



Teaching struggling readers in the classroom

Effective help for struggling readers can be provided by classroom teachers within normal lessons with the help of a skilled literacy coach. **Lynne Vernon-Feagans** and **Marnie Ginsberg** describe how

CHILDREN IN OUR SOCIETY ARE REQUIRED to read well in early elementary school. Those who don't learn to read well in these early years usually face a school trajectory of failure that includes poorer overall learning and poorer self-esteem, as well as a greater chance of severe behavioral problems and eventual school dropout. These negative consequences of poor early reading happen to many struggling readers, despite the fact that these children started school ready and eager to learn. As a society, we owe all struggling readers the best possible schooling opportunities and a fast start in developing literacy. Yet, despite policy makers and educators endorsing the need for better early literacy instruction for struggling readers, the attainment of the lowest-achieving children has not improved over the last few decades.

For years, schools have been providing a number of programs, generally not research based, for struggling readers who fail to learn to read well in early elementary school. These strategies include specific programs that take the child out of the classroom for specialized instruction, despite the fact that research suggests that classroom teachers may be the most effective professionals to help struggling readers. Although some of these programs work well, many do not make a permanent difference to overall performance. In addition, many of these programs require costly training of specialized teachers who deliver the program outside normal lessons. Thus, many schools find these programs too costly or not sustainable.

Targeted Reading Intervention

At the University of North Carolina we have developed a program, Targeted Reading Intervention (TRI), which uses a different strategy to help struggling readers make rapid progress in reading. We train classroom teachers to help struggling readers, since they are the professionals who know the children the best, spend the most time with them, and can sustain the interventions after we have left their school. We have found our TRI program to be as effective as programs that pull children out of their usual lessons, while ensuring a more permanent, positive difference in reading for the struggling readers.

TRI has the following elements that can be employed by almost all schools, even with limited economic resources:

- **One-to-one instruction.** Classroom teachers work one-to-one with one struggling reader at a time every day for 15 minutes while the rest of the class is focused on another task. This efficient individualized instruction targets the most

STRUGGLING READERS

Using a literacy coach

pressing need of the student in reading. These sessions continue daily until the child makes rapid progress in reading and can be moved into small-group and personalized independent activities to maintain reading gains. These sessions optimize the child's engagement and motivation because of the focus on their individual learning.

- **Diagnostic thinking and “instructional match.”** Recent evidence has emphasized the importance of “instructional match,” that is, gearing reading instruction to the skill level of the child. Effective teaching requires classroom teachers to think diagnostically and to personalize instruction for each struggling learner. By learning a set of diagnostically efficient word identification and

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text comprehension strategies that are matched to the skill level of the struggling reader, classroom teachers can dramatically increase struggling readers' progress in early reading.

- **Rapid acceleration of decoding abilities and text comprehension.** The primary goal of reading is reading comprehension, but this goal can be thwarted by the initial barrier of word identification. The teachers in our program relentlessly work on students' word identification abilities, first by helping them crack the code. Systematic, multi-sensory instruction in sound-symbol relationships within the context of words and text can rapidly help the student crack that code. This multi-sensory word work must be followed by guided oral reading, using a book that targets the child's level of word difficulty. This guided oral reading not only reinforces word identification, but also helps the child learn to summarize, answer questions, and discuss implications from the text. These integrated components maximize the ultimate goal of early reading instruction: reading comprehension.
- **Escalating opportunities to read.** A recent study indicates that the average 3rd grader reads for only 18 minutes of each school day. Given that struggling readers are likely to read even less than average readers, a dramatic shift in teaching is essential to enable struggling readers to

What we know

- Reading failure can lead to a trajectory of failure in school and social and emotional difficulties.
- Research suggests that classroom teachers may be the most effective professional to help struggling readers.
- Support for struggling readers should focus on individual needs.
- Teachers, and therefore struggling readers, benefit from literacy coaches.

become confident readers. TRI teachers press toward the goal of code cracking, which includes daily, challenging reading practice during one-to-one and small-group sessions and, importantly, follow

that with repeated reading of the same text. These and other opportunities for reading practice build the child's word identification automaticity (sight word speed), fluency, and reading comprehension.

- **Literacy coaches work with classroom teachers.** Literacy coaches who watch the teacher working with a struggling reader in weekly and/or biweekly 15 minute sessions are the linchpin to the success of TRI, by helping classroom teachers make sophisticated diagnostic decisions that result in rapid reading gains for a struggling reader. Weekly or biweekly coaching sessions, either live or via webcam, have been shown to permanently change the way teachers think about and teach their struggling readers. Teachers benefit from having an expert in reading development walk alongside them as they work with each reader. In these weekly/biweekly sessions, the coach observes a one-to-one TRI session, and then briefly discusses the student's most pressing need. Through this professional relationship, the teacher learns more about reading development, diagnosis, and efficient strategies that profit not only the one child, but the other students in the class as well. Webcam technology, such as Apple's iChat or FaceTime, or Skype, has been especially useful in providing this ongoing support in a cost-effective manner to teachers across the country.

Conclusion

Struggling readers in early elementary school are at very high risk for later school failure, and other negative outcomes, unless we intervene early to maximize the possibility of good reading skills for these children. Recent research has endorsed small-group and one-to-one support from classroom teachers as being particularly beneficial for struggling readers, especially where this is diagnostic. Literacy coaches, who scaffold the instruction of teachers as they work with struggling readers, can create the best context for struggling readers to improve dramatically in reading.

About the authors

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Further reading

Targeted Reading Intervention

<http://targetedreadingintervention.org/>

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