

CHAPTER 1

Instruction and Interventions

DEFINING OUR TERMS

This book describes how to design and implement meaning-based interventions for struggling readers (mild, moderate, and severe). So, let us first define two important terms: (1) a *reading intervention* and (2) a *meaning-based reading intervention*.

A Reading Intervention

A reading intervention is a focused instructional plan that supplements existing reading instruction (Allington, 2012; Wharton-McDonald, 2011). Like any type of intervention, reading interventions are designed to be used for short durations. In other words, an effective reading intervention should enhance students' current reading levels such that the reading intervention is no longer needed. That is the goal. For some students, the duration of the reading intervention could be a matter of weeks. Other students (students with severe reading difficulties) may need a bit longer.

Again, a reading intervention should supplement effective research-based reading instruction taking place in a general education setting. In other words, it should not be substantially different. When an intervention or remedial program is different from classroom instruction, it creates a splintered curriculum. Here struggling readers are presented with different types of instruction and learn different sorts of skills in different places throughout the day. This makes it harder for them to develop their reading skills, not easier.

Imagine if you were a struggling tennis player and you were sent first to one instructor who did a set of drills and asked you to swing the racquet a certain way

in the morning, and then to a different instructor who did different sets of drills and asked you to swing the racquet a different way in the afternoon. This would make it difficult to develop your tennis skills. Yet, this is what occurs with struggling readers when interventions and remediation provided outside the classroom look substantially different from good classroom instruction. Struggling readers need consistency in order to reinforce developing skills.

A Meaning-Based Reading Intervention

A meaning-based intervention is a reading intervention that seeks to keep the language used in literacy learning whole, complete, and meaningful. That is, it seeks to minimize those instances where students are asked to focus on individual words or letter parts in isolation. Instead, phonics and other reading subskills are taught within the context of meaningful sentences or whole connected text to the greatest extent possible. So instead of asking students to master a series of reading subskills (like sounding out words), a meaning-based intervention asks students to create meaning with print. The specific elements of what you might include in a meaning-based intervention will become clear as you read the chapters that follow.

DAILY READING INSTRUCTION

As mentioned above, an effective reading intervention is based on effective reading instruction. There are seven basic elements necessary for effective daily reading instruction. Although not every element need be included every day, most elements should be included most days. The frequency and duration of each would be determined by the age and ability of the students with whom you work. Good teaching is not an algorithm or a recipe to follow. Rather, good teaching is watching your students and responding to their needs.

Daily Reading Practice

All students at all levels need practice reading books that they have selected. Like any skill, one needs to practice in order to improve. Would you expect to learn to play the piano if you never practiced? Could you learn to play the piano if you did not have good music to play? Could you learn to play the piano if all the music given to you was too hard? So it is with reading.

Reading widely is one of the best methods that will enhance students' comprehension, word identification, and fluency skills as well as vocabulary and conceptual knowledge (Allington, 2012; Krashen, 2004). Also, reading practice enables students to practice newly learned skills in authentic reading contexts. Nancy Atwell (1998) recommends that 70–80% of each reading class be used for self-selected

reading practice and 20–30% for skills work. In most classrooms, these percentages are just the opposite. Students are asked to find a book to read only when they finish their “work.” Instead, finding a good book to read should be the main work occurring in reading class.

Thus, instead of reading *class*, it might be more constructive to think of it as reading *practice*. Here students would be provided a variety of good books to read at their independent level or below, as well as lots of time to practice and enjoy reading. In such an approach to reading instruction (known as reading workshop), small bits of targeted skills instruction would be provided based on students’ individual needs and set within a meaningful context to the greatest extent possible.

Social Interaction and Conversation around Good Books

Social interaction enhances high-level thinking and literacy learning. It may involve a variety of activities, including book talks, literature circles, book clubs, book evaluations and critiques, top 10 lists, journal entries and responses, and planned discussions. These experiences need not be long, but they should be planned and purposeful.

Authentic Writing Experiences

An authentic writing experience is one in which students are asked to use writing to describe, express, and share their ideas and experiences. Like social interaction, these writing activities do not need to be long. As you will see in this book, they can also be designed to be used as pre- or postreading activities or to reinforce target letter patterns.

Activities and Instruction to Develop Cueing Systems

As described fully in Chapter 3, the brain uses three cueing systems to recognize words during the act of reading: phonological, semantic, and syntax. The phonological cueing system uses letter sounds and letter patterns to recognize words; the semantic cueing system uses meaning or context to recognize words; and the syntactic cueing system uses grammar and word order to recognize words. Effective reading instruction includes activities to develop all three systems. Formal instruction and activities are generally discontinued when students are reading comfortably at the third-grade level.

Activities and Instruction for Word Identification Strategies

Students use certain strategies to identify words that are in their lexicon but not immediately recognized. There are four basic word identification strategies:

(1) analogy (word families), (2) morphemic awareness (prefix, suffix, affix, root), (3) context clues (semantics), and (4) phonics. All four of these strategies should be included in a reading curriculum. Formal instruction related to word identification is generally discontinued as a word identification strategy when students are reading comfortably at the third-grade level. However, they should be continued as part of vocabulary development.

Comprehension Instruction

Comprehension instruction refers to the specific strategies and skills used to create meaning with narrative and expository text. This is one of the most underinstructed elements in most reading programs (Allington, 2012; Pearson & Cervetti, 2017). Here, study skills are taught for use with expository text. Direct instruction is also used to teach the cognitive operations effective readers use with narrative and expository text.

Activities to Develop Word Knowledge (Vocabulary)

Wide reading is the most efficient and effective way to develop students' vocabulary. However, a variety of pedagogical strategies should also be used to expand the depth and breadth of students' word knowledge (Johnson, 2016b).

EFFECTIVE READING INTERVENTIONS

Interventions for struggling readers should build on the elements described above and include more intense versions of classroom reading instruction, a balanced approach to reading instruction, and expert reading teachers.

More Intense Versions of Classroom Reading Instruction

There is a misconception that struggling readers need some sort of super-secret specialized teaching strategies that only specially certified teachers can use. In reality, struggling readers do not need dramatically different kinds of instruction than other readers do (Wharton-McDonald, 2011). What they need is more intense versions of the kinds of research-based instruction they receive in a general education setting (see above). Intensity here refers to (1) more time, (2) more time on task, (3) more time engaged in authentic literacy activities (reading and writing), and (4) smaller instructional groups (three to seven students) (Allington, 2012). Intense, supplemental instruction (or an intervention) can occur within or outside of a general education classroom setting. This is not to say that there are no differences in

instruction between students with and without reading difficulties; however, these differences are in emphasis and intensity, not in kind.

A Balanced Approach to Reading Instruction

What struggling readers often receive in intervention programs is a steady diet of phonics and low-level reading skills (Allington, 2012). While research has shown that phonics-based instruction can lead to increased scores on phonics-based measures (Fautsch-Patridge, McMaster, & Hupp, 2011; Hill, 2016), too often there is little transfer of these skills to authentic reading conditions (ILA, 2016a; Weaver, 2009). As well, there is little evidence to demonstrate that this kind of instruction has any long-term effect on students' ability to create meaning with print (Allington, 2012; Strauss, 2011b).

This is not to say that phonics instruction is not necessary. Phonics instruction in some form is an important part of an intervention given to many students who are struggling readers; however, it should occur within a meaningful context to the greatest extent possible (Fawcett & Nicolson, 2007; Johnson, 2016b). And it should be part of a balanced literacy program that includes practice reading real books, a focus on higher-order reading skills, and word work that develops all three cueing systems (phonological, semantic, and syntactic).

Expert Reading Teachers

Successful reading intervention is dependent on having teachers who are experts in reading instruction (IRA, 2010; Wixson, Lipson, & Valencia, 2014). Expert reading teachers have knowledge and a broad understanding of the following areas: (1) human learning, (2) the processes used by the brain to create meaning with print, (3) literacy teaching and learning, (4) literacy research, (5) literacy assessment and diagnosis, and (6) literacy pedagogy.

THEY ALREADY KNOW HOW TO READ

I know how to play the piano. I know that the little dots on the page represent individual notes, the places on the piano where I am supposed to plink my fingers, and the duration of each finger plink. The problem is, I am not very good at it. I need some basic instruction and lots of practice.

In the same way, with any type of reading instruction or intervention, you will not be teaching students how to read. (I know this last sentence will be freaking out some of you. Take a deep breath.) Most students already know how to do this. That is, they understand the process. They know that letters stand for sounds, that you

put the letter symbols together to create words, and that these words go together to create ideas. They know that this is what you do when you read. The problem is, they are not very good at it. So, what do you do when you are not very good at something? You practice. Reading practice is necessary for readers to develop the higher-level cognitive processes involved in creating meaning with print (Portes & Salas, 2009). Instruction is necessary but not sufficient for struggling readers. Any reading intervention should also include a goodly amount of reading practice.

THREE BIG IDEAS

The chapters that follow describe specific strategies that might be included in reading interventions for struggling readers. There are three big ideas to take from this chapter:

1. A reading intervention should supplement research-based reading instruction already taking place in a general education setting.
2. Instruction and activities in a reading intervention should occur within a meaningful context to the greatest extent possible.
3. Daily reading instruction should include (a) daily reading practice, (b) social interaction and conversation around books, (c) authentic writing experiences, (d) activities and instruction to develop all three cueing systems, (e) activities and instruction for word identification strategies, (f) comprehension instruction, and (g) activities to develop word knowledge.