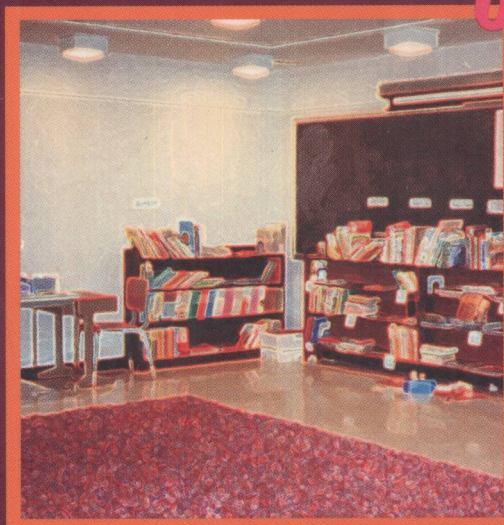


Variability



*Struggling
Readers in a
Workshop
Classroom*

Not Disability

Cathy M. Roller

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Not Variability Disability

Struggling Readers
in a Workshop Classroom

Cathy M. Roller

University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa



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Foreword

VARIABILITY NOT *Disability: Struggling Readers in a Workshop Classroom* is about enabling reading growth and ability, the ultimate goal of reading diagnosis, reading clinics, and all reading teachers. Numerous books detail how to identify disabled readers, choose and interpret tests, select instruction and materials, write reports, and so forth, yet few of them mark out a practical, day-to-day instructional framework for working with struggling readers. Here is one that does just that. In your hands is a most sensible and clear guide to helping these readers become independent. As one reading teacher to another, this book is a find and a boon.

Historically, the focus of remediation has been one of separating out and starting over. A reading specialist's job is seen as searching out children who fail and re-instructing—repeating particularly those easily identified bits and pieces of reading, the “skills.” Remedial clinics also habitually lag behind any changes made in the rest of reading practice. The majority of our reading fellowship may progress in thought and action, but remedial instruction remains static. With some wonderful exceptions, reading clinics are the most conservative element in the reading community. Curiously, in being so, conservative clinics rely on exactly what research says not to: focus on behavior, rules, and rote repetition. The attitudes, interests, and personal learning timeframes of struggling readers are not taken into consideration, nor are their surrounding family influences. Readers' understanding of their own process and progress is ignored. And the children, the struggling readers for whom good instruction can make the most difference, become less able. Rather than accepting this deficit model we are so accustomed to, Roller provides us with a fresh way of thinking. Her approach to remedial instruction focuses on seeking out, reinforcing,

and building on the capability of struggling readers. She asks us to look for what they *can* do instead of what they can't.

At the same time that we depend on an insufficient model to instruct struggling readers, the economic reality is that more children are being labeled as special learners and less money for separate instruction from specialized teachers is available. The diagnosis and instruction of struggling readers is now being left on the insufficiently prepared shoulders of classroom teachers. In her book, Roller adapts the reading and writing workshop approach practiced in many classrooms and makes it usable for any teacher of struggling readers, whether in clinic or classroom.

Written from the insights of her own clinic experiences and the conviction that struggling readers are like all other readers, Roller convinces us that, given the appropriate context, struggling readers are just as capable of seeking the knowledge and making the connections needed to solve the puzzle of reading as their more proficient classmates. Based on a teaching approach that honors children's ability, competence, and intellect, this method frees them to become self-motivating, self-directing, and thus, independent readers. It recognizes that struggling readers are not "dis"-anything, that they are as able as any other. It challenges each one of us to make the conceptualization of our classrooms and clinics more genuine and our instruction more realistic.

Mary Dayton Sakari
University of Victoria, British Columbia



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I also thank my colleagues at Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Clinic. I mention three by name because over the years they have taken care of the nuts and bolts of SRP—Robert Schum, Penelope Hall, and Kathy Miller. Penny has served in many roles at SRP including most recently as director. In every role she has been supportive. Kathy has kept track of the details and persisted with reminders until I came through. Bob, as the director and staff psychologist, has performed many roles, not the least of which is a supporter through some difficult moments. I am indebted, too, to all the graduate and undergraduate students who have worked with me in various capacities. I couldn't possibly mention them all, but as they know, it took the dedication of every one of them to make SRP happen.

I also thank the University of Iowa for its continuing support. SRP will celebrate its 50th anniversary this summer, and it has had critical institutional support through all those years. Also I must thank the University for supporting my research program in various ways. The FINE Foundation of Iowa funded the transcription of many of the examples in the book as parts of research grants; the transcription has been essential to my learning over the years.

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Introduction

READING DISABLED, learning disabled, dyslexic, mildly mentally disabled, communication disordered—the labels abound. Are so many of our children disabled? Why do we see disability rather than ability? Do we have narrow conceptions of “normal” literacy development? Is disabling instruction at fault? This book is the story of a summer reading program and the children it serves. In alternate summers I am responsible for the program, and I teach the children in the morning class. The children, viewed through the schooling system lens, are all “reading disabled.” They range in age from 8 to 12 years and in reading ability from recognizing fewer than 15 words to reading at a late second or early third grade level. Some of the children are as many as five years behind “normal” reading development, whereas others are only two or three. Because the summer reading program classroom is not bound by school time schedules and the need to place children in grade-level classrooms, we emphasize children’s abilities. We assume they can do many things, including learn to read, and we reject the labels—hence the term “struggling.”

The summer reading program classroom is part of the longstanding University of Iowa Speech, Hearing, & Reading Clinic’s Summer Residential Program, so we refer to it as SRP. Each summer between 20 and 30 children are in residence. Some have difficulties with speech, some with hearing, and usually half or more have reading difficulties. The children come to us via many routes: parents, teachers, school psychologists, grandparents, social services, and other university clinics refer the children to SRP. We select children from among those referred using an all-day screening process in the preceding spring. Usually between one-third and one-half of the children selected have participated in SRP the summer before. Most of the children participate for two or three summers.

The children live in groups of three to five with childcare workers in a dormitory. A licensed psychologist supervises the dormitory program. For the children, participating in the dorm program is like being at camp. The dorm staff is responsible for seeing to the physical and emotional well-being of the children. They also help the children with the social aspects of their various difficulties.

The children who participate primarily for reading attend class in the morning. In the afternoon, they have a small-group session to practice reading and writing, and they have an individual tutoring session. The individual tutors are graduate and undergraduate students in reading specialist or special education certification or endorsement programs.

SRP is the University of Iowa's primary practicum site for reading specialists. Since 1988 the underlying philosophy guiding all the reading instruction has been a "workshop" philosophy. (I will elaborate this in Chapter Three.) The reading program at SRP operates with a director (the faculty member in charge—in odd years Linda Fielding and in even years me), graduate assistants who supervise the individual tutoring sessions under the faculty member's direction and serve as classroom aides or small-group instructors, and administrative assistants.

For each child in SRP at least four reports are filed: a screening report, a dorm report, a classroom report, and a report of the individual tutoring sessions. The screening report summarizes previous records supplied to the clinic, presents the results of screening testing and interviews, and makes recommendations for the summer tutoring program. The other reports summarize the child's summer experience and make recommendations for future programming in the home and school settings. The reports are sent to parents and to any individuals or entities (such as the school) that parents request. In addition to these formal records, we also keep daily instructional records of individual, small-group, and classroom instruction.

At SRP all of us regularly study our practice. We observe tutoring sessions systematically, and students, visitors, and other staff are in and out of the morning classroom routinely. We require the graduate students to tape-record and listen to every individual tutoring session. We also have them transcribe portions of lessons regularly. I too tape-record and listen to myself and transcribe portions of my lessons. The examples used in this book are drawn from those tapes and other records of instruction from 1988 through 1994.

We learn a lot by studying ourselves—from both our successes and our failures. After seven years of running SRP with a workshop philosophy, we are hopeful about the potential that workshops offer for struggling readers. Al-

though workshops are growing in popularity, their advantages for struggling readers are often overlooked. Many times, even when most literacy instruction is delivered in workshops, struggling readers are excluded from them. In this book, I want to share some of what we have learned about struggling readers in workshop classrooms.

Chapter One



Variable Children Need Variable Instruction

MY CLASSROOM is a workshop classroom. Workshop classrooms were developed first for writing instruction by Graves (1983). Hansen's book *When Writers Read* (1987) extended the concept to reading instruction. In both cases they were developed in "regular" classrooms for "regular" children; they were not designed as a special education service. I chose the workshop format because I believed the struggling readers I work with could learn in this "regular" setting. (I will explain my reasons in detail in Chapter Three.)

A workshop classroom operates a little like an art studio. After a short demonstration, students paint as their teacher circulates among them to help. The students learn to paint as they paint. In reading and writing workshops students learn to read and write as they read and write. This independent reading and writing is one essential feature of a workshop classroom. A second critical feature is choice. In workshops children choose the topics they write about and the books they read. In this way workshops take advantage of children's internal motivation and harness it for literacy learning. (I will talk more about choice throughout the book, but Chapter Four will treat it in depth.)

When observers enter a workshop classroom they are often confused because they see children scattered around the room doing a variety of different activities. The scene is quite different than classroom scenes of traditional literacy instruction, where most often there is a small group working with the teacher and the other children are sitting at desks working on assignments. A typical scene in my summer reading program (SRP) workshop classroom may look like this. Karen and I sit on the floor while she reads a new favorite book to

me. Patrick squats beside us temporarily to listen to the story. He often browses through books about space and is quite proud of a piece he has written about the battleship U.S.S. *Iowa*. Randy stretches out on the rug in the center of the room and fills in his record form with the titles of a stack of books. He is proud of the many Story Box Series books he has read. Peter and Bobby meander along the bookshelves looking for some books that they can actually read and understand—books that are “just right” for them.

Later I join Andy and Jason at the desks by the windows as they wonder whether the plane in their book is a jet. They formed a close friendship during the summer and coauthored many science fiction books. As we talk several other children join us. One of them explains to me what a biplane is, and we decide that the plane is a propeller plane, not a jet. Peter and Bobby continue to meander along the bookshelves, and I worry that they are never going to find those “just right” books.

Several children choose to work alone all morning. Susan struggles trying to read a book about sharks that is quite difficult for her. But later in the summer, she shows us a shark book she compiled through her research. Mary reads about kangaroos; she is fascinated with marsupial reproduction and later shares the fact that baby kangaroos are called “Joeys” and that they have to crawl into the mother kangaroo’s pouch. I decide to suggest several titles to Bobby. He’s not happy with my choices nor with the fact that I am trying to choose for him. Peter is laboriously copying a section of his favorite book. I worry about this because I am fairly certain he cannot read what he is copying. Erin reads and rereads *Fortunately* by Remy Charlip. Later she will explain how practicing made this a “just right” book for her. Jimmy, Sammy, and Wes are each tucked into a corner and reading quietly. Now Karen moves over to Holly, and they work on a joint reading of Audrey Wood’s *King Bidgood’s in the Bathtub*, which they plan to share with the class later. Jamie works hard trying to read a James Marshall book. I’m concerned because I think it is probably too hard for him.

For the most part the children are engaged in their tasks. Throughout the morning, groups coalesce, break up, and form again. Single children stake out claims to the editing table or camp out under the supply table, areas of the classroom that will be explained in the next chapter. Others gather in small groups at student desks along the windows. I wander among them; talking with one child, then another. Sometimes I stop by a small group; at other times I read with a child or two. As often as not I sit on the rug in the center of the room for these conversations. I carry a spiral notebook and jot notes about the children’s activities as I go.