



CURRICULUM CORNER

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It's Broke, Fix It: Understanding Poor Readers Part I

What can you do for struggling readers in your school/district? To accurately respond to that question, the administrator must understand that there are many reasons why children may not be reading at grade level. Emphasis should certainly be placed upon the emergent reader as preventive measures certainly outweigh remedial programs (Penna, 2005). However, what do we do with those children who are still struggling in grade 4 and higher? The purpose of this two-part article is to provide you with some answers.

The upper elementary and middle school years are not too late to help struggling readers. The key question is which intervention should be used to help these children. Each child has undoubtedly been taught many of the pieces of the reading puzzle. Most likely, they have received instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. Opportunities were provided them to read aloud and all have heard fluent readers model appropriate reading behavior. Vocabulary instruction was certainly offered. Yet, all these pieces have not come together to create a smooth dependable array of strategies and skills needed to gain meaning from text.

Often times, poor readers do not understand the relationships among the various components of reading behavior. Although they may not be able to monitor their own reading, they do realize that they are not successful readers and often experience low self-esteem, lack of motivation and apathy towards school. It is never too late to help struggling readers. The question is which intervention works best? Some who lack most skills will require intense, specialized intervention, while others who may possess many of the underlying skills will need help in pulling these parts together. What is clear is that more of the same type of instruction will not work.

Fluency is as important a goal for older readers as it is for younger students. Children need many experiences reading books with familiar engaging topics and interesting structures. Simply browsing through books and reading independently are not enough. There is no research evidence that silent reading can increase a child's reading fluency. Youngsters need to hear materials read to them so that they have a model for how their own reading should sound. Just as in the earlier grades, older students need opportunities to read and

reread passages orally and to receive feedback on their reading. Tape recording oral reading, reading with partners, and choral or unison reading also help to develop fluency.

Students often receive very little direct instruction in how to make sense of what they read. One way teachers can help students to develop comprehension strategies is to structure instruction to mirror the approach students should take to their own independent reading. Successful reading consists of three phases: prereading, during reading, and after reading. In the prereading stage, teachers ask motivating questions, establish a purpose for the reading, build vocabulary and concept knowledge, and help students access their own background knowledge.

During reading, teachers remind students to use comprehension strategies and focus their attention on the important parts of the text. They pace silent reading by providing directions about how far students should read independently and interject frequent checks on understanding, often through requests for summarization and prediction.

After reading, teachers engage students in discussions that check for individual understanding and expand students' grasp of the material. They share ideas and often go back to the text to recheck facts and ideas. The use of graphic organizers, such as comparison charts or story frames, help students externalize their thinking.

Penna, R.F. (2005). "Fostering Emergent Reading," *On-Target*, New Jersey Association of School Administrators, October 2005.



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It's Broke, Fix It – Part II

In Part I, we discussed some intervention strategies to assist poor readers in grades 4 and higher. Part II will provide additional useful tools that an administrator can bring to his/her district.

Direct instruction on specific comprehension strategies is necessary for the older poor reader. Using strategies such as think alouds, guiding questions, background knowledge development, previous readings, rereads, modeled behaviors, etc. will help youngsters to review and mobilize their previously learned skills and strategies.

Direct instruction on diverse study skills and strategies are also beneficial. As students move toward increasingly difficult work in content area textbooks, they need to know how to use procedures and tools such as note taking, underlining, skimming, scanning, and previewing. They need to recognize the importance of attending to ancillary aides such as titles, headings, pictures, etc.

For those who are seriously in need of remedial assistance, employ small group and tutorial interventions. Although it is expensive to use certified staff, the cost of one-on-one tutors can be offset by utilizing cross age tutors, peer tutors, university students, parents, senior citizens and other members of the community. Volunteer tutorial programs should have the following eight key components in order to maximize success (Wasik & Slavin 1993; Burns 2004):

- a certified reading specialist supervises all tutors
- tutors receive ongoing training and feedback
- tutoring sessions have a basic structure
- tutoring should be consistent and intensive
- quality materials must be used
- regular ongoing assessments
- reliable tutors
- tutoring should be coordinated with class instruction.

Some students will need daily counseling, daily tutoring in reading, compensatory strategy instruction, assistive technology, or a combination of those. Others will need specialized programs that focus on rebuilding self-concept and teaching basic academic skills in a coordinated fashion throughout the day. Still others will need a combined program that focuses on their interests and temporarily minimizes reading demands.

A brief description of five popular but distinctly different remedial reading programs follows next.

The **DISTAR** model has three basic assumptions: all children can be taught; there is a need to focus on the development of basic skills and their application to higher order skills; and disadvantaged students need to be taught at an accelerated rate. Students' time on task is maximized through the use of explicitly scripted daily

lessons where the teacher follows a step-by-step procedure.

The **PHAST** program is a combination of Word Identification Strategy Training and phonological analysis and blending. Letter sounds, blending, word attack strategies, rhyming techniques, etc. are employed to help children use what they already know to decode unfamiliar words. Both the **DIS-TAR** and **PHAST** models provide instruction in small groups using highly regulated texts. In both programs a bottom up approach to reading is applied to students unable to master basic skills in reading.

The **Reading Apprenticeship Program** takes a Vygotskian approach in working with delayed readers through supported practice reading authentic texts with a mentor that is a skilled reader. Emphasis is placed upon modeling, motivational texts and scaffolded reading experiences.

Reading Recovery is designed for early identification and intervention. It employs a one-to-one setting of 30 minutes of instruction each day in addition to regular language arts instruction. The instructional program is designed to meet the student's individual needs through running records of strategies used and interesting trade books.

Early Steps is similar to the Reading Recovery Program but takes a more balanced approach combining many of the authentic reading and writing activities used in Reading Recovery with explicit phonics instruction through systematic word study.

Bibliography

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- Wasik, B. & Slavin, R.E. (1993). "Preventing Early Reading Failure with One-to-One Tutoring: A Review of Five Programs," *Reading Research Quarterly*.