Supporting Struggling Readers: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Manitoba's reading scores continue to be under scrutiny. A national report, the PCAP, indicated that Manitoba ranked last in the country in reading (O'Grady & Houme, 2014). This literature review records the author's investigation into ways to support struggling readers in the early years classroom. Research articles were reviewed and books were consulted for proven intervention programs and effective classroom teaching practices that would benefit a range of struggling readers in kindergarten to grade 2. Results from the research articles indicate that a one-to-one or small-group direct instruction model that focuses on phonics, reading, and writing is highly effective in supporting struggling readers. The research articles also indicate that student engagement plays a pivotal role in student achievement. Providing students with book choice can increase student engagement. Reading programs, although effective, often do not permit book choice, because the program writers select the themes and book titles in the programs. Many of these books may have little appeal, or social and cultural relevance, to struggling readers. More research is needed to determine whether culturally relevant books can positively affect reading achievement.

This paper summarizes research regarding my professional focus on ways to support struggling readers. My purpose is to provide classroom teachers and resource teachers with a reference guide for supporting struggling readers in the early years classroom. Several themes emerged in the articles that I read. Those themes are discussed, along with the research articles from which the themes emerged.

The importance of early literacy development cannot be overstated (Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Madden, 2010). Children with poor early reading skills often continue to struggle in later grades and are more likely to drop out of school (Ransford-Kaldon, Flynt, & Ross, 2011). While one-to-one or small group reading interventions may be costly, the long-term benefits of the intervention may outweigh the initial expense (Slavin, et al., 2010). Teaching a child to read, igniting an interest in books, and keeping an at-risk student in school are worth the financial cost of initiatives that work.

Rationale for Article Selection

My purpose for this research inquiry was to find proven ways, as elaborated by good research, to teach all students how to read, regardless of their individual circumstances. Several factors impede children's abilities to learn to read. These factors may include, but are not limited to, challenges with social development, emotional and behavioural issues, cognitive delays, and English language learning. My goal was to find research that would assist me in supporting each child's learning needs. I purposefully chose not to focus on one specific type of learning challenge; rather, I chose to maintain a broader scope on strategies that could benefit all children regardless of their specific circumstances.

In the 15 years that I have been a teacher, my roles in the schools in which I have worked have included teaching grades 4-6 basic French, teaching across kindergarten to grade 5, and serving as a Reading Recovery teacher. I have also been the school literacy leader and have had a small part of assigned resource time. My passion through these varying assignments has always been literacy. Whether teaching the alphabet or through a novel study, helping students to acquire a love of words and books has been my focus. What continually challenges me as a teacher is how to help the struggling readers. It is simple enough to engage eager young students in a book when they have the skills to read, understand, and enjoy the text. What

motivates my own teaching and learning is how to support the students who do not fit the mold of "average" achieving students. Discovering ways of reaching and teaching the hardest-to-teach children is my professional focus.

I would like, one day, to work as a literacy support teacher. The position would entail providing direct support to struggling readers and providing support to classroom teachers. When working with students, I would apply the strategies that have been proven to be effective for students who require more intensive instruction than the classroom teacher typically may provide. When working with teachers, I would provide them with instructional strategies that support an effective, classroom-based literacy program.

Researching effective reading intervention programs is important. The Manitoba school division that I work for, Pembina Trails School Division, supports Reading Recovery and Leveled Literacy Intervention as early literacy intervention programs. It was my goal to confirm, through research, that these intervention programs are truly effective and worth maintaining as a resource. Both intervention programs are costly in terms of time, money, and staff professional development. I wanted to discover for myself whether these programs were truly worthy of the merit that my administration claimed they deserved.

Another guideline that I set for myself in searching for research articles was to locate studies of teaching strategies that teachers could implement in the classroom. I work at a small school with declining enrolment. As enrolment declines, so does the resource and educational assistant (EA) time granted to schools by the school division. The current resource allotment translates to roughly four days per week for my K-6 school, with a population of approximately 145 students. Between meetings and dealing with volatile students, the resource teacher finds it incredibly challenging to devote a consistent, uninterrupted time to support struggling readers in the early years classes. Since none of my students have qualified for provincial funding, I also have no EA support. It was essential for me to find effective teaching methods that could be implemented with a range of struggling readers, and without requiring the support of another adult to manage the students who are not in the intervention group.

Emergent Themes from Articles

Several themes emerged from the articles selected for this literature review: direct instruction, phonics, writing, engagement, and good classroom teaching practices. Each theme, along with the implications for teaching and learning, are discussed in greater detail in the following sections of this paper.

Supporting Students Outside the Classroom with Direct Instruction

The teaching methods and professional development that I received in Reading Recovery have been invaluable to me as I teach young children to read. I apply those skills on a daily basis. Since I have that training ingrained in my approach, I tend to compare all reading programs to the highly regarded and research-proven effective Reading Recovery program, as was the case when reading articles about one-to-one or small-group reading interventions. Although there are many positive elements to the Reading Recovery program – one-to-one teaching with a highly trained adult, individualized instruction, quality materials, and a consistent routine – there are also several negative aspects to the program. The student selection process states that the weakest grade 1 student enters the lesson series even if the child is perhaps not the best candidate due to cognitive delays, behavioural issues, or lack of English language fluency. I agree that every child deserves the opportunity to learn; however, the Reading Recovery spots are so rare that it would sometimes be more beneficial to assign the spot at the teacher's discretion, and have that weakest student follow an alternative intervention that is more suited to the individual's needs. Another possible fault in the program is that there is no room for book choice by the child. The teacher selects the books from a Reading Recovery

approved series. These books often lack appeal to students, and thus the students who most need to be engaged in their learning disengage and continue to struggle.

The main theme that emerged from several research articles is direct instruction of literacy skills (Ransford-Kaldon, Flynt, & Ross, 2011; Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Madden, 2010; Spencer, 2011; Vernon-Feagans, Kainz, Hedrick, Ginsberg, & Amendum, 2010). Whether in a one-to-one or small-group setting, daily structured lessons delivered outside the classroom are reported by the research as essential in supporting struggling readers.

Prior to beginning the search for articles, I was well aware of the proven teaching methods that the Reading Recovery program provides. What I was not aware of was how many studies have based their work on the direct instruction tenets of the Reading Recovery model and the work of Marie Clay, founder of Reading Recovery. Of the 9 articles that I found and reviewed, 5 cited Clay. Several other articles that I skimmed, but did not review, also referred to Clay. In a research synthesis report, Slavin et al. (2010) stated,

> Reading Recovery is by far the most widely researched and widely used tutoring program in the world. Originally developed in 1985 in New Zealand by Marie Clay, Reading Recovery provides extensive training, observation, and feedback to qualified teachers, who provide daily 30-minute lessons to the lowest 20%-30% of children in their first years of elementary school until they are reading at the expected level for their age. (p. 6)

Reading Recovery appears to be the benchmark to which other reading intervention programs are compared.

Targeted Reading Intervention (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2010) borrows heavily from Reading Recovery. Targeted Reading Intervention (TRI) lessons and assessment practices are structured in the same manner as Reading Recovery lessons and assessment procedures. A standardized assessment package is used to evaluate the student's strengths and areas of weakness before and after the intervention. A highly structured and consistent daily, 15-minute, one-to-one lesson series then follows. The format of the TRI lessons is quite similar to Reading Recovery in that both begin with a re-read of a known book for fluency, then word work is used to teach phonics, followed by a new book taught to the student with support provided as needed.

Another program that follows a similar direct instruction structure to Reading Recovery is Leveled Literacy Intervention. Ransford-Kaldon et al. (2011) detailed a study on the effectiveness of the Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI). LLI is a small group literacy intervention program for struggling kindergarten to grade two students. Two former Reading Recovery teachers, Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, created the program. In the study by Ransford-Kaldon et al., students were assessed using a series of standardized tests prior to beginning the program and post intervention. LLI is a highly structured program that follows a specific sequence of activities during each daily, scripted 30-minute lesson. Like Reading Recovery and Targeted Reading Intervention, LLI emphasizes direct instruction of phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and expansion of vocabulary.

The Voyager program, a scientifically based commercial reading program, similar to LLI, was used in the Spencer (2011) study. Voyager is a daily 40-minute, small-group intervention program. The program also follows a scripted direct instruction model that emphasizes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction. Spencer's article introduced me to the reason for the rise of commercially produced, scripted, and sequenced direct instruction models: the American Reading First policy of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The multi-billion dollar Reading First policy states that every child should read at or above state requirements by the end of grade 3 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). American schools received funding to provide scientifically based literacy programing to students in order to help reach the goal of grade level achievement. The policy indicates that

five pillars of literacy – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension – are required to provide an effective reading instruction program. According to Spencer, the United States government conducted its own studies and found that the five pillars are essential components that have spurred a surge in the direct instruction model of literacy programming.

Results of the Spencer (2011), Ransford-Kaldon et al. (2011), and Vernon-Feagans et al. (2010) studies indicated that a one-to-one or small-group, direct instruction intervention has a positive effect on all aspects of literacy development for struggling readers. Basic word reading and comprehension skills increased (Vernon- Feagans et al.); letter naming and fluency improved (Ransford-Kaldon et al.); and vocabulary understanding and usage improved (Spencer). Implementing a direct instruction intervention program such Reading Recovery, TRI, LLI, or Voyager would support many struggling readers. Given the results provided by the studies, I will continue to use skills and strategies taught in Reading Recovery and LLI. I will also recommend that other schools invest in LLI as an intervention alternative to Reading Recovery.

Supporting Students Inside the Classroom

As an early years teacher, I see the effect on students who struggle to read. These students typically begin to identify themselves as inferior to their classmates when they realize that their performance does not match the performance of their peers (Ciampa, 2012). Even without me distinguishing who is reading at which level, the weaker readers see the differences for themselves in the physical appearance of the books that they read as compared to the other students' books. If their book has six or eight words on a page, while their friend's book has multiple sentences, the lower achieving students soon realize that they are falling behind.

Efficient and purposeful classroom teaching practices are essential in helping struggling readers. Four main themes emerged from the literature regarding needed classroom focus areas: phonics, writing, engagement, and sound teaching methods.

Sensory-based phonics. Both phonics instruction and phonemic awareness are crucial in supporting struggling readers, as noted in the articles detailing highly structured direct instruction programs (Clay, 1993; Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2011; Slavin et al, 2010; Spencer, 2011; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2010). Phonemes are the smallest unit of sound that carry meaning in language. Phonics instruction and phonemic awareness are often more simply referred to as alphabet skills or letter-sound knowledge. Letter recognition in young learners is frequently the best predictor of future reading success (Massengill Shaw & Sundberg, 2008). Many students in grade 1 begin the year not having mastered alphabet skills. Letter knowledge and letter formation, as well as phonics, are all essential pre-reading skills.

Without alphabet knowledge, children are not able to begin reading (Zascavage, McKenzie, Buot, Woods, & Orton-Gillingham, 2012). Learning the significance of the abstract formations that we call letters can be somewhat challenging for young learners. Struggling learners, in particular, could benefit from a sensory approach to phonics instruction. An integrated sensory approach is recommended for teaching phonics, like the one used in the Massengill Shaw and Sundberg (2008) research with at-risk first graders. Such an approach could help to support students who have not benefited from traditional alphabet lessons.

The method used to teach alphabet skills in the Massengill Shaw and Sundberg (2008) study was based on the neurodevelopment of children's brains. The integrated alphabet approach includes four sequential phases: imagery, auditory, integration and sound blending, and a motor plan. In the first phase, through imagery, students are introduced to a symbol that represents a letter and its corresponding sound. The shape and beginning sound of an object match the shape and sound of the letter. For example, if "o" is for octopus, the round shape of a toy octopus is shown to match the round shape of the letter "o." In the second, auditory phase, students learn the applicable phoneme, or sound, for each object or picture. During the third

phase, integration of letters and sounds is used to make sound-symbol relationships, and is then followed by blending sounds into words. The final phase is the motor plan whereby students learn proper letter formation to print the letter. Although this could be a lengthy process for a classroom teacher, the value in providing all students with a solid phonemic foundation will help to close the gap between struggling readers and more successful students. This approach could possibly teach the struggling students, prepare them for reading, and narrow the achievement gap.

Another method to assist in letter and sound learning is visual discrimination. In their research report, Zascavage et al. (2012) described the use of a three-dimensional appearing font as opposed to traditional flat font for emergent readers. The background section of the article detailed a number of studies that applied information from brain research to seek effective ways to activate more areas of the brain in people with dyslexia. Several studies found that using a visual-spatial approach is most effective in brain activation for many people with dyslexia. The researchers decided to investigate the effect of font on emergent readers. The results of the major study indicated that the three-dimensional font is most effective for the lowest achieving students. This simple change could support those emergent readers who require the most help.

I currently have a struggling reader in grade 2 who exhibits certain traits of dyslexia. I have begun to use a three-dimensional font with this student. He likes the appearance of the big, dark letters. He says the font "is easier for my eyes to see." This student now uses the font himself when learning to read and write new words. He writes new words on a small whiteboard, as I have modelled, in dark bubble letters, and then swipes from left to right under the word with his finger to read the word slowly until he has solved it himself.

Writing. Marie Clay (2001) believed firmly in the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing. Clay emphasized that "when children are clearly getting left behind by their faster-learning classmates, it is very important to work with reading and writing together" (p. 11). Since writing requires students to apply literacy skills, not simply to understand them, the writing process is where gains in reading can also be made. "As teachers explore this reciprocal relationship in the classroom, they will be surprised at how children learn more quickly as they begin to make connections" (Anderson & Briggs, 2011, p. 549).

Waiser and Whiteley (2001) studied the effects of adding writing to the daily routine in four kindergarten classes over a two-year period. Journal writing and word walls were used to teach high-frequency words. The study found that the June reading achievement scores increased from 75% of students meeting provincial expectations in the first year of the study to 82% in the second year. The gains from one year to the next were attributed to the teachers' increased familiarity and comfort in teaching high-frequency words and in using the word wall and writing journals. Perhaps more significantly, summer learning loss was decreased. The same students were assessed upon entry to grade 1. Waiser and Whiteley (2001) found that 47% of students maintained their reading level though the summer in the first year of the study, while in the second year 74% maintained their reading level through the summer. Waiser and Whiteley attributed the reduction of summer learning loss to the change in the kindergarten literacy program. The addition of writing provided the students with more opportunities to apply letter and sound knowledge in a manner that enabled them to gain a better understanding of how words work. "The fact that significantly more children were able to maintain their reading level over the summer months suggests that greater word knowledge can help secure reading levels over the summer between kindergarten and grade one" (Waiser & Whiteley, p. 8).

The results of the Waiser and Whiteley (2001) study indicated to me that direct instruction of high-frequency words and, more importantly, their application in writing journals can directly and positively impact lasting reading achievement. This teaching method reinforces the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing. By applying the phonics skills learned in

reading lessons, students then internalize and apply phonics skills to their writing, thereby reinforcing their learning.

Engagement. The current trend in literacy instruction is a highly structured, teacher-directed model. Although the research suggests that this type of teaching program is effective (Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2011; Slavin et al., 2010; Spencer, 2011; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2010), it does not permit personal choice by the teacher or the student. The lessons in these programs are scripted, the books are pre-selected, and the program writers determine the topics of discussion. Little regard is given to the personal interests of students, their cultural backgrounds, or current societal issues. All of these factors contribute to the engagement of students. Struggling readers, in particular, need more encouragement, motivation, personal connections, and engagement in order to persevere (Ciampa, 2011).

Spencer (2011) identified the flaws in the current literacy instruction trend. If current practice is to implement scripted, sequential, direct instruction programs, there is very little freedom to incorporate student-initiated activities that support their literacy learning. The social and cultural aspect of literacy learning is missing from these programs. Although some of these programs attempt to include children of diverse cultural backgrounds, the inclusion of a Latino, Aboriginal, Indian, or Chinese child, for example, in one of a series of books does not truly give value to the child's own experiences and cultural background. Spencer concluded that the divergent practices, or seemingly off-task behaviours of students in a small reading intervention group, were actually a way for children to work through literacy issues and develop an understanding through social interactions. The students in Spencer's study discussed English vocabulary taught in the lessons in both English and Spanish, the participating students' first language, in order to create meaning for each other, and used play and personal stories to provide context for certain concepts beyond their personal experience. Spencer concluded that deviating from the script provided rich literacy experiences for the three students participating in the research study, because "they made use of their collective social and linguistic resources, approached text reading with a sense of purpose, and physically re-imagined the space to suit their experiences and intellectual endeavors" (p. 48). Not only is Spencer's perspective applicable to young learners, it also has implications for English language learners as a whole. Play removes some of the pressure that the children feel, and frees them to take linguistic risks and possibly to make mistakes that can be corrected in a relaxed manner. Incorporating children's own experiences and language yields richer literacy practices. These participating students found a way to engage themselves in their learning. They used play to stay connected to the lesson and to develop an understanding of the literacy skills being taught each day.

Costello (2011) also indicated the importance of direct instruction to teach specific skills. However, he also noted that an element missing from direct instruction is giving students opportunities to choose their own reading materials. The direct instruction approach does not permit student interests to guide book choice, which Costello found limiting to his students, since some struggling readers in his class performed much better with self-selected books that appealed to the students' interests or experiences. The data collected by Costello indicated a positive relationship between increased engagement with a book and increased reading skill level.

In his article, Costello (2011) raised an important point: it is the teacher who makes the difference and not the program. A teacher knows his/her students and what will engage and motivate these students. Regardless of whether a teacher uses a whole language or a direct instruction approach, teaching and reaching students with that approach is what is essential. Discovering an effective means of teaching is what is important in teaching early literacy skills, which may mean following a specific approach and/or changing it for one's own context.

The children whom we welcome into the classroom are influenced by the Internet and electronics (Ciampa, 2012). In my daily classroom experience, my students are constantly making reference to online happenings. A logical method of engagement, especially for

struggling readers whose focus tends to wane, is electronic books. Ciampa (2012) found that during the 25-minute eBook sessions in her study, all students remained on-task and exhibited behaviours indicating that they were highly engaged. Ciampa attributed this change in behaviours, as compared to previous classroom behaviours, to "the motivational qualities of self-determination, choice, and stimulation" (p. 18) provided by the online program. All participants enjoyed the opportunity to choose the books read on the computer. Ciampa's results indicated that using eBooks was an effective method of increasing on-task reading behaviours. Implemented along with traditional reading instruction, online storybook reading may have positive motivational effects.

Good classroom practices. The debate over the best pedagogical methods for teaching children to read has been ongoing for many decades and in many countries (Reid & Green, 2004). The current trend is to rely on the commercially packaged, scientifically based methods. As Reid and Green (2004) found, however, a look to the past may broaden teachers' views of the scripted approach. Past methods have included teaching reading through spelling, using hand signals for each phoneme, and a whole language approach, all which lead to more critique and exploration of other approaches. With each of these methods, most children learned to read while others struggled to read. Regardless of the method, the teacher was charged with finding a way to teach the child to read. One determining factor of effective reading instruction is having teachers with the skill, knowledge, understanding, and timing to support individual students, regardless of the method or approach to teaching. The needs of the students may require the teacher to draw upon several methods to teach the students in the class. An openness to various methods and knowledge of skill development are more effective in teaching struggling readers than any one specific reading method.

Many commercial programs are available to teachers. 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 within a school or school division. Scripted programs are often accompanied by scientifically proven data that endorse their teaching methods. Other programs are less scripted. The less scripted programs permit teachers to use their professional discretion and a variety of materials and resources when delivering lessons. There appears to be little difference in whether the program structure has an impact on student performance (McIntyre, Rightmyer, & Petrosko, 2008). This finding suggests that it is the ability and skill of the teacher to adapt lessons to meet the needs of the students that has the greatest effect on student achievement. It is the teacher who identifies individual needs in the moment, and who modifies the lesson, who has the greatest impact on student learning. The reason that the claimed scientifically proven methods do not work for all learners is because they do not address the specific needs of the individual. Commercial programs are designed to teach children who acquire literacy skills in a typical fashion, rather than to address the needs of struggling readers who have gaps in learning.

Sound classroom practice from year to year is necessary to support struggling readers (Slavin et al., 2011). If a teacher were to design a literacy program that incorporates all of the elements that the research says are effective, it would involve a small-group, direct instruction model that uses books of high interest to students with an emphasis on phonics and writing. Sensory aspects would also be woven into the reading and writing process. As effective as a particular reading program might be, it is only as good as the teacher who teaches the lessons. Literacy instruction needs to take into consideration the personal strengths and interests of the students and the teacher. Good classroom teaching would also accommodate the cultural, behavioural, and social dynamics of the students. As found in the Spencer study (2011), sometimes deviating from the script reaps the most benefits.

Discussion and Conclusion

Because I hope to work as a literacy support teacher within the Pembina Trails School Division, I strove to find research articles that would help me in that role. The articles that I reviewed outline ways to support struggling readers, particularly for teachers who do not have extensive reading instruction backgrounds, that is, teachers who are regular classroom teachers rather than reading specialists. I hope to use what I have learned from the articles to support teachers and children in early years classrooms and so to close the learning gap for struggling readers. Something as small as encouraging a teacher to use a different font or to write certain challenging words in bubble letters for specific students may work to promote development in a struggling reader. Adding an additional phonics or writing lesson to a classroom routine may signify the difference in reading achievement, and thereby future success, in some students. These articles have provided me with more tools to add to my repertoire as I support struggling readers.

Becoming a research consumer has helped me to find ways to support struggling readers both in and out of the classroom. All students benefit from an engaging, quality literacy program that consistently uses phonics, writing, and reading components. For those who require further support, a small-group, direct instruction program provides sequential lessons that build literacy skills. After reading the research, I have determined that the programs supported by my school division are truly worthy of the merit that my administration claims they deserve. With the implementation of the teaching methods discussed in this literature review, perhaps the next PCAP assessment will show more encouraging statistics regarding young readers from Manitoba.

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