

Literature Review: Supporting Struggling Readers

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Abstract

In 2013, the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program identified Manitoba as the province having the lowest reading achievement scores of grade 8 students across Canada. These poor results serve as an indicator that changes to the way teachers support struggling readers in the classroom and beyond its walls are essential. Struggling readers require specific skills to be taught to them in order to make gains in reading. Research in the area of identifying teaching strategies that support struggling readers in the classroom has highlighted several emergent themes. Increased student engagement results when teachers use strategies such as teacher-led read-alouds and e-books, and when students have choice in what they read. In addition, explicit instruction in phonological awareness and abundant opportunities to practise reading, both at home and at school, improve reading skills. When classroom instruction is not enough, research identifies that both Levelled Literacy Intervention and Reading Recovery are effective out-of-class intervention programs. Teachers are the ones who make a difference in supporting struggling readers through the use of concise and direct teaching methods. This paper addresses aspects that will assist the struggling reader to achieve success.

The purpose of this paper is to synthesize research in the area of teaching strategies that support struggling readers. Reading is an important area of academic research because “many students struggle academically because of their persistent reading problems” (Abler-Morgan, 2006, p. 273). This paper takes a close look at several studies and their findings, including recommended teaching strategies that have proven to be effective in supporting struggling readers. The need to find ways to refine teaching practice, particularly to teach more effectively and concisely, serves as the motivation for this literature review. When teaching students at varying reading levels, with specific strengths and weaknesses, teachers need to be directly attuned to individual students’ needs and work to create some immediate change in an effort to increase students’ engagement in their own learning. This paper examines the essential skills that students need, and specific teaching strategies and programs that have been proven through research to support struggling readers both inside and outside the classroom setting.

Research Rationale

Focusing my research on identifying ways to support struggling readers in the classroom has been driven by my professional experiences as an early years teacher over the past 15 years. As a teacher, I am always looking for ways to improve my practice, and I have used many different programs to support my teaching over the years. In my experience, when new teaching approaches have been offered or shown to me, it has been with the assurance of embracing what “research says” is the latest and greatest way to teach, without my really knowing, directly and for myself, what the research has actually found. Any publishers of programs or initiatives can provide research that is biased in efforts to support their particular programs. Throughout the Interpreting Educational Research course, I have learned that as a consumer of research, I need to look directly at research studies to determine the best practice for teaching reading and which methods to use when supporting struggling students in the classroom.

I currently work in a school with declining enrolment, with current school enrolment at 145 students and class sizes of around 20 students. This is a manageable number of students for a teacher to have in a class, but within each class are many social, emotional, and academic needs, both diagnosed and undiagnosed. Teaching in a small school has advantages for

teachers in that we are able to build relationships with all of our students on a personal basis. This positively affects student learning due to an increased sense of belonging and connectedness to caring adults. However, a small school also has disadvantages for teachers. With declining enrolment comes decreased support staff time allotment. This directly affects teachers, as well as student learning, because the available classroom support is insufficient to meet the learning needs of every student. Teachers need to be able to identify strategies that support learning for their particular context, because it is the teachers and not necessarily the program used that engenders student success. While all areas of learning are important to support, recent scores of Manitoban students on the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP, 2013) identify that our students are lagging behind the rest of Canada in reading (O'Grady & Houme, 2014).

PCAP 2013 Reading Results

The PCAP is a program designed to inform Canadians about how well our educational system is doing. In addition to providing current achievement data, it records changes over time in grade 8 students' scores in reading, mathematics, and science. Within the reading domain, the PCAP assesses reading comprehension, interpretation, and response to text (O'Grady & Houme, 2014). The reading portion of the 2013 PCAP painted a less than favourable picture of Manitoba's students in reading achievement.

Manitoba's reading scores were the lowest in Canada at 469, well below the Canadian mean of 508 in both English and French language schools (O'Grady & Houme, 2014, p. 42). Changes over time indicate that Manitoba's reading scores have continued to decline steadily (when assessed in 2007, 2010, and 2013). The 2013 study has some identifiable limitations that lead a research consumer to question the overall validity of the results: (a) participant selection did not clearly identify whether any (or which) private schools with a strong academic focus were included in the data; (b) the role that socio-economic factors played in affecting Manitoba's scores due to our high child poverty rate was not explored; (c) without explanation, the northern territories were not included in the PCAP data; and (d) specific assessment questions were not identified. Having this information would identify the specific areas of weakness in Manitoba students' reading skills. It is hard to improve practice when we do not have a clear picture of what we need to improve.

Regardless of the limitations to the PCAP study, the results are clear that Manitoba teachers need to reflect on current teaching practice and make changes to improve the quality of reading instruction that our students receive. We cannot simply continue to teach in our current manner and expect our students to do better on future PCAP assessments.

Classroom Instruction

Research in reading identifies several reoccurring themes deemed essential to support struggling readers. Teachers are the ones who make a difference in the classroom. By increasing student engagement, providing explicit instruction, teaching phonological awareness, and developing strong home-school connections, teachers can assist struggling readers in making gains toward closing the reading gap.

Student Engagement

A key factor that influences student success in reading is student engagement. When readers struggle, engagement in classroom activities is often decreased. Early on, students identify and begin to compare their own skills (academic and not) to those of their siblings and classmates. Reading skills are observed by students; as such, without ever identifying specific reading levels, children quickly determine who is a "better reader." Wiseman (2012) studied the

effects of not measuring up to classmates in a case study of kindergarten student Kevin, who at five years old had already disengaged during literacy instruction due to his low reading skills. Because no two learners learn at the same rate, teachers need to be aware of learning needs and support their students in fostering an eagerness to learn at a rate and in a way that enables individual success.

Wiseman (2012) cited a study by Good and Nicols (2001), which indicated that performance gaps in “at-risk” students are partially linked to instructional opportunities in classrooms. I agree with Wiseman that a deficit-based approach to teaching is often taken in schools rather than one that builds on strengths. In efforts to improve reading skills, I often become disenchanted and overwhelmed by what individual students cannot do, and I forget to look at all that they can do and how far they have progressed as readers. Wiseman also cited the work of Allington and Cunningham (2002), to provide an example of an ineffective teaching strategy that decreases engagement: “When students spend more time on isolated skills instruction and extensive repetition, the end result is disengagement and frustration” (p. 257). Understanding this statement, and seeking to teach in a manner with which all students can be successful, active participants in lessons, Wiseman identified interactive read-alouds to be an effective strategy that increases student engagement and literacy skills.

Interactive read-alouds provide all students with the opportunity to be challenged and to extend their thinking and understanding of reading through teacher-directed modelling and higher order questioning. During Wiseman’s (2012) nine-month qualitative study, a three-member study team observed the kindergarten classroom four times a week from October to May. Data were collected during morning meeting, read-aloud, and writing times. Field notes focused on teacher instruction, student interaction, and responses to read-alouds by student participant Kevin. The study findings indicated that despite Kevin’s struggles due to low reading skills, which led to disengagement and frustration during instruction, read-alouds “provided Kevin with opportunities to contribute in class in ways that extended his thinking about reading” (Wiseman, p. 264). As the year progressed, Kevin’s responses became increasingly sophisticated, and demonstrated deeper understanding, personal connections, and higher levels of engagement. Kevin’s “responses paralleled the teacher’s emphasis on complex thinking and open-ended responses” (Wiseman, p. 266). Wiseman used the case study data to determine that read-alouds are an effective teaching strategy to increase student understanding and engagement in literacy.

Just as read-aloud books are carefully chosen by teachers to promote interest and engagement by students, so too should appealing books be chosen for both guided and independent reading opportunities. Teachers need to have many books available at all reading levels, so that students can choose what they want to read. Interest in a book’s topic and relatability to characters are important elements that foster reading engagement. E-books have quickly become available for readers of all skill levels, and many websites and publishing companies identify them as an effective tool to increase student engagement.

Jones and Brown (2011) detailed a study with the purpose of examining reading engagement and comprehension of children as they read e-books. The participants were 22 grade 3 students who were determined by their teacher to be reading at grade level. Study data were obtained through enjoyment surveys and comprehension scores. The results indicated that most students did not have a preference between reading e-books or traditional print book format, but rather that the key factor of reading satisfaction was having a wide selection of books from which to choose. That does not mean that teachers should not use e-books, but that they can be used in addition to a print book library in order to increase book and format choice, and thus contribute to student engagement in reading. “Reading motivation and engagement are enhanced when students have choice in reading material” (Jones & Brown, p.16).

In order to engage students in reading, especially those who struggle, teachers need to orchestrate the reading process with success for all students as the end goal. Read-alouds are an example of modelling what good reading sounds like. They also invite students to participate

in rich literature-based discussions. Book discussions increase student confidence in that a teacher can acknowledge all responses and purposefully choose students to participate, thus facilitating strong student engagement. Choice of books is essential in promoting reading. Just as adults will not easily engage in books that are too difficult or that they are not interested in reading, neither will children. Regardless of the format, whether e-books or traditional print materials, teachers need to have an abundant library and give students freedom to choose what they read in order to have truly engaged readers. Once a student has the freedom to choose a book of his/her interest area and reading level, explicit teaching is essential for the student to acquire the necessary skills and strategies to become a better reader and be fully engaged in reading.

Explicit Instruction

Explicit instruction involves individualized or small-group instruction that is specific to student learning needs. It targets a skill or strategy that the student needs to work on in order to become a better reader. Explicit instruction often occurs during small-group guided reading sessions wherein a teacher can focus on, but is not limited to, strategies such as phonological awareness, decoding, and segmenting skills.

Guided reading involves an opportunity for a teacher to read with students in small groups. In guided reading, students can be grouped either homogeneously or heterogeneously by reading abilities or by strategies that are being worked on, such as rereading or chunking letters. During guided reading sessions, the teacher provides direct instruction that meets individual student learning needs. This is essential for student learning, as Wiseman (2012) explained from Stevens, Van Meter, and Warcholak's (2010) research results that "explicit instruction in reading strategies, such as understanding story structure or using context clues to identify unknown words, has been shown to increase student reading abilities and comprehension" (p. 257).

McIntyre, Rightmyer, Powell, Powers, and Petrosko (2006) undertook a study to determine the amount of time that students should spend reading connected text in school. Their participants were 66 grade 1 students who were identified by their teachers as struggling readers in 26 classrooms in the United States. These students had scored in the lowest 20% on reading assessments in their classes. McIntyre et al. collected data through observations and interviews of the teachers with reference to their teaching practices. They looked at the amount of time that students spent reading connected text, defined as text with meaningful sentences, one or more sentences in length. The reading contexts included echo reading, choral reading, guided reading both silent and oral, and independent reading time. Read-aloud time, direct instruction to the class, word work, and non-print responses to literature were also addressed.

McIntyre et al.'s (2006) study did not provide a numerical value to answer the following question: How much should young children read? Rather, the results show that the most important factor in predicting and supporting reading success for struggling readers is "the kind of reading practice (and other instruction) that is occurring in the classroom" (McIntyre et al., p. 64). McIntyre et al. stressed the importance of teacher mediation for early readers to build reading skills, because "the first-grade children who gained the most were either provided guided reading practice or independent reading with feedback" (p. 66). Grade 1 learners are not typically ready for independent reading and are not usually able to apply what has been taught during reading instruction independently. McIntyre et al. suggested that phonics instruction is effective in supporting reading growth, but it needs to be child specific to be most effective.

Phonological Awareness

Much research has been done into the importance of phonological awareness and phonics skills for beginning readers. Phonological awareness is a "strong and significant predictor of

word reading skills in elementary children” (Park & Lombardino, 2013, p. 83). These decoding skills are especially important in the early stages of reading, when students are learning to read and need to be taught directly by the teacher. Phonological awareness is essential for word recognition, and word recognition is a foundational skill for reading comprehension.

In efforts to support struggling readers, Park and Lombardino (2013) recommended specific strategies that teachers can use during instruction time to improve phonics skills: phonological awareness, phonics/decoding instruction, spelling instruction, vocabulary instruction, and morphological instruction. These components work together to increase students’ phonics skills during word study instruction. Effective teachers use all of these during reading instruction time, in order to engage, model, coach, and provide direct instruction that supports students in developing reading skills.

Beyond Classroom Instruction

When classroom instruction is not enough, struggling readers require a more intensive approach to instruction in order to improve their skills. Intensive instruction is most effective when a highly skilled teacher of reading administers it. Choosing an effective reading intervention program from the many available can be difficult. Research consumers need to be cautioned by claims made by publishers that their programs are the “best” or “most effective.” Publishers have the ability to create a study whose results are favourable toward the product that they want to sell. Having noted that, two programs that I am familiar with for intensive support are Levelled Literacy Intervention (LLI) and Reading Recovery.

Levelled Literacy Intervention (LLI)

LLI is a program that was developed by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnel and is published by Heinemann. Schools within Pembina Trails School Division, where I teach, use Fountas and Pinnell’s assessment kit to determine our students’ reading levels. With a developing trend of experiencing an increased number of students in grades 1 and 2 who were reading below grade level expectations, my school purchased the LLI intervention kit to augment classroom reading instruction. LLI is designed to support students in kindergarten to grade 2. Its goal is to provide intensive, rich instruction that will elevate reading scores at a rate more rapid than with regular classroom instruction.

The LLI program requires little teacher training, and includes instructional videos to support program implementation. Ransford-Kaldon et al. (2010) conducted a study to determine the efficacy of LLI as an intervention program to support kindergarten to grade 2 students. In each of the three grades, student achievement in reading was greater for those who received LLI instruction than for those who did not receive LLI intervention. This was determined through benchmark assessments to determine the number of reading levels that each student increased post-intervention compared to initial testing scores. When surveyed, the teachers who took part in the study agreed that the LLI program was effective and positively influenced their reading instruction for their struggling readers.

In my experience with LLI, it is laid out in simple-to-follow lessons. Each lesson has reading, comprehension, word work, and phonics/phonemic awareness components, and follows the same basic structure. Books have reoccurring characters that students can relate to. LLI is conducted in a small-group setting; three students is the recommended number for small-group LLI instruction. Each lesson is designed to be 30 minutes in duration. As a classroom teacher attempting to administer the intervention, this time frame is often difficult to achieve. I have had to modify lessons, often shortening them so as to work within the confines of regular classroom routines. Despite the need to make modifications to the program, because of the success that my students have experienced I agree with Ransford-Kaldon et al. (2010) that LLI

is an effective intervention for struggling readers, which is more intensive than regular classroom lessons.

Reading Recovery

For students who require an even more intensive reading intervention, Reading Recovery is available in many schools. Reading Recovery is designed to accelerate a student's literacy skills. It takes place through intensive, daily, one-on-one instruction and includes a nightly home reading component. Daily lessons are 30 minutes in duration and have three sections: (a) familiar reading and a running record, (b) alphabet, word work, and writing, and (c) introducing and reading a new book. Each of the three segments of a lesson receives equal amounts of emphasis and time (10 minutes). Students selected for Reading Recovery are in the lowest achieving 20% of grade 1 students within the school. This is determined through standardized assessments from An Observation Survey of Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2013). A student is typically in Reading Recovery for 10 to 20 weeks. When students are discontinued from Reading Recovery, it is because they demonstrate reading and writing skills that are equivalent to the average level of their peers at that particular point in time.

Jesson and Limbrick (2014) found that students who receive Reading Recovery intervention continue to be at risk and require monitoring by teachers to ensure that their skills continue to be at par with their peers. As well, a school focus on literacy, home-school connections and communication, high levels of literacy expectations for all students, and a collective responsibility by all staff are all necessary for Reading Recovery students to sustain their reading skills post-intervention.

Although the selection process and the number of students who can receive Reading Recovery support in a school each year is small, the program itself is effective. Having said that, every student may not be successfully discontinued (graduated) from the program after 20 weeks, and might need to be referred to other resources for additional support. Even so, those students are still farther ahead than they would have been if they had received only classroom instruction. Reading Recovery instruction is not prescribed, nor does it follow a specific lesson sequence. Teachers are trained and receive ongoing training to identify areas in reading where individual students require support. One drawback of Reading Recovery is that there are specific books from which a teacher must choose. There is a variety, but for some students the books are not engaging and this impedes their reading development. Because Reading Recovery teachers are highly trained, classroom teachers who are fortunate enough also to be Reading Recovery trained have a special set of skills that they bring to the classroom to support all struggling readers.

Reading Practice

While it is important for students to have book choice, as well as a teacher who models good reading and provides ample opportunities for rich literacy instruction, all readers need practice to get better. This practice, coined "repeated reading," can be achieved both at school and at home. "When students are provided frequent opportunities to orally read text, they make significant gains in fluency" (Alber-Morgan, 2006, p. 273). Repeated reading is more likely to be achieved when the books are familiar to the child and are at an independent reading level. Repeated reading situates the child to practise fluency and orchestrate good reading. Alber-Morgan (2006) identified daily repeated reading as a crucial supplement to a reading program that includes immediate and constructive individualized feedback; such an approach is an effective strategy that helps students to attain optimal reading performance. Repeated reading can be done at home or at school through partner reading.

Creating peer partnerships with student mentors is an effective strategy to foster student success in reading in a manner that promotes student engagement. "Learning buddies," as the

strategy is often referred to, pairs up a student in an older grade with one in a younger grade. The younger student has the opportunity to read aloud and receive immediate praise, feedback, and encouragement from the older buddy. When this initiative is done in cross-grade groupings, even weaker readers in the older grades are typically able to support the younger readers and in turn gain confidence in themselves as readers. In my experience, cross-grade buddy reading is an effective strategy to facilitate engaged reading practice. A benefit to teachers is that it is not labour intensive for teachers to prepare, beyond creating effective partnerships and ensuring that students have books that are appropriate to their grade level to read aloud. This method is further enhanced if a teacher can meet with the older students prior to buddy reading, in order to teach the older students specific strategies or reading prompts to use with their younger buddies.

Home Reading

An effective reading program includes a home reading component. Time spent practising reading at home is essential to consolidate the reading skills being taught at school. In order for students to be successful readers, they need to read; the more practice reading they have, the better they will get. A teacher needs to foster the home-school connection and create an open relationship with families in order to foster parental participation in school programs. No parent wants to see a child struggle academically, but parents often are challenged by not knowing how to help. It is a teacher's responsibility to promote reading at home and to make efforts to provide parents with the support that they need to make home reading a successful experience for both parents and children.

Martin (2011), a classroom teacher, observed that families of her students wanted to help their children academically at home, but were often frustrated due to lack of skills and understanding how to help. From this observation, Martin conducted a study to determine how to remove the barriers that inhibit parental support of a child's reading development at home. She determined that in order for home reading to be effective, giving parents easy-to-understand directives, academic support, and the necessary tools is essential. Giving parents specific guidance for homework removes the barrier that inhibits parental support.

When a teacher uses a variety of strategies within classroom programming, meets individual learning needs, accesses extra supports when needed, and works in partnership with parents to support struggling readers, success is more likely to be achieved. Learning to read cannot be forced, but each step along the way must be celebrated and seen as growth toward developing a lifelong reader.

Conclusion

Struggling readers require extra support to decrease the achievement gap by developing reading skills that are at par with those of their peers. Due to staffing limitations, classroom teachers need to differentiate teaching pedagogy and provide programs that meet individual needs. Effective teaching practice includes direct teaching instruction that includes teaching phonological awareness skills, affording opportunities for immediate feedback, providing students with a rich choice of books, and creating opportunities to practice reading both at school and at home. It is the teacher who influences the approach to a specific program and who is the facilitator of learning. When classroom instruction is not enough, interventions such as Levelled Literacy Intervention and Reading Recovery are needed to supplement, but not to replace, daily classroom instruction. Teachers must work to ensure that all students receive daily, rich, quality, targeted reading instruction and provide the necessary tools for effective home reading practice to occur. When home and school teams work together to support struggling readers, growth in literacy skills is more likely to occur and the students will have the necessary skills to catch up to peers who are working at grade level.

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