

Reading & Writing Sourcebook

R e s e a r c h B a s e

Struggling Readers

For many children, learning to read seems to happen almost by magic. For those who struggle with reading, progress seems painful and slow—sometimes almost impossible. Struggling readers can lose self-esteem rapidly. They may begin to avoid the difficult tasks of literacy, appearing unmotivated and even resistant to teachers' efforts to help them. However, struggling readers can be helped. With a good reading program and patient, caring teachers, all children can improve their reading skills. The *Sourcebooks* are one resource for achieving this goal.

Four factors place a child at risk for reading and academic failure: family poverty, parental educational level, gender, and perceived immaturity (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). By the third grade, when most students have become fluent in their reading, struggling or delayed readers are not fluent. Such readers still read slowly, cannot decode individual words, try to sound out phonetically irregular words, guess at words based on the beginning sound, do not remember a word the second or third time it appears in the passage, do not syllabicate words, point at words as they read, repeat words and phrases, read without expression, read word by word, ignore punctuation, and do not understand or recall what they have read (Tompkins, 2001). Researchers have also found that less capable readers, unlike their more capable peers, view reading as a decoding—rather than a comprehending—process; do not adjust their reading speed or purpose to their reading task; fail to connect what they are reading to their prior knowledge; do not use fix-up strategies effectively; do not identify words as effectively, whether in context or isolation; fail to monitor their comprehension; and have low expectations for success (Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991).

In adolescence, reading motivation declines in virtually all students, as social and other concerns take precedence. At the same time, the tasks of literacy become more complex (Vacca, 1998). Thus struggling adolescent readers are triply disadvantaged. Kos (1991) reports four factors that prevent struggling readers from making progress in adolescence: an inability to use reading strategies effectively, perception of reading instruction, stress associated with reading, and individual educational histories.

Children who are identified as delayed readers in kindergarten or the first grade generally struggle with reading throughout their educational career (Mueller, 2001). Often, such children are viewed as needing slowed-down, more concrete instruction. However, as Allington and Walmsley (1995) point out, slowing down instruction ensures that delayed readers will always remain behind their peers. At the middle and high school level, such readers are often enrolled in special classes or programs in

which they must complete skill lessons in workbooks or on worksheets (Allen, 1995). In effect, they continue to receive more of the same type of instruction that had been unsuccessful in elementary school.

Because the factors that predispose students to reading difficulties, such as poverty and previous school failure, are beyond a teacher's control, teachers can easily feel that their efforts to help these readers are futile. However, Snow (1991) has shown that it is not. In her book, *Unfulfilled Expectations*, she reports that two or more years of "high-support" classroom literacy instruction can counterbalance the effects of low-literacy home support and result in success for all. "Consistently high-quality classroom instruction," conclude Cunningham and Allington (1999), has an "enormous impact."

Several educational approaches for struggling readers have been advocated. Ruddell's principles for meeting the needs of delayed readers include matching the text level to the student's reading level, providing instruction in automatic word recognition and word identification strategies, being aware that content area reading is especially difficult for delayed readers, and fostering motivation (2002). Cunningham and Allington (1999) emphasize the importance of authentic purposes for reading and writing, reading and writing across the curriculum, a variety of literacy experiences, guided reading and writing, and lessons that teach essential reading strategies. For teaching struggling adolescent readers, Wilhelm emphasizes reading response, especially through art and drama (1997).

Recently the National Reading Panel, after a rigorous review of the best available educational research, concluded that seven types of instruction can improve reader comprehension: comprehension monitoring; cooperative learning, in which students learn strategies together; the use of graphic and semantic organizers; question answering; question generating; story structure; and summarization (National Reading Panel, 2000). The Panel also reiterated the importance of vocabulary knowledge in the development of reading ability (National Reading Panel, 2000). The U.S. Department of Education, in its summary of evidence-based reading instruction essential to the *No Child Left Behind* initiative, also emphasized the importance of systematic and explicit instruction in comprehension and literature appreciation; exposure to a variety of texts; vocabulary instruction that stresses the relationships among word, word structure, origin, and meaning; instruction in comprehension strategies, such as predicting, summarizing, clarifying, questioning, and visualizing; and frequent writing opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

In response to the most current educational research and legislation, the *Sourcebooks* provide an integrated, literature-based approach to supporting readers. The short, leveled passages in the *Sourcebooks* have been selected from a variety of texts. Vocabulary development is promoted through interactive lessons on word meanings and word structure. Also integral to the *Sourcebook* approach is student response to the reading selections, primarily in written form. The *Sourcebooks* are comprehensive, structured, and strategy intensive, taking students through each phase of the reading and responding process, enabling students to experience success as they proceed. Because writing is integrated into each reading lesson, students have the opportunity to build a range of literacy skills and become active, thoughtful readers.

Educators have long recognized the value of providing texts from a variety of genres and topics to promote interest and ability in reading (e.g., Morrow, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The reading selections in the *Sourcebooks* are taken from quality literature and represent a broad range of genres, including fiction, poetry, personal narrative, and expository forms of writing. The range of topics is also wide, including history and social studies, the sciences, and literature involving contemporary issues. Such variety of genres and topics is important to reaching struggling readers, who benefit from experiences with both expository and narrative text structures (e.g., Cheek, Flippo, & Lindsey, 1997; Cooper, 2000; Gordon & Braun, 1983) as well as exposure to different types of knowledge. Such variety also motivates students to read and is especially important for reaching students from different backgrounds (Morrow, 2001).

After reading a selection in the *Sourcebooks*, students are asked to write a response. This response requirement, built into each *Sourcebook* lesson, is an essential part of supporting struggling readers: Reader response activities enhance students' motivation to read as well as their ability to comprehend (Ruddell, 2002). The repeated opportunity to respond personally to a piece of literature forms good reading habits. Knowing that a personal response is expected from them, students must read actively—making connections, questioning, and monitoring their understanding.

Because comprehending a text, or constructing meaning, relies on the reader's prior knowledge, each reader's meaning construction is individual and personal (Rosenblatt, 1978). Students given the chance to construct their own meanings, as in the *Sourcebooks*, learn to take responsibility for their own comprehension process. Reading is no longer a passive activity, in which the student's eyes sweep over words and then the student sits and waits to hear what the teacher says is important in the text. With reader response activities, reading becomes an active process, requiring each student to search for the textual information and clues that he or she needs to construct an understanding of what the author is saying.

In the *Sourcebooks*, many of the reading selections are organized by themes that are of interest to today's students, such as families, violence, becoming champions, scientific mysteries, and finding an identity. Organizing readings under such themes enhances student interest. It also provides the opportunity for the development of language (i.e., vocabulary related to the theme) and concepts (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 2002). The use of themes in the *Sourcebooks* offers more meaningful, authentic reading and writing experiences to struggling readers.

The Reading and Writing Process

The *Sourcebooks* feature five-part lesson plans that integrate reading and writing. This approach helps struggling students see how the two processes work together. The basic lesson structure is repeated and consistent, so that students can gradually internalize the steps in the process. The steps are:

1. Before you read (prereading)
2. Read (active reading and responding to the selection)
3. Gather your thoughts (prewriting)
4. Write (writing, revising, grammar, usage, and mechanics)
5. Wrap-up (reflecting and self-assessment)

Each step introduces strategies that students can practice in their *Sourcebooks*. Prereading strategies are given to build motivation and background. To promote active reading, each *Sourcebook* provides interactive reading strategies, called “response strategies,” for students to practice during reading. In addition, each *Sourcebook* contains several comprehension strategies, embedded in the reading selection, to show students which strategies to use and when.

The *Sourcebooks*, then, promote a strategic approach to reading. This approach is advocated by a large body of research, which clearly shows that successful readers use a variety of strategies to understand text (Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992; National Reading Panel, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Struggling readers either lack a knowledge of or ability to use these strategies, not quite understanding when or how to apply them (Vacca & Vacca, 2002). However, these strategies can be taught to struggling readers, and reading comprehension can be improved (e.g., National Reading Panel, 2000; Pressley, 2000). The *Sourcebooks* introduce, demonstrate, and require students to practice the essential comprehension strategies.

In addition, the *Sourcebooks* integrate reading and writing. Developing reading and writing together fosters communication, enhances critical thinking ability, and improves achievement (Dahl & Farnan, 1998; Pearson & Tierney, 1984; Shanahan, 1990; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). Successful reading and successful writing require similar strategies (such as determining purpose, monitoring, repairing, and so on) and thus reinforce one another (Lewin, 1992). Furthermore, when reading and writing experiences are integrated across the curriculum, students learn more content as they improve their literacy abilities (Gavelek, Raphael, Biondo, & Wang, 2000; Guthrie & McCann, 1997; Morrow, Pressley, Smith, & Smith, 1997).

Writing is also one of the major modes of reader response, which supports students’ construction of meaning (Cooper, 2000). Writing or journaling in response to a reading provides students with the

opportunity to construct meaning and reinforces comprehension skills (Atwell, 1987; Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Tierney, Readence, & Disgner, 1990). The *Sourcebooks* provide many and varied opportunities for students to write in response to reading. Space is given for taking informal “Response Notes” during reading, for answering specific prompts on the content of the reading selection, and for composing a final, more formal response to the selection.

The *Sourcebooks* also include a step for revising the final composition. This step focuses students’ attention on correct grammar, usage, and mechanics. Learning how to revise your own writing is an essential part of becoming a skillful writer (Lane, 1993). Gaining control over the conventions of writing—grammar, spelling, punctuation, and correct usage—is an important part of revision. Virtually all authorities on writing today emphasize the importance of learning these conventions in the context of authentic writing experiences (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994; Spandel, 2001; Weaver, 1997). In the *Sourcebooks*, students learn and practice conventions to improve their own compositions, in the context of their own, authentic writing.

In the *Sourcebook* Wrap-Up sections, students are asked to reflect on their reading and writing one last time. The questions ask students to think about their own understanding, how easy they felt the lesson was, what meaning the lesson had for them, whether they liked the style of the selection, whether it prompted them to think deeply, and whether they enjoyed the lesson. Reflective questions such as these promote a feeling of ownership of and engagement with the reading and writing accomplished (Cooper, 2000).

Reading and Writing Strategies

Each part of the *Sourcebook* lesson introduces and reinforces strategies to support students’ reading and writing. The strategies used in the *Sourcebooks* are based in research and have been advocated by researchers, teacher educators, and classroom teachers (National Reading Panel, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

The strategies introduced in Part I, “Before You Read,” include think-pair-and-share, a cooperative teaching approach developed by McTighe and Lyman (1988); KWL, the widely used graphic organizer that asks students to list what they know and what they want to know before reading, then to record what they learned after reading (Ogle, 1986, 1989); and the anticipation guide, a list of true or false statements about the reading selection designed to stimulate interest and provide prior knowledge (Head & Readence, 1986; Tompkins, 2001). The prereading strategies in Part I emphasize previewing the selection, which is known to help struggling readers become more strategic (Heilman, Blair, Rupley, 2002; Paris, Lipson, & Wilson, 1994). Skimming, an important part of previewing (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984), is included. Another activity is “picture walks,” in which students develop a general idea of what the reading is about by looking at any pictures, illustrations, and

graphics before reading. This strategy, which sparks interest and activates prior knowledge, has been used with struggling readers as well as in regular classrooms (Clay, 1985; Hiebert & Taylor, 1994). In quickwrites, also known as freewriting (Elbow, 1973), students jot down what they know about a topic, making connections and free associating, without having to worry about getting all their spelling and grammar correct. This activity activates students' prior knowledge and provides risk-free writing practice.

The interactive reading strategies in Part II, "Read," include marking and highlighting to promote interaction with the text; predicting, an important strategy used by expert readers and recommended especially for struggling readers (Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992; Dana, 1989); and questioning, which "propels readers forward" (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), promotes engagement with the text, and improves meaning construction (Davey & McBride, 1986; Singer & Donlan, 1982). Another important interactive reading strategy is clarifying, or the process of checking and double-checking the hypotheses formed during reading (Rosenshine & Meister, 1994). Visualizing, the act of picturing what is read, is also an important strategy, which struggling readers often lack (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Wilhelm, 1997). Another important interactive strategy is connecting the current reading to personal experience, other texts, and other subjects, which promotes interest and strengthens meaning construction (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994).

Part II, "Read," also introduces and provides practice with several important comprehension strategies. In the directed reading strategy, students are asked to "stop and think" periodically during their reading to check their comprehension. Directed reading and other similar strategies, such as the directed reading-thinking activity (Stauffer, 1975), have long been used to scaffold struggling readers (Harris & Sipay, 1985). In reciprocal reading, students share the process of reading and responding to a text (Rosenshine & Meister, 1994). The questions included in the *Sourcebook* lessons ask students to clarify, make predictions, question, and summarize what the author has said. Students are also periodically asked to stop and predict what they think will happen next, a strategy that builds motivation, engagement, and hypothesis-checking, which leads to comprehension monitoring (Cooper, 2000). Retelling or summarizing a part of the selection just read, also included in the *Sourcebooks*, not only helps students build the habit of monitoring comprehension but also aids in their language development (Cooper, 2000; Morrow, 2001; Tompkins, 1998).

Students are also asked to use a variety of graphic organizers while they read to help them distinguish between important and unimportant information and organize the important information in a reading (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Smith & Tompkins, 1988). For example, the story frame is a graphic organizer in which students record key information from a fictional selection, including the time and place of the story, the main character, and the central problem. In double-entry journaling, another tool that promotes engagement with and comprehension of the reading, students record quotations or information from the selection on one side of the page and their responses to that text on the other side (Berthoff, 1981).

In Part III, “Gather Your Thoughts,” several prewriting strategies are given to scaffold struggling students’ writing. Brainstorming, quickwriting, and drawing are all useful tools for students to access their thoughts before writing (Lane, 1993). The *Sourcebooks* also include graphic organizers in the prewriting stage, such as storyboards, character maps, and main idea and supporting detail organizers, which focus students’ attention on the most important aspects of texts and help students organize their thoughts (Cooper, 2000).

In Part IV, “Write,” students are reminded that composition is not a one-step process. Students are taken through several steps, such as narrowing the topic, forming an opinion, drafting, revising at least one time, and sharing their work. In the *Sourcebooks*, students engage in several small writing tasks to learn that writing involves a series of steps and tasks. Students work on composing paragraphs, letters, summaries, character sketches, dialogues, descriptive and expository paragraphs, all of which play a role in students’ growth as writers as well as readers (Harvey, 1998; Lane, 1993; Tompkins, 2000).

In Part V of the *Sourcebook* lesson, “Wrap Up,” students reflect on the strategies they found personally valuable for prereading, reading, prewriting, and writing. The “Reflective Assessment” task asks students to reflect on and think critically about the literacy lesson. This builds metacognitive awareness and ability, which are essential to skillful reading and writing (Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992).

Vocabulary Development

Another key feature of the *Sourcebooks* is the integration of vocabulary into each lesson. Vocabulary knowledge has been clearly and strongly associated with reading comprehension (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Davis, 1971). Extensive research (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 1991) suggests that children acquire vocabulary understanding in different ways. One important way is through wide reading (Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1986; Nagy & Herman, 1987). Other researchers (e.g., Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984; Sternberg, 1987) have shown that students learn new word meanings from context but need instruction on how to use context effectively. Dictionary skills are also important (Schatz & Baldwin, 1986). Finally, several researchers have shown that students can benefit from direct vocabulary instruction (Beck, McKeown, & Omanson, 1987; Graves, 1987; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986).

In their review of current literature on vocabulary development, the National Reading Panel identified several specific implications for instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). The Panel emphasized the need for both direct and indirect instruction and for repetition and multiple exposures to new words. Factors that enhance vocabulary development include learning in print-rich contexts and incidental learning. Direct instruction should actively engage all students. In addition, multiple methods of vocabulary instruction are needed for optimal learning (National Reading Panel, 2000).

The *Sourcebooks* incorporate current thinking on vocabulary development. In each lesson, uncommon words are identified and defined. Five words to work on and remember are featured in each lesson, with activities focused on these words. Consistent with research, specific word skills are taught throughout the *Sourcebooks*. For younger children, these skills include understanding contractions; prefixes, suffixes, and base words; homophones and homographs; reading new words by analogy; and adding suffixes to words that end in silent “e” and to words with one syllable. Word study for students in the upper grades includes understanding context clues; synonyms and antonyms; word analysis; idioms; Latin roots; and etymologies. The *Sourcebook Teacher’s Guides* are designed to help teachers support struggling readers’ knowledge of word meanings and word structure, which will ultimately improve students’ reading comprehension.

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