

Effective Teaching for Readers Who Struggle

Irene C. Fountas
Gay Su Pinnell

Teaching readers who struggle is the greatest challenge for literacy educators. In different ways, all teachers face this problem. And the problem does not reside in the children. The fact is that *teaching* must be designed to meet the needs of each child. Effective teaching can lift readers from struggle to success.

The early years of school are important for every child, but for those who find literacy learning difficult, every one of these years is critical. First, they need excellent classroom instruction over the years. But to develop a proficient reading process, some will also need intervention at a critical point (or several points) in their academic careers. Children who fall behind in the first years of school do not benefit fully from classroom instruction. The gap widens over the years as they experience confusion and failure. Schools seeking to close the achievement gap must consider good classroom teaching, multiple layers of intervention, the role of short-term intensive tutoring, and the ongoing development of highly qualified teachers.

We have studied and worked with early intervention for many years. Effective intervention places students in a position to engage in successful processing. A first step is to analyze students' current reading competencies and to place them in texts that they can read successfully (with comprehension and high accuracy) with teacher support. But that is only the beginning. The teaching makes the critical difference in student progress. In the rest of this article, we discuss characteristics of intervention teaching and the structures that help to make it powerful.

Our examination of the research and our experience suggests fifteen keys to effective intervention. We describe these fifteen keys below.

1. *Provide supplementary lessons.* Interventions must supplement, not supplant, effective classroom instruction. When children fall behind, they need “something extra” to make faster progress and catch up to their peers.
2. *Provide frequent lessons.* Struggling readers need a predictable, consistent schedule of instruction. Daily supplemental instruction helps students gain momentum; you can reinforce and build on what was learned the day before.
3. *Keep the teacher/student ratio low.* The effectiveness of individual tutoring is well-documented. When working with small groups, a one to three teacher/student ratio is ideal. Three students provide enough varied conversation, you are able to match their reading levels more close and interact with individuals as needed. We have found it more accelerative to work with three children for half of the school year than to work with six for the entire year.

4. Provide highly effective short term services. If the intervention is early and effective, children will not need many years (or even a whole year) of intervention instruction. The layers of intervention should be flexible enough that you can group and regroup students or move from group to individual intervention.
5. Provide highly structured and systematic lessons. Effectiveness and efficiency depend on carefully designed instructional frameworks in which all the participants know what to expect and what is expected of them. Lessons should use a sequence of texts that build on each other in many ways—concepts, complexity, word difficulty, and other relevant factors. The lessons structure should include phonics principles, built systematically, but also emphasize comprehension and a great deal of work with continuous text.
6. Provide fast-paced lessons. For many struggling readers, lessons involve “slowed down” work and a great deal of boring drill. A fast-paced lesson will engage learners and keep their attention focused on reading and writing.
7. Focus on comprehension strategies and vocabulary. Too often, reading becomes a mechanical and tedious task for struggling readers, especially if they are constantly asked to read texts that are too hard. They need supportive teaching to help them think about texts and talk about their thinking. They also need some explicit vocabulary instruction to support their understanding of the content of increasingly challenging texts.
8. Combine reading and writing. Using writing in combination with reading is a highly effective way of supporting the growth of both reading and writing skills. Writing can help students extend their understanding of texts that they read. During the process of writing, they learn much about letters, sounds, and how words work.
9. Make systematic use of phonics. Very often, struggling readers need to learn the building blocks of words—how words work. Phonics principles should be explicitly introduced and students given the opportunity for “hands on” or kinesthetic practice and application. Students need to meet the same principles again and again and be prompted and reinforced as they apply them in reading and writing.
10. Develop fluency in reading and writing. Fluency must be an important goal of intervention lessons. Lessons should include explicit attention to elements of fluency such as phrasing, pausing, appropriate stress on words, and intonation.
11. Center instruction around high-quality texts. We have said that texts should be matched to readers’ current abilities, but they must also engage learners. Too often, texts for struggling readers are inferior or just boring and unappealing. Readers who struggle need the same variety and quality as proficient readers.

12. *Assess difficulties and monitor progress in valid and reliable ways.* Effective instruction is based on excellent assessment. You not only need initial and final assessments, but it is important to systematically and continuously monitor progress and keep practical records that inform your day-to-day teaching. Assessment that involves close observation and recording and analyzing reading behaviors will be most helpful.
13. *Connect the intervention to the classroom.* The more the intervention lessons are connected to the student's work in the classroom, the more effective they will be. This does not mean reading the same books as expected in classroom instruction or helping the student complete assigned work that is too difficult. It does mean working closely with the classroom teacher, communicating about the child, and providing some work that the student can do independently in the classroom.
14. *Connect intervention instruction to students' homes.* Children need opportunities to share successes with their families at home and to demonstrate their new learning with competence. Taking books home, and also some well-designed phonics work or writing about reading, will create a link between school and home and promote literacy in homes.
15. *Include high quality professional development.* We have said that teaching makes the difference, and this means supporting teachers to help them learn from their teaching. Many times, professional development is vague and nonspecific, leaving teachers to apply principles on their own without support. Professional development should be centered on the problems of practice and offer very specific guidance for teacher decision making. At the same time, it must help teachers constantly strengthen their own understanding of the reading/writing processes and expand their ability to observe for behavioral evidence of learning.

Multiple layers of intervention that meet the criteria above have great potential for influencing learning. If we are willing to put systems into place, we can meet the needs of children in today's schools.

A FRAMEWORK FOR LITERACY INTERVENTION LESSONS

Odd-Numbered Lesson

Text Analysis and Goals

1. Rereading Books
2. Phonics/Word Study
3. Reading a New Book (instructional level text)
 - Introduction
 - Reading with Teacher Support
 - Discussing the Meaning (Evidence of Thinking Within, Beyond, and About the Text)
 - Teaching Point
4. Word Work

Classroom Connection
Home/School Connection

Assessment

Suggestions for Working with English Language Learners
Professional Development

Even-Numbered Lesson

1. Rereading and Assessment (reading record)
2. Phonics/Word Study
3. Writing about Reading
4. Reading a New Text (1-2 levels easier than instructional)
 - Introduction
 - Reading with Teacher Support
 - Discussing the Meaning (Evidence of Thinking Within, Beyond, and About the Text)
 - Teaching Point

Extra Word Work (option)

Classroom Connection
Home/School Connection

Assessment

Suggestions for Working with English Language Learners
Professional Development