

# Struggling Readers, Knowledgeable Teachers



Imagine a grade 3–8 student who struggles to read. Consider a student who frequently stops to sound out words and, consequently, fails to comprehend or one who reads the words in a passage but then is unable to retain the information. In both cases, it is highly likely that such readers would have never had a successful reading experience. We want to change that. Our goal is to motivate and teach struggling readers to become active, engaged, and successful.

To ensure that struggling readers have opportunities to thrive, we can create multiple, daily, authentic opportunities to read, write, discuss, listen, and view. We can also provide engaging, accessible text and meaningful, strategic literacy instruction in a variety of settings.

In this chapter, we discuss these issues and other essential ideas about struggling readers and those who teach them. We begin by examining the nature of such readers. Then, we focus on their teachers. Finally, we discuss selected elements of context: the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model, explicit skill and strategy instruction, varied types and levels of text, and multiple representations of thinking.

## Struggling Readers

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The nature of struggling readers is as varied as the students themselves, so as teachers, our understanding needs to be both broad and deep. To accomplish this, we need to know our students—their literacy backgrounds, interests, preferred ways of learning, and favored ways of representing their thinking. This may seem like a daunting task, but it is a challenge that we need to meet every day.

In this section, we begin by detailing two ways through which we can gain insights into students' backgrounds. Next, we discuss students' preferred ways of learning. Then, we examine students' favored ways of representing their thinking.

### ***Struggling Readers' Literacy Backgrounds***

When we need to understand students' reading experiences prior to the time they arrived in our classrooms, we can invite them to create their Literacy Histories. If we need to understand students' personal preferences when reading, viewing, and listening outside of class, we can ask them to complete Interest Inventories.

**Literacy Histories.** To learn about students' previous experiences, we can share our Literacy Histories and encourage students to create theirs. In our Literacy Histories, we recount our experiences from earliest memory to present day. Figure 1.1 features Literacy History Prompts designed to help students think through their prior experiences. Students should not directly respond to the prompts. They should read through the prompts to inspire recollections of past literacy experiences and to gain understanding about which information might be important to include. Students can select the mode through which they present their Literacy Histories. Writing a multipage account, creating a digital collage, designing a PowerPoint presentation, and discussing their experiences with a teacher are a few examples of student choices. (A reproducible of the Literacy History Prompts appears in the Appendix.)

**Interest Inventories.** To gain insights into students' interests, we can invite them to complete an Interest Inventory, which is basically a list of favorites. Students may respond orally or in writing. Queries include student preferences in such areas as authors, television, food, music, and life dreams or goals. A sample "My Favorites" Interest Inventory appears in Figure 1.2. (A reproducible is available in the Appendix.)

## Figure 1.1. Literacy History Prompts

The following are not questions to be answered but rather ideas to prompt students' thinking as they are creating their Literacy Histories. Depending on the grade level, students may reflect on the entire list, or the teacher may provide selected prompts.

1. What are your earliest memories of reading? What are your earliest memories of writing?
2. Before you were able to read, did you pretend to read books?
3. Can you remember the first time you read a book? What was that like?
4. Do you read and/or write with your siblings or friends? Do you have examples?
5. Do your parents read for pleasure? What is an example of something that they have read?
6. What are your first memories of being taught to read?
7. Do you read for pleasure? Name a book that you enjoyed reading.
8. Do you remember writing for pleasure in elementary school? What topics did you write about?
9. What was a book you chose to read in elementary school?
10. What was your first writing assignment in elementary school?
11. Did you write a report in elementary school? What was that like?
12. What was the first book you loved (couldn't put down)?
13. Has reading a book ever made a difference in your life?
14. Have you ever shared books with friends? What books did you share?
15. What is your all-time favorite book?
16. How have reading and writing changed your life?
17. Do you think you are a good reader?
18. Do you think you are a good writer?
19. Are you a reader now? What are you currently reading?
20. Are you a writer now? What are you currently writing?

*Note.* From *Guided Comprehension in Grades 3–8* (2nd ed., p. 315), by M. McLaughlin and M.B. Allen, 2009, Newark, DE: International Reading Association. Copyright 2009 by the International Reading Association. Adapted with permission.

## ***Preferred Ways of Learning***

Struggling readers, like all of us, have preferred ways of learning. These readers appear to benefit from contexts in which multiple modalities are infused. *Modalities* refers to how students use their senses in learning. Typical modalities are visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), kinesthetic (moving), and tactile (touching). Some students may be more auditory than visual, others more visual than kinesthetic, and still others more tactile than auditory. Whatever the preferences, information in such classrooms is presented in a variety of modes. Examples of student activities include listening to books on CD and dramatizing retellings. Typical traits of auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and tactile learners appear in Figure 1.3.

Struggling readers also favor particular instructional settings. For most, collaboration is a prominent factor, and small-group, paired, and one-on-one learning are often preferred to whole-group instruction.

Having opportunities to spend additional quality time with their teachers, as well as reading specialists and literacy coaches, is another essential component of struggling readers' learning. As these students learn, they are influenced by good oral reading models.

Figure 1.2. "My Favorites" Interest Inventory

The form is titled "My Favorites" and is enclosed in a rectangular border. It contains six distinct sections for recording preferences:

- TV Shows:** A rounded rectangular box with a title at the top and three numbered lines (1., 2., 3.) for entries.
- Foods:** A circle with a title at the top and one numbered line (1.) for an entry.
- Music:** A circle with a title at the top and one numbered line (1.) for an entry.
- Books and Authors:** A rounded rectangular box with a title at the top and three numbered lines (1., 2., 3.) for entries.
- Classes:** A circle with a title at the top and two numbered lines (1., 2.) for entries.
- My Life Dream:** A rounded rectangular box with a title at the top and no numbered lines.

Teachers, parents, tutors, siblings, and cross-age literacy partners are examples of those who might serve in this capacity.

Text supports are another vital element. Supports such as pictures, photographs, and illustrations strengthen students' thinking. Knowledge of text structure is an additional contributing factor. Also, because students' listening comprehension is typically higher than their reading comprehension, teacher read-alouds and books that students can listen to and read along with are particularly beneficial.

### ***Favored Ways of Representing Thinking***

In addition to learning through a variety of modes, struggling readers benefit from representing their thinking in multiple ways. So, instead of being asked to write a traditional

**Figure 1.3. Traits of Auditory, Visual, Kinesthetic, and Tactile Learners**

Auditory learners favor...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning by listening</li> <li>• Discussion</li> <li>• Reading</li> <li>• Communicating well verbally</li> <li>• Music</li> <li>• Talking</li> </ul>
Visual learners favor...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning through demonstration</li> <li>• Note-taking</li> <li>• Using picture supports</li> <li>• Recognizing sight words</li> <li>• Making lists to organize their thoughts</li> <li>• Using their imaginations</li> </ul>
Kinesthetic learners favor...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being actively involved</li> <li>• Being outgoing</li> <li>• Movement</li> <li>• Using manipulatives</li> <li>• Being willing to try new things</li> <li>• Having high energy</li> </ul>
Tactile learners favor...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using manipulatives</li> <li>• Hands-on activities</li> <li>• Taking notes</li> <li>• Sketching their ideas</li> <li>• Having artistic natures</li> </ul>

report, these students may well prefer to create projects, sketch their responses, or dramatize their thinking.

As struggling readers progress, their willingness to trust, keep open minds, and believe in themselves is essential. They need to know that they can be successful. They need to understand that knowledgeable teachers will partner with them to ensure they reach their goal.

## Knowledgeable Teachers

Teaching struggling readers is a challenging, multifaceted process. We need to be knowledgeable about both literacy and our students. In addition, we need to use instructional time wisely, provide accessible, engaging texts, and teach students to become skillful, strategic readers. Integrating technology and using formative assessment are essential to these tasks. Our collective goal is to create a team to teach, support, and inspire struggling readers.

Research tells us that the teacher is the most influential factor in student learning. To meet this goal, we need not only to be knowledgeable about every aspect of literacy but also to thoroughly understand the components of effective instruction. In addition, we need to engage in ongoing professional development.

## ***Knowing Our Students***

Howrey, Taylor-Greathouse, Hikida, Claravall, and Allington (2014) note that when teaching struggling readers, we should make it personal. We should know our students. Inviting them to complete Literacy Histories and respond to Interest Inventories will provide insights into students' previous literacy experiences and their personal preferences about topics such as books, television, music, and rainy-day activities. Encouraging students to discuss their resulting ideas will contribute to deeper understanding.

## ***Using Instructional Time Wisely***

Time may well be our greatest challenge. There never seems to be enough time, and we need to carefully examine how we allocate it, especially when teaching struggling readers. They need extra time with their teachers, more small-group instruction, and more differentiation based on particular needs.

## ***Providing Accessible, Engaging Text***

According to Allington (2013), struggling readers benefit from engaging with texts at their reading level more than reading texts at grade level. These readers also benefit from texts that are of interest to them. Both of these ideas support our need to provide access to a variety of types and levels of text, including multimodal text, to our students. The nature and plurality of these texts support teacher read-alouds (Layne, 2015), student independent reading, differentiation of instruction, and cross-age literacy experiences.

To ensure that these readers have opportunities to engage with multiple levels of text, teachers can scaffold learning experiences and offer students varying levels of support, depending on the purpose and context of the reading. When text is challenging, students have full teacher support, and teachers can share the text through a read-aloud. When the text is just right for instruction, teachers provide support as needed, and when the text is just right for independent reading, little or no support is required. Although motivation plays a role in student text selections, it is important to note that transacting with a wide variety of genres enhances students' understanding. Experience in reading multiple genres provides students with knowledge of numerous text structures and improves their text-driven processing (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000). Gambrell (2001) notes that transacting with a wide variety of genres, including biography, historical fiction, folk tales, and poetry, increases students' reading performance. Duke and Pearson (2002) suggest that text selection is a critical teacher task. They note that some texts should be chosen because they are well suited for teaching particular strategies. They further propose that such teaching should begin with easier texts and grow into texts at higher levels.

In addition to traditional types of texts, multimodal text is a highly motivational instructional resource that incorporates the use of various modes of communication: print, audio, photos, illustrations, film, graphic novels, the use of color and design, and more. When we use multimodal text, we broaden the spectrum of learning for struggling students. We provide opportunities for them to transact with elements such as images, sounds,

representations, expressions, and inspirations that they may not otherwise encounter. By tapping into multiple modalities, we also encourage students to use their strengths as they learn. When we consider the possibilities for incorporating multimodal text in our teaching, we should note not only that we can use such text in our teaching but also that our students can create multimodal responses. Generating digital images, writing and illustrating form poems, designing self-authored digital texts, creating comics, engaging in dramatizations, and producing podcasts are just a sampling of the possibilities.

### ***Teaching Through Authentic Tasks***

Engaging students in authentic tasks means that they will be reading, writing, discussing, viewing, and creating as one would in real-life situations. This means that students will not be subject to skill and drill and told to complete worksheets. Rather, the instruction will be differentiated, and all of the tasks will be real.

### ***Explicit Teaching***

When teachers engage in explicit instruction of reading skills and strategies, they use a meaningful, multistep process to scaffold students' learning. During instruction, there is a gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the students. In the Guided Comprehension Model (McLaughlin & Allen, 2009), the steps of explicit instruction are explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect. Discussion permeates the process. The teacher typically begins by explaining a reading comprehension strategy. In the next step, the teacher demonstrates how to use the strategy while reading authentic text. As students become more knowledgeable about the strategy, they may begin to participate in the demonstration by offering responses about applying the strategy. In the guided step, students engage with a partner or small group to apply the strategy as they read additional sections of text. Following discussion, students engage in independent practice on their own. Next, the teacher and students engage in reflection about what they learned and how they can integrate the strategy they learned with the repertoire of strategies that they use as they read.

Using explicit instruction to teach struggling readers affords students the opportunity to learn from the teacher, with the teacher, with peers, and on their own. From explanation to demonstration to guided instruction and independent practice, students learn how to use a variety of skills and strategies through a series of instructional processes. Through the interactive nature of explicit instruction, students not only learn how to use skills and strategies but also discover how to think through text. Explicit instruction benefits all students, but it is particularly helpful for struggling readers (Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009). Teaching these students to use comprehension strategies every time they read is key.

### ***Gaining Insight From Formative Assessment***

Formative assessment provides teachers and students with descriptive feedback concerning students' literacy. We use formative assessment to inform and differentiate instruction. When engaging in formative assessment, teachers and students share responsibility for

learning. Shepard (2005) suggests that this type of assessment is a collaborative process in which teacher and student negotiate how to improve learning. Formative assessment is characterized by purpose, collaboration, its dynamic nature, descriptive feedback, and continuous improvement (McLaughlin & Overturf, 2013a, 2013b).

### ***Collaborating With a Literacy Team***

When we are teaching, it is important to remember that we are not alone. We are members of a team of educational professionals composed of reading specialists, literacy coaches, content area teachers, English as a Second Language teachers, fellow grade-level teachers, and school administrators. Together, the team can work to ensure that struggling readers consistently receive all the support they need.

### ***Creating Home–School Connections***

Open communication with families helps extend literacy into students' everyday lives. In addition, sending resources, such as books, home with students provides family members with opportunities to read with struggling readers, to serve as oral fluency models, and to help the children understand that literacy is valued in the home.

## **Creating Meaningful Contexts**

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Cambourne (2002) reminds us that “what is learned cannot be separated from the context in which it is learned” (p. 26). Consequently, all that we have discussed about students and teachers, as well as numerous other influences, needs to be situated within meaningful contexts.

Duke (2001) suggests an expanded understanding of context for present-day learners. She notes that context is curriculum, activity, classroom environment, teachers and teaching, text, and society. An interesting aspect of this expanded nature of context is the number of influences that impact student learning.

Lipson and Wixson (2013) note that the instructional context encompasses settings, practices, and resources. The instructional settings include teacher beliefs and literate environment, classroom interaction, classroom organization, and grouping. Instructional goals, methods, activities, and assessment practices are part of instructional practice. Commercial programs, trade materials, and technology are viewed as instructional resources.

Pearson (2001) indicates that context is characterized by multiple factors, including authentic opportunities to read, write, and discuss. He further notes that the instruction of skills and strategies, integration of concept-driven vocabulary, use of multiple genres, and knowledge of various text structures are other contextual considerations.

In this section, we focus on two elements of context that particularly support our teaching of struggling readers: the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model and multiple representations of thinking.

## ***The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model***

Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) Gradual Release of Responsibility Model is an instructional framework based on the idea that teachers need to shift from a situation in which they assume "all the responsibility for performing a task...to a situation in which the students assume all the responsibility" (Duke & Pearson, 2002, pp. 210–211). Components of the model include explanation, demonstration, collaborative practice, guided practice, and independent practice. The model does more than support the explicit instruction of comprehension strategies and authentic opportunities to read, write, and discuss. It "connects and integrates these different learning opportunities" (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 208). Throughout the process, it is important for teachers and students to remember that the goal is to develop a repertoire of comprehension strategies and use them as needed when reading.

## ***Multiple Representations of Thinking***

Teaching struggling readers to represent their thoughts in a variety of ways broadens their communication possibilities and strengthens their understanding. It also helps engage students' thinking and accommodate their learning styles. Although offering multiple modes of response is motivational for all students, it is particularly beneficial for more struggling readers (McLaughlin, 2015).

Eisner (1997) suggests that we follow his five principles to support our understanding of forms of representation:

1. The form used influences the processes and products of thinking.
2. Varied forms of representation nurture different thinking skills.
3. The form influences what we are able to represent and what we are able to see.
4. Forms can be combined to offer students a greater array of resources.
5. Each form can be used in different ways, requiring different skills and forms of thinking.

Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, and Leu (2008) note that current digital tools readily allow for multiple, multimodal, and multifaceted representations. When we contemplate students representing their thinking through a variety of modes, we should consider the possibilities offered not only by technology but also by poetry, drama, music, and art.

## **Final Thoughts**

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Our primary responsibility to our struggling students is to teach them to become active, engaged readers. We want them to enjoy being read to, reading with others, and reading on their own. We want them to be motivated to listen to and read a variety of texts and use a repertoire of skills and strategies to construct meaning. We want to hear them giggle when they read Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books, and we want to share their desolation when they read *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. We want to see their looks of amazement

as they read Seymour Simon's *Wolves* and the fascination they feel when reading about the scientific method in Jon Scieszka's Frank Einstein series. We want to see their faces bursting with pride as they read sentences and stories that they have written and share their ideas in discussion. Teaching our students to become active, strategic readers is a noble goal, one we strive to achieve every day.

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