in the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada's (2009) recommendations for effective teaching practices. Tier 1 of the model includes whole class instruction, tier 2 is small-group intervention for the students who require additional support, and tier 3 is special education. By following the RTI system of whole-class lessons, small-group intervention, and individual support when required based on reading performance, and following strict principles of effective reading instruction, teachers should implement a program with positive effects for all students.

Many commercial programs are available to teachers. Most programs are now designed to include the essential components suggested by NICHD. Some programs are highly scripted, which may benefit teachers who are new to teaching reading and may increase consistency of instruction from classroom to classroom. Scripted programs are often accompanied by scientifically proven data to endorse their teaching methods. Other programs are less scripted. The less scripted programs permit teachers to use their professional discretion in delivering lessons. The program structure appears to have little effect on student performance (McIntyre et al., 2008). This finding suggests that the teacher's adaptation of lessons to meet the needs of individual students has the greatest effect on scholastic achievement. The claimed scientifically proven methods do not work for all learners because they do not address the specific needs of the individual. These programs are designed to teach children who acquire literacy skills in a typical fashion, not struggling readers who may have gaps in learning.

Early Years

Reading interventions for early years students often focus on phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. These programs concentrate on teaching letter and sound knowledge because they are keys to decoding words. However, some young students are not yet

developmentally ready to take in the abstract concept of print (McIntyre et al., 2008). These students require more phonemic awareness teaching before proceeding to phonics instruction. A phonemic awareness program provides additional exposure to letters and sounds, rather than teaching words and sentences in a book.

Middle Years

Older struggling readers face different challenges. Middle years students have often mastered phonemic awareness and phonics, but struggle to maintain comprehension of the texts that they read. Few reading intervention programs teach comprehension strategies, but instead focus on decoding skills when a mere 10% of struggling readers in middle years experience problems with decoding (Allington, 2012). Common reading intervention strategies serve only to widen the gap between struggling readers and their at-level peers because the common strategies do not address the reader's area of need (Robertson, Dougherty, Ford-Connors, & Paratore, 2014). Rather than focusing on decoding, teachers working with struggling readers in middle years may develop a thoughtful, literacy-rich reading program (Allington, 2012). Teachers following a thoughtful literacy program would use research-based comprehension strategies to teach for meaning and comprehension through various text types. This type of literacy program could support the learning needs of older struggling readers.

Engagement

An element missing from many literacy programs, whether scripted or non-scripted, for early years or middle years, is motivation. Without proper motivation to read, students are less engaged and may not appreciate the importance of the goal of reading. Implementing a teaching plan that includes motivation and engagement, instructional intensity, and cognitive challenge to support struggling readers can lead to success in reading for all students (Robertson et al., 2012). One way to motivate and engage struggling students is to use their interests and ideas in the course of a lesson.

Story innovation is a highly motivational and engaging teaching method that can be used with students of all ages. Story innovation is recommended to develop reading vocabulary and improve reading fluency in young readers (Griffith & Ruan, 2007). This approach uses the structure of a familiar text to create a new story through the substitution of specific words. A page from a storybook or verses from a poem are examples of familiar texts that can be used in story innovation lessons. This method provides students with a bridge from the familiar to the new or unknown words in reading and writing. Students are engaged in the process, since their words are chosen to replace words from the original text. Story innovation is a simple way of reinforcing and repeating words and sentence structures. Teachers introduce new vocabulary at the students' pace of learning within a familiar context. The students feel successful because the new text is written within their level of mastery. Story innovation is an effective means of improving reading fluency, because students are not working to decode the words but are freed to focus on fluency. Students are engaged in the newly created story and are motivated to read their own version of the text.

Instruction

Regardless of age or ability, schools should include one-to-one or small-group instruction to help students become more proficient readers (Education Endowment Foundation, 2014). Although phonics instruction is valuable to begin the reading process, schools should also focus on comprehension strategies with older struggling readers as an alternative to phonics instruction. Teachers of all levels need to be mindful of the urgency and importance of providing students with effective strategies to close the gap between struggling readers and their peers.

Conclusion

Teaching children to read is a complex assignment. Identifying and properly supporting struggling readers can not be viewed from a one-size-fits-all approach. Essential teachings such as phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension are important to students' success. The teacher who adapts the program to suit the needs of the students is the greatest catalyst of change.

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