

# Meeting the Needs of Struggling Readers

Teachers have always worked hard to help every student to become a skillful, motivated and proficient reader. However, today's teachers face a different challenge than those from previous generations, and even from those who taught in classrooms only a single decade ago. While we can fantasize about the "good old days" of education, and how "things used to be," in the real world, we must acknowledge that teachers now face a different challenge: to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population of students. Growing diversity in our students' cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as in their readiness for school, pose a real and significant challenge to almost every teacher.

Another reality that every teacher must face is the challenge of meeting the needs of these diverse students with few resources. Roger Kroth (1997) reminded us that it is axiomatic that schools will never have enough time, enough money or sufficient numbers of well-trained personnel. While society expects us to work miracles in our classrooms and teach every student to be a reader, the resources provided for us are far from miraculous.

## Seeking Guidance from Research

When faced with challenges, a professional in any field must seek ideas for solutions to these challenges from the best possible sources. Such sources should be trustworthy, and have documentation to show that possible solutions have been tested and found to be reliable, workable, and effective. This would indicate that teachers should seek answers for how to meet the needs of struggling readers from research. While this sounds logical, many recognize that seeking clear answers from educational research can have its own challenges. We often see conflicting results presented to us, all earnestly claiming that "research proves this works!" One way for teachers to approach these conflicting and confusing messages might be to ignore anything that claims research support. A better choice would be to look for guidance from a convergence of high-quality, well-conducted, relevant research such as that created from meta-analyses or systematic reviews of high-quality research.

## What Does Research Tell Us About Teaching Reading?

When teachers turn to this kind of high-quality research, what guidance is provided for how to effectively teach our struggling readers? First, there is some good news for teachers who work with younger readers: "...intensive training, even over relatively short periods of time, can



substantially improve the word-reading skills of children with serious reading disabilities and...these positive outcomes are maintained over months or years after the cessation of training" (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 254). Converging evidence from many years of research demonstrates that systematic and explicit instruction can assure at least adequate skill development for children in pre K-3. And what about our older students? "While there is a recognized optimal age for reading intervention... it is never too late" (Shaywitz, 2003). This is particularly hopeful news for our students who continue to struggle with reading in the upper grades. Research suggests that the key is good instruction, which can overcome challenges due to poverty, IQ, family status, and language deficits. Instruction is key, and instruction is powerful!

## What Do We Need to Teach?

Louisa Moats (June, 1999) reminds us that, unlike learning to speak, reading is a highly complex linguistic achievement. Reading must be taught. What does research suggest that we should be teaching if we want every student to become a reader? The National Reading Panel (2000) conducted an extensive review of reading research and identified five key instructional components that teachers must make sure that each student has learned and can use skillfully: 1) phonemic awareness, 2) phonics and decoding, 3) fluency, 4) vocabulary, and 5) comprehension.

Jan Hasbrouck, Ph.D., Educational Consultant-JH Consulting • Seattle, WA

Phonemic awareness is the ability to notice, identify and manipulate the separate sequence of sounds in spoken words. Phonemic awareness helps prepare readers for phonics. It is an auditory process only. Phonics is the knowledge of which letters symbolize the sounds in a word. Decoding is the ability to link sounds to letters so readers can sound out or decode unknown or unfamiliar words. Phonics involves both auditory and visual skills. Fluency is the ability to read words accurately and at an appropriate pace, and also includes oral expression. Vocabulary knowledge involves understanding the meanings of words so the reader can make sense of what is being read. All this leads to the ultimate reading skill of comprehension: the skills, strategies, and techniques used by a reader to make meaning from what has been decoded.

## How Do We Organize Instruction?

If these five components should be the focus of our reading lessons, what should the instructional program look like? How do we organize our instruction? There are five steps that teachers must take that will help insure that we are meeting the needs of every student who may be struggling with reading.

**Step One: Benchmark screening.** Step One is to make sure that we have actually found every student who may be struggling. We can do this by using benchmark screening assessments. Screening assessments are short—often only 60 seconds, and many are fluency-based. Benchmark screening tools can help us determine which students are



likely “on track” and can begin instruction in the regular reading program, and which students may possibly need some additional assistance. Common screening assessments for reading include DIBELS (<http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>), or measures of oral reading fluency (see Read Naturally’s Reading Fluency Monitor ([www.readnaturally.com](http://www.readnaturally.com/)), or AIMS web (<http://www.edformation.com>).

**Step Two: Diagnosis.** The second step in the process requires a teacher to administer diagnostic assessments to those students identified

in the screening step as possibly needing extra help with reading. Diagnostic assessments help determine a student’s strengths and needs in reading to focus instruction and intervention efforts. They should focus on the five key instructional components. Two sources for useful and effective reading diagnostic assessments are: Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures for K-8 ([www.corelearn.com](http://www.corelearn.com)) and SEDL: Southwest Educational Diagnostic Laboratory (<http://www.sedl.org/reading/rad/>).

**Step Three: Design and implement instruction.** At this point teachers now have the information they need to set some instructional goals, and to develop and implement an instructional program or an intervention to help each student meet his/her individual goals. Decisions about which instructional programs or methods to use should be based on a convergence of empirical evidence of that program’s effectiveness.

**Step Four: Progress monitoring.** Once instruction has begun, a teacher must continuously evaluate the program’s effectiveness for each student. Teachers administer short assessments to determine if the instruction being provided is helping students meet their instructional goals. For those students receiving supplementary instruction or more intensive interventions frequent, quick assessments that mirror the benchmark assessments of Step One are often used to provide this kind of information. Once a week or so students read aloud from unpracticed materials at the student’s goal level for one minute. Teachers calculate the number of words read correctly per minute, and typically graph the results (Hasbrouck, Ihnot, Woldbeck, & Parker, 1999; Shinn, 1989).

**Step Five: Making decisions about next steps.** Based on the results from the progress monitoring, a teacher then makes a decision in Step Five: to continue the instruction because it is working, or to revise the instruction to make the outcomes more successful. When the results of progress monitoring indicate that a student has met his/her instructional goal, a new goal can be set, or the student may no longer need special assistance.

## ALL Students Must Learn to Read

Helping our struggling readers is not an easy task, but it is a vital one. Louisa Moats (1999) offers us some inspiration about teaching students to read:

“Just about all children can be taught to read and deserve no less from their teachers. Teachers, in turn, deserve no less than the knowledge, skills, and supported practice that will enable their teaching to succeed. There is no more important challenge for education to undertake.”

We work in the real world, the world in which resources of time, money, and human resources will always fall too short. We MUST help every one of our students to become full participants in their learning and in their lives. To achieve this, we must work hard to teach ALL of our students to read. ■

*Dr. Jan Hasbrouck will be the kick-off speaker for a series of reading institutes sponsored by USOE and UPDC. See the announcement in “Hot, New and Very Cool.”*

*References are available upon request from the Utah Personnel Development Center.*