



Two Important Strategies for Struggling Readers

SUMMARY

Even students who meet standards in the early grades are likely to struggle if they don't receive instruction in the more sophisticated literacy demands of middle-level content areas. This article shares recommendations for two strategies that its authors say should be included in any comprehensive literacy program at the middle level: differentiated support for literacy across the curriculum, and additional targeted instruction for those who struggle with reading and writing.

Background

Much qualitative research has described the literacy strategies older youth develop to negotiate situations that matter to them, including relationships with peers outside of school. Even those who struggle with academics can demonstrate sophisticated, though non-academic, literacy strategies while graffiti-writing (Moje, 2000), instant messaging (Lewis & Fabos, 2005), and participating on a MySpace page (Malavasic, 2008). When teachers appreciate and make connections to such out-of-school capabilities, youth's motivation to participate in academic literacy instruction can benefit.

Judith Langer and colleagues at the Center on English Learning and Achievement identified the shared features of dozens of effective secondary school English language arts classrooms. Such classrooms include varied forms of explicit literacy instruction, rich curriculum not limited to test preparation, coherent learning tasks that invite youth to make connections to what has been learned outside of school, overt instruction in strategies for thinking and doing, enactment of generative conceptions of learning, and complex learning involving social engagements (Langer, 2002).

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Langer’s findings mirror school-wide recommendations that can be found in several recently published reviews of adolescent literacy research. The methods that we recommend in the following sections come from these reviews or other peer-reviewed research articles. All have been shown to foster measurable differences in literacy development in youth who struggle with literacy. Supporting studies or other sources are listed in the end-of-text References, and several research reviews are listed at the end of this article. These may be useful tools for school-wide literacy planning teams who want to delve more deeply into the research.

Strategies for support

Like Ms. Simpson (*see Methodology at right*), teachers in all subject-specific classes can ask students to read and write frequently. They can teach mini-lessons to aid such work, meant to help students gain understandings specified in the subject-specific New York state learning standards. Teachers can model reading and writing strategies and invite students to mimic their efforts as they coach. Students can eventually be asked to use such strategies independently, writing on Post-its or in learning logs

METHODOLOGY

Strategies for Supporting Those Who Struggle With Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum

Students in Ms. Simpson’s seventh-grade mathematics class were investigating the uses and calculation of slope. Students worked in assigned heterogeneous pairs to solve the problems posed in the unit launch, and to explain their varying solutions to the class; pairs were assigned according to reading scores, with one more and one less able reader in each dyad. Ms. Simpson demonstrated to the class how to use the boldface words and headings to determine what was important in each section of the textbook’s explanation, inviting students to help her explain key ideas in the first section, then asking the pairs to note important ideas in subsequent sections on Post-it notes for her collection and review. She also modeled the plotting of slope according to a simple equation and asked her student pairs to try several more such problems. She then directed students to complete a quick write, explaining what they’d learned in class.

Disappointed that students did not use precise technical vocabulary in their written explanations, Ms. Simpson began class the next day with paired review of meaning, use, and equations represented by slope-related terms on the word wall. Students engaged in additional investigations involving slope, each of which she asked them to explain during class as she helped them use key vocabulary in their explanations. At the end of class she conducted a brief writing mini-lesson, showing students an example of a well-written explanation of slope, and then asked them to again describe what they’d learned in class that day. This batch of writing contained far more accurate descriptions of how and why to plot slope. The writing samples also gave her data to use for further differentiated decision-making.

to indicate thinking for later discussion. Such gradual movement toward student independence helps youth develop a strategy repertoire that serves them elsewhere. Frequent reading and writing also exposes them to varied uses of subject-specific

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vocabulary. Use of pairs or small groups, along with individual and whole class mini-lessons, allows teachers to address varying students' needs (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

What strategies might be worth modeling, according to the experts? In *I Read It But I Don't Get It*, Cris Tovani (2000) suggests teaching students to predict, make connections, question, determine importance, summarize, and monitor and fix misunderstandings. Michael Graves (2006) recommends explicitly teaching a few important vocabulary words and fostering word consciousness and word learning strategies, such as use of context clues, common word parts, dictionaries, and other reference tools, in *The Vocabulary Book*. In *Content Area Writing*, Harvey Daniels and colleagues (2007) recommend mini-lessons that teach young writers effective word choice, like Ms. Simpson did in her mathematics classroom. All three of these sources are popular study group texts and welcome additions to a middle-level professional development library.

Schools may want to adopt a reputable literacy across-the-curriculum program model. If so, Project CRISS (Santa et al, 2004) teaches students to build on prior knowledge and become actively involved in learning through organizing information and writing. West Ed's Strategic Literacy Initiative

(Schoenbach et al, 1999) involves teachers in showing students how to engage in metacognitive conversations before, during, and after reading. Deshler and his colleagues' (2001) Strategic Instruction Model shows teachers how to model and guide students to independent use of a variety of learning strategies. All the above program models encourage differentiation. Each also has an extensive research base that is easily explored with Internet and library searches.

Targeted instruction

Some middle-level youth with gaps in literacy and understanding need added instruction, beyond what content-area teachers can reasonably be expected to provide (*See Methodology at right*). These students can be identified with state assessment results and teacher or parent recommendations. Such students may not be best served, at least at first, by attending to grade-appropriate state English language arts standards. Instead, literacy specialists can consider how to motivate and increase youth's confidence, as well as provide bits of instruction to address evident gaps in literacy understandings. Helpful informal data include interest inventories and informal oral reading and writing samples — data within which changes can easily be noted for ongoing progress monitoring. Interventions to accelerate progress are arguably best when developed in

collaboration with youth, and when they occur in regular classrooms organized with lots of opportunities for students to read and write in collaboration with each other and their teachers. However, students who seriously struggle may feel more motivated in out-of-class instruction that helps them bolster classroom participation while they accelerate progress in private. Such more individualized attention can help students who are identified for academic intervention as well as many of those who are identified for special education services.

Code-emphasis instruction may be appropriate when assessment indicates difficulties in reading words or spelling, and when youth agree and realize the benefits of instruction. For instance, students who struggle with determining pronunciation of unknown words can be excited to learn to decode by analogy, a treatment developed by Gaskins and colleagues based on study of phonograms in commonly used words (1995). Bhattacharya and Ehri (2004) describe a simple approach to helping older youth pronounce and spell multisyllabic words by guessing vowel sounds within syllables; this was Ms. Blake's strategy. Teacher-assisted repeated reading can help students develop more expressive and fluent decoding in context, involving one-to-one or small-group modeling and mimicking (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003).

The research articles cited above give detailed direction to how to provide such instruction.

Meaning-emphasis interventions are often helpful for readers and writers

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METHODOLOGY

Targeted Instruction for Students Who Struggle

Michael's teachers all saw his need for additional reading and writing instruction. This included the school reading specialist, Ms. Blake, who noted the eighth-grader's unsuccessful performance on the preceding year's New York State Assessment in English Language Arts as she screened candidates for Academic Intervention Services. Because Ms. Blake knew that such assessments yield only general information about a student's literacy abilities, she asked Michael to talk with her about his day-to-day reading and writing, and to read aloud 100-word passages from his English language arts and social studies textbooks. Ms. Blake noted that Michael was able to read only about 70% of the words accurately, and that he struggled mightily with reading multisyllabic words. His rate was slow, and his comprehension lacked nuance. Michael's writings were usually brief, lacked detail, and contained single sentences with many phonetically spelled words. Michael reported that he spent hours each night on homework and on the Internet, trading video game "cheat codes" with peers.

Because their needs for instruction were somewhat extensive, Ms. Blake worked with Michael and five other students for 45 minutes each day in addition to their other classes. At first, she helped Michael and his peers gain confidence, fluency, and comprehension. This included instruction in multisyllabic word reading, which they practiced as they read a student-selected text that all could read with roughly 90% accuracy: *Monster*, by Walter Dean Myers. They alternately read orally and silently, discussing predictions, important ideas, and questions as they read. The students selected and read several more such texts in quick succession, then switched to collections of shorter but more difficult texts. Ms. Blake picked out these texts with their social studies, science, and literature teachers to reflect curriculum concerns. She periodically conducted brief mini-lessons on each type of text, listening to students' oral reading and exploring their writing to note areas for added instruction. As students gained confidence in their grade-appropriate texts, she focused more intensely on state English language arts standards for the students' grade level, and she followed the students to other classes to ensure transfer of strategies to content-area work.

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Published programs cannot address all the likely variations in older youth's literacy needs and interests, although they can provide helpful resources that can be modified to suit students' needs.

who are struggling. Such instruction generally seeks to have students make connections between in-school and out-of-school literacy. Teachers begin with texts that are somewhat easy for students to read and with instruction that is congruent with students' ideas of their needs and interests. As students gain confidence and strategies for reading and writing, teachers begin to introduce more sophisticated subject-area study. For instance, Jiménez (1997) used culturally relevant texts in two languages to teach bilingual, middle-level youth how to draw on existing language abilities to determine word meanings, questions, and inferences; Ms. Blake mimicked this approach with her use of student-selected texts early in her intervention. O'Brien (2003) successfully invited youth to design Internet-based multimedia inquiry projects while teachers helped them with needed reading and writing; Ms. Blake's students investigated academic topics in an inquiry project that allowed them such exploration. Such projects provide opportunities for teachers to model strategies that are specific to learners' needs and questions.

Published programs cannot address all the likely variations in older youth's literacy needs and interests, although they can provide helpful

resources that can be modified to suit students' needs. It is more likely that several programs will be needed in any one school for discerning teachers and students to design the most efficacious paths toward accelerated progress for those who struggle with literacy (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

Conclusion

Research suggests it is important that extensive reading and writing opportunity and instruction be provided across the curriculum. Subject-area teachers are in the best position to model literacy skills in their respective fields. Such instruction is especially important for those who struggle. Differentiated tasks, completed in small groups, can help such students develop understandings and strategies that follow teachers' models and mimic peers.

Additional instruction is warranted when youth struggle with reading and writing in ways that exceed content teachers' practices. Literacy specialists with the expertise to analyze youth's literacy and design instruction grounded in their capabilities can be most helpful. Such teaching provides youth with strategic insights so that their literacy, too, offers them life choices that are available to their peers.

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APPENDIX

Research Reviews in Adolescent Literacy for Literacy Team Use

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