Supporting Struggling Readers

BARBARA J. WALKER

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INTRODUCTION

Readers of all descriptions work to make sense of the literacy events that crowd their lives. Struggling readers, too, work to make sense of literacy events, often in situations that inhibit, rather than support, their search for meaning. Nevertheless, they *are* active learners in search of meaning who deserve support as they struggle to make sense.

To help you understand and support their literacy development, this book will illustrate:

— An interactive view of the reading process.
— A developmental view of literacy.
— How inappropriate instruction can affect students' strengths and weaknesses and reinforce their reliance on ineffective learning strategies.
— Instructional methods and authentic assessment procedures that enable us to support struggling readers as they develop their literacy skills.
— An instructional framework that can be used to intervene effectively during each phase of literacy development.

In the years since this book was first published, teaching strategies and techniques have been refined and adapted to reflect new developments in the field of literacy instruction. As a result, this new, revised edition of *Supporting Struggling Readers* includes even more suggestions for helping children whose literacy development has stalled.

Furthermore, my continuing work in the field has sparked me to rework, update and shift to different chapters some of the teaching strategies included in the original edition. Though all

the suggested strategies can be adapted for use at every phase of a child's literacy development, many are particularly effective when matched with specific developmental tasks. Two strategies included in the chapter dealing with strategic literacy, for example, are the directed reading-thinking activity and the experience-text relationship. They appear in this chapter because they focus on helping children integrate and elaborate on their previous knowledge as they read a text, the major developmental task of the strategic literacy phase. Both strategies can, however, also be used effectively to promote literacy development during other phases.

New teaching strategies have been added throughout the book to reflect research suggesting that word identification skills and the ability to read fluently are important elements of comprehension. We must remember, however, that children who are at risk of failing to learn to read proficiently struggle with these elements of the comprehension process. Emphasizing these strategies at the expense of strategies that encourage children to make sense when reading prevents struggling readers from demonstrating what they can do.

As you read this new edition, I hope that you will come to appreciate that struggling readers do attempt to make sense of what they read and that they do so by drawing on what they can already do. Too often, instruction focuses on what they can't do, leaving them struggling to make sense of what they're reading and writing. If teachers support the literacy development of struggling readers by joining them in focusing on what they can do, they are able to successfully construct meaning from text.

ACTIVE LITERACY

Being literate means that children and adults are able to use reading and writing to make sense of their world. But literacy development now involves far more than the ability to pick up a book and read — or to pick up a pencil and write. Advances in technology, especially computer technology, have added layers of complexity to the definition of literacy. In addition to reading and writing using traditional print materials, students must now know how to read and write material that is generated electronically, such as Web pages, e-mail correspondence and chatroom messages. All involve different aspects of literacy.

As we read and discuss with one another, we use a multitude of strategies depending on the situation. Our purposes for reading affect both the strategies we use and our interpretation of the text. Take the case, for example, of a young man who was reading a manual as he repaired a motor in auto mechanics class. He read a few paragraphs, looked at a diagram, then worked on the engine. Later that day, he sat reading a movie magazine for his own enjoyment. As he read, he decided that his friends might be interested in hearing about and discussing some of the information in the article.

The reading strategies the young man used on these two occasions changed because his purpose had changed — from reading to perform a task to reading for enjoyment and, finally, to reading so that he would be able to recount a specific point. Readers also vary their strategies as the text organization changes. In the case of the young man, for example, the text

changed from a manual with diagrams to a magazine designed for leisure reading.

Because readers' knowledge of various topics differs, their level of understanding changes with the topic. As the young man read the auto manual, he understood most of what he was reading and simply read to confirm or add to information he already knew. As he read the movie magazine, he read quickly at first. When he decided that he wanted to discuss the information with friends, however, he not only slowed down, but also reread sections. He wanted to be sure that he understood the author's perspective, which gave him new information, so that he could contrast it with his own.

In the same way, a group of children from Calgary, Alberta, read and understood a difficult passage about glaciers because they had just returned from an excursion to the Columbia Icefields where they had seen firsthand how glaciers form. This same group of children, however, had great difficulty when they read an easier passage about tropical rain forests. In these two instances, the students had not changed — but the text had. They had trouble interpreting the passage about rain forests because they weren't familiar with the topic.

In most cases, reading difficulties are not the result of an underlying cognitive deficit in a reader; rather, a reader's ability to make sense of text depends on the complex interaction of myriad factors — the strategies they possess, their purpose for reading, their knowledge of the topic, the format of the text, and the situational context. The ability — or inability — to read is not a static characteristic; rather, it is contingent on the interaction among a unique reader, a text and instruction. Both the reader's ability and the difficulty of a literacy activity are relative. This chapter examines how reading proficiency develops by taking a closer look at the active process of making sense of text — a process that involves readers in predicting, checking and elaborating on their interpretation within a particular situation.

Predicting

Proficient readers use what they already know to predict what a text will say. They use this strategy, as well as the information given in a text, to make sense of a passage. As they read, their

previous knowledge helps them recognize patterns that give them clues about how to interpret a text. Just as a weather forecaster uses an array of instruments to predict the weather, readers use an array of information sources to predict what a text is likely to say. These information sources, such as the features and meaning of words, sentence organization and the organization of the text, combine with readers' previous knowledge about words and their familiarity with the topic to facilitate understanding.

When reading a passage about a roller coaster ride, for example, readers might say to themselves, I know what this is going to say, because I've ridden a roller coaster. In this way, their personal experience with riding a roller coaster enables them to predict what the text is going to say. Like the weather forecaster's predictions, however, theirs are sometimes accurate — and sometimes not.

Checking Predictions

Active literacy involves not only making predictions, but also checking those predictions. Proficient readers continually check their understanding of a passage to see whether it makes sense. As they read more text about the roller coaster ride, for example, they might say to themselves, Yes, that is exactly how I felt when I rode the roller coaster, or, Oops, this character didn't have the same experience as I did.

This internal dialogue enables readers to monitor their understanding. If they are having trouble understanding, they check both the text and their own previous knowledge to figure out what went wrong. Then, they revise their understanding and continue to read. Like the weather forecaster, they continually check data from a variety of sources, revising and refining their original predictions.

Developing readers check their understanding by asking themselves questions that direct their use of fix-up strategies. They reread to correct misunderstandings or check their own previous knowledge. As this active process of predicting and revising continues, children begin to reflect on the topic they're reading about, the structure of the text, and the strategies they're using. This leads to further development of literacy.

Elaborating on Strategies and Understanding

As students read and write, they elaborate on what and how they read. About the roller coaster passage, for example, they might say to themselves: Hey, I get this because it's like the octopus ride at the fair. They make associations between what they already know and the new information in the passage — and these new associations become part of what they know.

Just as weather forecasters encounter new phenomena and identify their particular patterns, readers, too, identify patterns as they read. When they see a particular pattern for a second or third time, both readers and weather forecasters describe this pattern so they can recognize it quickly in subsequent experiences.

As readers augment their knowledge of a topic or strategy, they think about how the new knowledge jibes with what they already know and do. Thus, by engaging in literacy activities, readers learn to connect patterns in text with their own knowledge. When these patterns are encountered frequently, they are refined and integrated into what readers already know. In subsequent literacy experiences, they use this information or strategy more readily because it has become familiar. In this way, frequent reading and writing become tools for connecting what students know and do, helping to build a network of information sources and decoding strategies.

Situating Literacy

Readers are constantly expanding their repertoire of strategies for dealing with text. As they do so, they think about the situation in which the literacy event occurred, another characteristic of active literacy. The social aspects of literacy influence developing readers' attitudes, their definition of literacy, and the strategies they use. For example, a young child listening to a parent read a story is involved in a social experience that transfers meaning to printed language. The parent conveys meaning by reading with expression and emotion. As the parent and child talk about the words on the page, they create a social interaction that affects the child's perceptions of literacy.

These same interactions continue into the culture of the school. In fact, school has become a culture of its own. Like par-
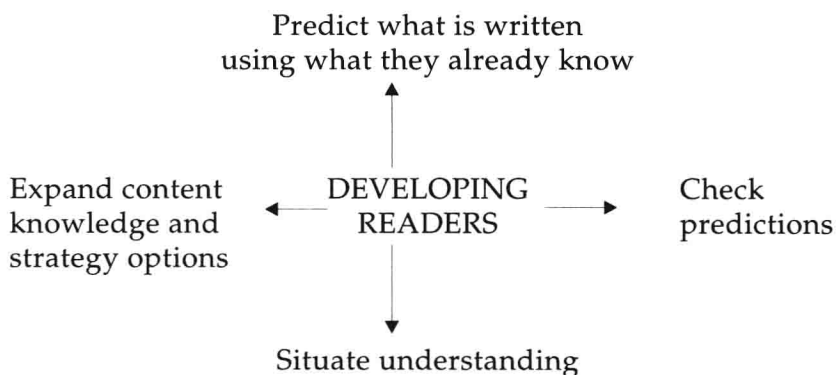
ents, teachers are an integral part of the literacy context, orchestrating it and negotiating meaning among class members. For example, one struggling eight-year-old asked her teacher, "When do I get out of the group with all the boys?" Her membership in this group of readers experiencing difficulty was limiting her reading development, as well as that of the boys. This anecdote illustrates that the circumstances in which reading occurs can influence developing readers' purposes and their perspectives on literacy events.

Another example involves a young student in a foods class. She became involved in writing a report on lime. However, she forgot to check the context and wrote an extensive report on lime, the stone. The next day, she walked into the foods class, assessed the context, and realized that the report should have been on lime, the fruit.

Readers constantly use their knowledge of the situation to select both the strategies and the information they use. Thus, circumstances affect what developing readers perceive as important, how sources are combined, what is elaborated on and how strategies are selected, as well as their perceptions about the literacy event.

The Reading Process

This model shows how the previously discussed aspects of the reading process interact continuously as developing readers construct meaning.

Predict what is written
using what they already know
↑

Expand content   DEVELOPING   Check
knowledge and   ←   READERS   →   predictions
strategy options
                             ↓
Situate understanding

Developing readers predict what the text will say by linking sources of information (previous knowledge and the text) and checking — and revising when necessary — their predictions and interpretations. As they read, they add to their knowledge of the topic and elaborate on the strategies they use. Within each literacy event, knowledge is reconstructed as the learner reflects on how a particular context affected his interpretation. As students read and write, resolving ambiguities in a variety of literacy contexts, they refine and generalize their knowledge and strategies. As a result, these are constantly evolving.

Summary

An interactive view of reading involves four important principles:

- Developing readers use many sources of information to predict what a text will say.
- Developing readers automatically monitor their interpretation of a text by checking their predictions against the text to figure out what makes sense.
- Developing readers expand their content knowledge and strategy options by embedding new information and strategies within existing knowledge.
- Developing readers select strategies and expand their knowledge of a topic depending on the situation — academic, recreational, etc. — they encounter.

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REASONS

FOR READING DIFFICULTY

All readers use what they can already do to work out difficulties they encounter as they read and write. When a task calls for them to use strategies that are unfamiliar or that they can't perform, they avoid these. Instead, they fall back on what they can already do. For this reason, readers who are continually placed in situations where learning is difficult develop inappropriate compensatory strategies. Rather than double-checking the text, for example, some will guess wildly at words, using what they think the text might say and sometimes actually creating a new story. Others, who are unfamiliar with a topic, will read strings of words, hoping to find something that makes sense. They don't check their own knowledge to look for ways to connect what they're reading to what they already know. Their use of these inappropriate alternative strategies often causes parents and teachers to view these students as less able to engage in literacy activities.

Believing these students to be less capable, teachers often reduce the quantity and quality of instruction, increasing the likelihood that they will be placed in learning situations where they'll develop inappropriate compensatory strategies. And so the cycle continues.

When students repeatedly find themselves in situations where their natural sense-making strategies are at odds with the instruction they receive, they begin to rely solely on inappropriate alternative strategies to construct meaning. This reliance hinders their literacy development and their reading becomes unproductive. For example, beginning readers who rely on their personal knowledge rather than textual clues may be

fairly successful — at first. Eventually, however, they'll find themselves in situations where they must make predictions using their personal knowledge, then check their predictions against words in the text. If they're inattentive and randomly select letters when doing this checking, they'll find that the strategy doesn't work. As a result, they will abandon it in favor of relying on their personal knowledge and, perhaps, the clues they get from pictures. In other words, they will shift away from a particular information source rather than integrating and linking it with other sources. This will prevent them from developing more flexible strategies.

As indicated by this example, the interactive model of reading can set up a framework for studying reading difficulty. Reading difficulty develops when students frequently rely on a single source of information rather than linking sources, repeatedly read difficult passages that restrict the growth of knowledge and strategies, read without checking meaning, a practice that results in the development of limited rather than flexible strategies, and expect literacy activities to result in failure. Thus, reading difficulty is not a static characteristic that lies solely within the student; rather, it is influenced by a variety of factors that interact during each literacy event.

Difficulty Linking Sources of Information

At the onset of literacy, children learn to link sources of information. Often, however, struggling readers exhibit a deficiency in either a skill, such as sight-word knowledge, or an ability, such as sound blending, that causes them to shift away from an information source.

In an essay in the *Handbook of Reading Research*, Richard Allington says, "Poor beginning readers ... seem to rely on one available source of information rather than integrating all available cues." These readers experience difficulty because they don't link sources of information. For example, readers who have difficulty with sound blending may try to decode an unfamiliar word by relying on what they know about the picture rather than sounding out the letters . When the topic is familiar, this strategy may be productive. When these readers confront unfamiliar topics and avoid looking at the text to sound out a few letters in the word, however, their interpreta-