Looking Out for Low-Achieving Readers

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A mother shared her concerns about her son: "Nathan said that he is in the Blue Group at school. I was afraid that the Blue Group might be some kind of gang or something, but he said that it is a reading group, one of three, in his classroom. Later, when I talked to his teacher, I learned that the Blue Group is the *low* group."

She wiped her hand across her brow and hair before continuing, "When I asked his teacher why the students were in different groups, she said that by placing the students in smaller groups, she can monitor their individual work and provide them with appropriate materials. She said it's quite common to find elementary classrooms divided into three ability groups for reading instruction."

"I noticed the reading assignments on the chalkboard. Students' names were written on a large red, white, or blue square with their assignments for the day written next to the squares. *Anyone* could walk in and see that Nathan is in the low group."

With a long pause and a loud sigh she continued. "I'm not so sure that I like having *Nathan* in the low group. What does this mean for Nathan?"

To respond to this question, one could look at the numerous articles written about the differences in instruction provided to students in high- and low-ability groups. Authors have repeatedly made the point that students assigned to low groups receive instruction that is not as helpful in developing literacy as the instruction provided to the better readers. For instance, the instruction and instructional materials provided to students in low-ability groups may be characterized as uninteresting, repetitive, routine, slow paced, and unchallenging (Gamoran, 1984; Hallinan, 1987a, 1987b). Further, teachers emphasize decoding with low-achieving students, a practice in sharp contrast with the emphasis placed on comprehension with students in higher groups (Allington, 1983; Barr and Dreeben, 1991; Gambrell, Wilson and Gantt, 1981; Indrisano and Paratore, 1991; Shannon, 1985).

There are great consequences for being assigned to a low group since assigning students to low-ability groups may affect their attentiveness, achievement, motivation, aspirations, and self-esteem (Felmlee and Eder, 1983; Gamoran, 1984; Hallinan, 1987b). Felmlee and Eder (1983) found these consequences become greater over time. Indrisano and Paratore (1991) questioned whether the negative impact on low ability students "was related to ability grouping itself, or to differential instruction." Others have gone as far as to say that low-ability students in within-class ability grouped settings have a greater chance for success than their counterparts in whole-class heterogeneous settings, and most likely in tracked classrooms where students are of similar ability, because the teacher can pay

closer attention to their individual learning requirements (Karweit, 1987; Marliave and Filby, 1985).

This article explores some practical, research based principles for teachers to use in maximizing the learning of low-achieving readers, those students who aren't yet reading at their potential, in the regular classroom.

Increased reading time

Teachers who use ability grouping often provide equal instructional time to all reading groups. However, students in the low groups need more time than do their more successful peers (Allington and Johnston, 1989; Barr and Dreeben, 1991; Karweit, 1987). Struggling readers require more time for two reasons. First, these learners typically require more instructional time for discipline and organizational purposes than their peers in high-ability groups, time that could be used for instruction or reading (Hallinan, 1987a; Indrisano and Paratore, 1991). Second, they need more time to help narrow the gap between them and their higher-achieving peers.

Time alone is not the answer. Low-achieving readers need to use their time in ways that will enhance their literacy development. It is how time is used that makes the difference. Increasing the amount of students' time on task can positively influence reading achievement (Gaskins, 1988; Rosenshine and Stevens, 1984). The amount of engaged time is more crucial for low-achieving readers than their higher-achieving peers because students who are having difficulty in reading need a great deal of concentration for success (Marzano, Hagerty, Valencia, and DiStefano, 1987). Naturally, teachers need to make sure that all students have time available for reading. Increased contextual reading, as opposed to work on isolated skills, allows

students to practice the whole act of reading and contributes to improved reading achievement (Allington, 1983, 1984; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985).

Facilitating cooperative learning

Reading should be a social act. Too often children read in isolation with few opportunities for peer response and feedback. Many teachers have been pleased with the progress their students make in cooperative learning groups. For instance, Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, and Roy (1984) found that the interchange of ideas among students of differing abilities and ethnic backgrounds enriched their learning, and students learned to accommodate themselves to each others' perspectives. Students, including low-achieving readers, not only learn more when they work collaboratively, but they also develop increased self-esteem, better intergroup relationships, a sense of community, and improved attitudes towards learning (Madden, 1988; Slavin, 1987; Slavin, Madden, and Stevens, 1989-90; Stevens, Madden, Slavin, and Farnish, 1987). Some teachers have feared that cooperative learning is less beneficial to the high-achieving students. However, Kagan (1990) emphasizes that research findings clearly indicate that both low-achieving and high-achieving students benefit from cooperative learning, and notes "there is no evidence that [cooperative learning] is a detriment to learning" (p. 3).

Promoting reading as meaning construction

Students may have difficulty with reading because they don't understand what reading is (Smith, 1985). One accepted definition of reading states that reading is the "active process of constructing meaning from text" (Anderson, et al., 1985). Unfortunately, many students are given the idea that reading is decoding and, as a consequence, feel that successful word pronunciation is reading. To them,

meaning is not even a consideration. Instruction for all readers should be meaning centered. Of course students need help in learning to decode words, but decoding instruction should be taught as a vehicle to reading. Teachers must have comprehension as the ultimate goal and end result of all reading instruction (Daines, 1982).

Building self-esteem

Poor readers almost always see themselves as poor readers and have low self-esteem (Athey, 1985). Such students are often fearful and anxious about reading and many avoid reading at all costs. Teachers can foster an improved self-esteem for low-achieving readers. Since self-esteem often improves as a result of improvement in reading (Harris and Sipay, 1990), it is important for teachers to provide students with opportunities for success. Cooper (1992) emphasizes that teachers must adjust instruction ("remediate instruction, not students") to reduce failure and enable all students to learn.

Teachers' comments to students can also influence their self-esteem (Wittrock, 1986). High expectations, less criticism, and frequent praise are more often communicated to more able students than to their low-achieving peers. It is important for teachers to communicate obtainable expectations for all students.

It is possible that teachers can help students' self-esteem by allowing them to choose their own reading materials. Teachers can begin by giving students two choices and eventually allow the students total responsibility in choosing books, magazines, stories, etc. Many teachers find they can help students make better choices by providing mini-lessons on how to choose an appropriate book – one that isn't too hard or too easy, but "just right." Moreover, self-

selection of reading materials motivates students and helps them learn to select materials which suit their interests, needs, and abilities (Hornsby, Sukarna, and Parry, 1988).

Enhancing reading through writing

Gaskins noted that process writing, where writers recursively move through a series of stages as they compose, distinguished effective from ineffective programs for low-achieving readers (1988). Typically, these students write only to fill in blanks on worksheets or sentences about topics their teachers have chosen. Yet all students need to write for meaningful purposes. Teaching the writing process is especially beneficial to low-achieving students since it focuses upon what the students already know (Graves, 1985). Constructing meaning in writing reinforces the construction of meaning in reading.

Allowing students to choose their own topics for writing is an essential element of the writing process. Students are empowered as they write about topics of their own choosing and are able to teach their teachers and fellow students (Graves, 1983, 1985; Hansen and Graves, 1986). While it should be obvious that students can write best about topics they already know about or desire to learn about, it is not uncommon to see teachers assigning topics for student writing (Hansen, 1987).

The writing process takes more time than traditional writing activities since students need time for their ideas to percolate, time for drafting, time for conferencing, time for revising, time for editing, and time for publishing. Each aspect of the process is important. Publishing, for example, makes the effort involved in drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading worthwhile. Students can publish their writing in a number of ways: books, posters, school newspaper

entries, letters, classroom anthologies and magazines, bulletin board displays, etc. (Nathan and Temple, 1990). The author's chair, where students read their own writing to their teacher and classmates from a special chair, is an effective way of sharing student work (Graves and Hansen, 1983). The books read by student-authors are received in the same manner as books written by professional authors, with students commenting on what they liked and asking questions about the author's source of ideas and future writing plans, etc.

Conclusion

Low-achieving readers receive poorer quality instruction than their higher achieving peers. Poor instruction has a negative impact on students who are already adversely affected by low achievement.

Students need equal access to literacy. Teachers can make a difference in the lives of low-achieving readers, as they enable their students to better understand and enjoy reading. They help narrow the gap between good and poor readers. They focus literacy instruction on meaning to give students a clear picture of what reading is – meaning construction. They provide low-achieving readers increased instructional and reading time. They tap from the social nature of reading and set up conditions where students interact with others in cooperative learning groups. They find ways to strengthen low-achieving readers' self-esteem. And, finally they let their students write for many purposes. We believe these changes will help low-achieving readers become better readers and result in enjoyment of reading – and school.

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