



Meeting the needs of struggling readers and writers, particularly in the later primary years and secondary years (August 2020)

All children are different. Their experiences are different, their environments are different, their ways of thinking are different. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to literacy learning does not work (Touchstone 6).

Classroom teachers and school leaders continually seek to understand how best to meet every individual student at their point of need. When we focus on each student's needs, we come closer to addressing the issues related to equity, excellence and well-being present in our schools and society. *"When equity, excellence and well-being converge, the outcome is people and groups who become good at life."* (Fullan & Gallagher 2020, p. vii). Across our schools and community, we want to engage all students in their reading and writing to ensure they see these as meaningful and worthwhile practices. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000, p.602) defined engaged readers as *"motivated to read, strategic in their approaches to comprehending what they read, knowledgeable in their construction of meaning from text, and socially interactive while reading"*. We know not every student has that experience.

This article draws on research and practice in order to provide teachers and school leaders with research evidence and informed instructional and organisational practices to meet the needs of those students who are struggling as readers and writers.

Understanding some of the reasons why some students find reading and writing more challenging than others

In their book *Creating Literacy-Rich Schools for Adolescents*, ASCD 2006, Ivey and Fisher wrote a chapter that focuses on designing and using interventions that work for struggling students. To first understand some of the reasons for the persistent reading difficulties some upper primary and secondary students experience, they outline four points (pp.70-71) for consideration:

1. Many of the students who come to middle and high school as struggling readers were assigned as younger students to remedial reading programs that are known to focus on decontextualised skills, literal recall, and skills worksheets at the expense of purposeful, strategic, silent reading experiences (Johnston & Allington, 1991). Furthermore, Ivy and Fisher argue, this kind of instruction has been shown to slow rather than accelerate reading progress.
2. Students who do not read well, read less, and consequently do not get any better at reading (Stanovich, 1986). Related to this situation, students who experience failure at reading and writing year after year lose motivation and confidence and feel helpless to improve (Johnston & Winograd, 1985). Many of these students come to believe that reading and writing are unattainable goals. It is ironic that students who most need the benefits of reading connected text get many fewer opportunities than the good readers who are reading more not only during the school day but also outside of school (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988).
3. School reading alone may limit the reading experiences of all students, and this is especially detrimental to the most inexperienced readers. If textbooks are used, they are typically too difficult for struggling readers. Thus textbooks need to be supplemented with quality books and rich texts; newspaper, magazine, and journal articles; relevant internet sites; and the like. Struggling readers might choose to read more if they had access to readable, high-interest texts.
4. To make progress, many students need continued instruction in reading beyond the primary years. Unfortunately, although the range and complexity of texts students must negotiate increase as they progress through school, the amount of instruction and support for reading and writing actually decreases.

As Jamison Rog (2015, p.141) states in the conclusion of her book *Struggling Readers- Why Band-aids Don't Stick and Worksheets Don't Work*, 2015, "...sometimes programs, innovations, and techniques work with some struggling readers. At other times, the same programs, techniques and innovations don't work. What makes the difference? Teachers do... Teachers are central to the delivery of effective teaching of reading. They need to know their students, their pedagogy, and their resources. They need to be well-trained, be well supported, and perhaps most important of all, have positive relationships with their students."

Knowing each student well can support teachers to adjust and target specific strategies and to more precisely support a student who is experiencing challenges. Through knowing more about the student, we find out what motivates and interests them. We may find they have become disengaged from learning, or have had frequent absences from school, or be losing the reading and writing skills they had acquired when younger by not reading. They may also be losing the will to persevere with reading and writing. It may be they have experienced some level of trauma or disruption, or may face language processing challenges or have been given a diagnosis such as dyslexia or ADD/ADHD. Mantei and Kervin's (2016) close analysis of children who were experiencing difficulty with reading suggested that children experiencing difficulty with reading often had a very limited repertoire of reading strategies, limited mostly to the sounding out of an unknown word or the over-reliance on the initial letters in a word.

However, Fisher and Ivey, (2006, p.71) provide wise words about how we should take action, "*we cannot possibly trace the precise origins of students' reading difficulties, and on an individual level it seems non-productive to place blame on earlier home or school experiences. What we can do is design solid, evidence-based interventions for students who need something extra.*"

Disengagement is a particular issue for adolescents, especially those in Grades 7 through 10 (Gallup, 2019; Willms et al., 2009; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007).



Disengagement as we know, can also be linked to attendance. Attendance often decreases through the year levels or classes are skipped. Research shows that students who are not confident of their skills in English and Maths have lower levels of engagement across all dimensions and subject areas. When students are not confident and not challenged, the chances of them being engaged are even lower. (Willms et al., 2009)

Adolescents need a reason to believe that things can be better, and that school need not cut them off from their peers. They need opportunities to teach and learn from each other. They need teachers to support them to extend their repertoire of reading and writing strategies so that they apply these to texts of increasing complexity as they progress through schooling, learning across and through all the disciplines.

As Lori Jamison Rog (2015 p.7) says of students who are struggling with reading, "... the good news is that it's not too late, even in the middle years, to provide those extra scoops of instruction that will get the great majority of these students back on track...we used to assume that by Grade 6 or 7 or 8, reading difficulties were irreversible, and our best option was to provide band-aid solutions like week-ahead reading, reading the text aloud to students who couldn't manage it on their own, buddying up struggling readers with more competent readers, or simply s-l-o-w-i-n-g-d-o-w-n-t-h-e-w-h-o-l-e-p-r-o-c-e-s-s. However, the problem with band-aids, as we know, is that they simply don't stick forever. Another outdated school of thought is that struggling readers just need more practice of discrete skills, like decoding and letter issues. (In truth, only about 10% of struggling adolescent readers have issues with decoding.)"

Teachers need to work collaboratively with other teachers across their school and in partnership with the students themselves to build learning assets and dispositions or Habits of Mind (Costa & Kallick, 2000), that support them to see themselves as readers, as writers and as thinkers:

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| ► Curiosity | ► Openness |
| ► Persistence | ► Creativity |
| ► Engagement | ► Metacognition |
| ► Responsibility | ► Flexibility |

Organisational and instructional practices to support students who need something extra

Fisher and Ivey (2006) urge teachers to think beyond a ‘program’ as a commercially available product and ask the quintessential question to guide their thinking about literacy intervention:

“Do the interventions cause students to read more and to read better?”

Fisher and Ivey (2006) and Fisher (2011) outline five factors that must be present for intervention to matter:

1. Providing recurring instructional time with expert teachers
2. A comprehensive approach to reading and writing – going beyond fundamental skills
3. Reading and writing that engages students
4. Interventions based on useful and relevant assessments
5. Providing plentiful opportunities for authentic reading and writing.

For children and adolescents who are having the most difficulty and need something extra on top of quality classroom teaching experiences, Fisher calls for additional instructional intervention that should:

- Be individual (instruction designed by an expert teacher individually tailored to a student’s needs based on relevant assessments)
- Be 20-30 minutes three times per week (occurring outside of quality classroom time – negotiated with the student)
- Be frequently monitored (noticing and recording small changes in reading and writing behaviours to plan for next instruction)
- Involve expert teachers (expert teachers who have the most knowledge of how language works and of effective strategies)
- Link to classroom instruction (how to read and write discipline specific texts)
- Include family involvement.

When planning support for students at both the upper primary and the secondary level, teachers and leaders should consider the following key points:

- Collaboration should increase, not reduce, the coherence of the instruction experienced by struggling readers/writers
- Congruence between core literacy instruction and interventions/support requires a shared vision and common goals for literacy instruction and assessment, adequate time for communication and coordinated planning
- Support must be based on data, measured regularly, and used flexibly
- Support must supplement classroom instruction (removing students from reading instruction to provide them with reading instruction may be offering students teaching in a different setting, but they are not offering additional time for learning).

In a recent Australian study Hayes, Hattam, Comber, Kerkham, and Thomson (2018) concluded that the teachers who were most successful in supporting the literacy learning of at risk students had a rich repertoire of teaching strategies. They built on the knowledge and experiences that students already had and made

connections to school learning. They designed open-ended tasks requiring complex thinking and use of language. And they engaged students with real texts that provided opportunities for students to contemplate significant life issues.

Wilhelm's research on reading with adolescents (2011, p. 146) "*found the use of drama helped less proficient readers overcome their local-level decoding problems and enjoy the experience of literature. It aided them in responding on many of the sophisticated dimensions used by more expert readers of their age. Using new strategies to produce meanings helped them to also rethink the act of reading and themselves and their roles as readers*".

Literacy is a powerful, wide-ranging life skill. Teachers, school leaders and parents and carers need to believe that every child and young person can become a compassionate, confident, competent, and creative citizen who uses literacy effectively to navigate their increasingly complex world. We all need to have high expectations of ourselves, and of every student.

'The expectations we hold of every student make a difference. We must ensure difference in our classrooms does not become a deficit. Nobody rises to low expectations' (Peters, 2015).

The Foundation for Learning and Literacy has written a partner article to this, *Principles for working with struggling readers and writers*, which can be found on the website in the Useful Articles section.

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