

January 2000

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Recommended Citation

Epkey, Brenda; Gaskill, Peggy; Gostomski, Karen; and Smith, Jennifer (2000) "Strategies for Improved Literacy," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol32/iss2/5>

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Strategies for Improved Literacy

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As the United States enters the "knowledge era" of the twenty-first century, literacy programs are facing higher expectations than ever before. The nation has moved out of the information age and into the era in which information has become readily available. A literate person in the twenty-first century has the ability to access this information and apply knowledge gained at a phenomenal rate. In looking at the need for a balanced literacy program, at the questions and challenges facing our nation, and at the research, a model for an effective literacy program begins to emerge.

The need for an effective literacy program in the early elementary grades is strong throughout the United States. The success of an elementary school is judged on the reading proficiency of its students. Therefore, reading is the top priority in elementary education. Early reading achievement is a very reliable predictor of later school success. Too many children today are moving into the middle level grades without control of reading skills and strategies necessary for effective and satisfying uses of literacy. There

is a discrepancy between the reading literacy performance of poor, minority, and non-English-speaking children and that of white, middle class, majority children. An increasingly large number of people in America cannot read as well as they need to for success in life. An increasing number of students are considered learning disabled because of reading difficulties (National Academy Press, 1998). Productive functioning in our society during the knowledge age will require higher levels of literacy than in previous eras, and these higher levels will be required of a larger percentage of the population (Braunger and Lewis, 1998).

The National Reading Council (1998) has stated that the majority of reading problems faced by today's adolescents could have been avoided or resolved in the early years of childhood. In response to this and other similar information, President Clinton issued the "America Reads Challenge," often referred to as "Goals 2000."

The challenge: We must do more to ensure that every child can read well and independently by the end of the third grade. The America Reads

Challenge will accomplish this by marshalling the resources of entire communities – schools and libraries, religious institutions, universities, college students and senior citizens – to work together with teachers and parents to teach our children to read (United States Department of Education, 1998, p. 2).

Michigan has responded to this challenge by America's leader through the development and implementation of the English language arts content standards and working benchmarks outlined in the Michigan Curriculum Framework. It is now up to the teaching profession to examine the fit between reading instruction and the new higher standards for literacy.

Evolution in Literacy and Literacy Responsibility

Today literacy is considered to be an individual's ability to read, write, and speak English and to compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential. Literacy has evolved to suit the increasing demands of our personal, social, economic, and civic lives.

The original definition of literacy was quite different from the understanding of the concept today. The beginning of specific literacy periods can be traced back to the American Revolution. Around the time of the revolution, the need for a literate society was limited. People needed to know how to read and write their names. This period is often referred to as the time of signature literacy (Braunger and Lewis, 1998).

Signature Literacy

Signature literacy was followed by recitation literacy. This type of literacy concentrated on oral recitation of memorized text that was usually religious in nature. Churches and schools with a religious, moral focus took the lead in establishing and fulfilling literacy requirements of the day (Braunger and Lewis, 1998).

The need for today's definition of literacy began to take shape in the early twentieth century. This was a much higher standard of literacy that included the ability to read previously unseen text. The decoding/analytic period of literacy resulted from a need to bring many more people into productive employment and citizenship. The heavy influx of immigrants was a driving force behind this need for higher literacy standards. Educators also began to feel the momentous push toward the teaching of higher systematic lessons that strengthened literacy among the people as a whole. Classrooms placed a high priority on decoding individual words and comprehending the literal text. The same priority has persisted well into the 1980s and, by most accounts, has been successful in teaching this type of literacy (Braunger and Lewis, 1998).

Proficient Literacy

Today, literacy has reached an even higher level. As society has shifted from the "information age" to the "knowledge age" the need for, and use of, literacy has changed. Basic reading abilities are no longer good enough. Literate individuals need to be proficient or, preferably, advanced as the United States enters the critical/translation literacy period of the twenty-first century. Proficiently literate people should be able to extend the ideas of the text by making connections to their own personal experiences and other readings. The advanced literate person is able to construct new understandings by interacting within and across texts, summarizing, analyzing, and evaluating. Advanced literate people can use literacy for creative and critical thinking and for problem-solving. Strategies are consciously applied to texts in order to construct meanings from different perspectives and to understand how their meanings may differ from those of others (Braunger and Lewis, 1998).

This literacy shift to the critical/translation period has forced students, educators, parents, policymakers, and society as a whole to evaluate the effectiveness of reading instruc-

tion within school systems. No longer is the primary responsibility being left to teachers, but rather entire communities need to be accountable for the literacy achievement of all individuals.

This change in beliefs has been a cause for evaluation of school reading programs on a national, state, and local school district level. The "knowledge" period of society has moved literacy programs to a whole new level in the United States. In order to ensure success for children, schools must provide balanced literacy programs that use five interwoven and systematic strategies: reading aloud to children, shared reading, guided reading, paired reading, and independent reading.

Balanced Literacy Programs Strategies

Strategy 1: Reading Aloud to Children

Routman (1994) states that "reading aloud to students is seen as the single most influential factor in young children's success in learning to read" (p. 32). It is the simplest strategy to incorporate into any language program at any ability level, and it is cost effective, requires little planning, and results in few discipline problems.

At least once a day, the teacher reads to the children a story that is above both their independent and guided reading levels (Williams, 1996). This allows the children to hear richer language and more complex language than what they can independently read. This will help them in preparing to read at a higher level. Also, reading aloud should include selections from many genre, both fiction and nonfiction. "By reading to children at school, you can approximate the experience of being read to at home" (Wright Group, 1990, p. 6). Make story time a relaxed, non-threatening time of the day in which the children know that the only purpose is to sit back, listen, and enjoy the story. If a time is set aside for reading only, children will come to understand the importance of reading.

Along with developing good attitudes about reading, the students will learn many things about books and reading during this time. Additionally, the reading strategy of reading aloud improves listening skills; builds vocabulary; aids reading comprehension; exposes children to diverse genres, styles, authors, and cultures; familiarizes them with basic reading conventions; and provides a chance to model fluent reading (Routman, 1994).

Strategy 2: Shared Reading

Shared reading is a "step between reading to children and independent reading by children – the step where children learn to read by reading" (Depree and Iversen, 1994, p. 34). Successful shared reading allows the reader to learn to read gradually, rather than all at once. All children can become independent in reading material that would otherwise be too difficult to read. Shared reading is a "Methodology that allows less-able readers to function as readers" (Depree and Iversen, 1994, p. 34). Shared reading was created in New Zealand to support children who had limited experiences with print prior to school. Holdaway (1979) described shared reading as "The unison situation properly controlled in a lively and meaningful spirit, [which] allows for massive individual practice by every pupil in the teaching context" (p. 129).

The idea behind shared reading is to read a book over and over again on successive days. When researchers began to notice how much children liked to have the same books read again and again, they observed several patterns. "Young children's favorite books are usually highly predictable" (Schieper, 1995, p. 16). Predictability is what makes reading so engaging for children. The books "used for shared reading typically follow predict-

"By reading to children at school, you can approximate the experience of being read to at home."

able patterns: repetition, cumulative sequence, known sequence, and rhythm and rhyme" (p. 16).

Mooney (1990) has suggested that such predictable patterns "do not necessarily, or alone, make a book suitable for beginning readers" (p. 27). Suggested criteria for the selection of material suitable for use in shared reading include "the appeal of the book to the child, the worth of the idea, the appropriateness of the story's shape and structure, the effectiveness of the language, the authenticity of the story, the help illustrations give readers in gaining meaning, and the appropriateness of the book's format" (p. 27).

The shared reading strategy has also been helpful in teaching children who speak English as a second language

To use the strategy of shared reading, first choose a book using the criteria suggested above. While choosing this book, remember that enthusiasm is contagious. Students are more likely to be excited about a book if the reader is excited. Before reading the book to the children, take some time to discuss the cover, the title, and the author. Ask children to make predictions about the story. Give a brief introduction to the story and read it. Some children may join in reading during the predictable parts. During the second reading, which is usually Day 2, ask the children to join in reading whenever they like. During the second and each successive reading, point out things such as directionality, letters and words, high frequency words, illustrations, graphophonic cues, one to one, reading strategies, and extension activities. On subsequent days, continue to share the story and invite the children to read along with you. Finally, if individual copies are available, encourage children to try to read the story independently. Not all shared reading sessions have to follow the same pattern. Vary the approach based on the story and the children's reactions to what is read. Children often have great ideas for extension activities (Schleper, 1995).

In shared reading, children "should feel they will be supported until they become so familiar with the story and how it works that they will be able to read it successfully for themselves" (Mooney, 1990, p. 31). Teachers must accept all approximations as children opt in and out of the reading. "As the story line draws the children in and they feel their efforts are accepted by the teacher and their peers, they increase their involvement and take a more active part in their reading" (p. 24).

While examining the research on shared reading, many benefits were noted. One of the most important is that "shared experiences in language are part of the heritage of all cultures" (Depree and Iversen, 1994, p. 34). The shared reading strategy can be used individually or in groups, with students of any age or ability, because it develops positive feelings toward stories in a relaxed situation. This strategy is an important part of a successful reading program because:

- it is highly engaging and motivating;
- children read with more feeling and vitality;
- children enjoy reading together;
- the less efficient readers and those for whom English is a second language read more confidently because they get more support from others, they feel that their mistakes go unnoticed, and they are swept into the reading by the enthusiasm of the group;
- all children get increased pleasure from reading the original version by themselves later, and so more efficiently; and
- although there may be a range of reading ability in the class or group, each child can learn something at his or her own level (Rose, 1998).

The shared reading strategy has also been helpful in teaching children who speak English as a second language. Research indicates that "in less than a year, children are reading with greater comprehension, know more sight words, and are better able

to repeat simple English structures orally” (Depree and Iversen, 1994, p. 35). The new language is learned in a situation where motivation is high.

Shared reading and discussion of stories provide a framework for literature and language. Shared reading helps students learn how to solve problems, helps teach reading strategies, and gives the students the confidence necessary for the next stage in reading: guided reading.

Strategy 3: Guided Reading

Guided reading is another strategy used in teaching children to read. This strategy “is a group approach, involving the teacher with a small group of children of similar reading ability” (Wright Group, 1995, p. 1). When using the guided reading strategy, the teacher and a group of children “talk and think, and question their way through a book of which they each have a copy” (Mooney, 1990, p. 11). The teacher models for the students what types of questions to ask themselves and the author, so that each child can gather meaning on the first read. It is very important for the teacher to be aware of each child’s competencies, interests, and experiences when using guided reading. The teacher must also be able to determine what challenges will arise in a particular book and what support students will need to read the book effectively and must be willing to accept the role of supporting learning rather than insisting on directed teaching.

Serving as a link between shared and independent reading, guided reading is based on the “understanding that the children are the readers and they are the ones who must bring meaning to, and gain meaning from, the text as they read” (Mooney, 1990, p. 48). When using the strategies of reading to children and shared reading, children are able to enjoy books that would be too difficult for them if they were to try to read the books on their own for the first time. When using the guided reading strategy there is a careful match of text and children to ensure that each child can successfully read the story on his or her own through the first read. At this stage,

the children are capable of doing more of the reading work, so while the teacher helps them to “recall, and problem-solve, and learn about new features in print, she does not share the reading of the story as she did in shared reading” (Clay, 1991, p. 198).

Books selected for guided reading should be challenging but not too difficult. The children should be able to read 90 to 95 percent of the words in the story. The teacher must prepare an introduction to the story, keeping in mind “the meaning, language, and visual information in the text, and the knowledge, experience, and skills of the reader” (Fountas and Pinnell, 1995, p. 7). In the early stages, the introduction of a new book can help children think about their expectations of characters, problems, and solutions. The introduction helps the children gather some meaning of the story prior to reading. This, in turn, will help with comprehension of the entire text. During the reading the teacher observes the readers’ behaviors for evidence of strategy use and problem solving attempts and successes and interacts with individuals to assist with problems.

Children participate in conversation about the story, raise questions, build expectations, and notice information in the text before reading the story. During reading, the students read the whole story or a unified part to themselves softly or silently and request help when needed in problem solving. When the reading is completed, the children talk about the story, check predictions, revisit the text at points of problem solving as guided by the teacher, may reread the story to a partner or by themselves, and may engage in follow-up activities (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996).

Some of the benefits of the guided reading strategy are that it

- gives children the opportunity to develop as individual readers while participating in a socially supported activity;
- gives teachers the opportunity to observe individuals as they process new texts;

- gives individual readers the opportunity to develop reading strategies so that they can read increasingly difficult texts independently;
- gives children enjoyable, successful experiences in reading for meaning;
- develops the abilities needed for independent reading; and
- helps children learn how to introduce texts to themselves (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996).

Guided reading differs greatly from the more traditional approach to reading instruction. In guided reading, the teacher uses questions and comments to help children become aware of resources within themselves and in the text (Mooney, 1990). This is in direct contrast to techniques used in methods suggested in manuals of most basal series. The teacher's role in the more traditional methods is to supply short-term help by "focusing children's attention on the initial letter or some other specific textual detail, or by telling them the word without establishing any resource for overcoming similar challenges in subsequent reading" (p. 47). This approach creates students who are dependent on the teacher telling them what to do. Students form the habit of appealing to the teacher when they have difficulty. If the teacher is not there to help, the student is not able to persevere with the reading.

Teachers sometimes make the mistake of assuming that children can learn to read simply by giving them good books and letting them explore them on their own. "In fact, what most young readers need cannot be found in books alone. The process of reading must be dynamically supported by an interaction of text reading and good teaching. Guided reading serves this important goal (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996, p. 9).

Strategy 4: Paired Reading

"Paired reading gives children the opportunity to work together in pairs and help each other learn how to read" (Wright Group, 1995, p. 8). This strategy is helpful for supplying support to less-able readers. Usually

a more competent reader is paired with a less competent one. However, these pairs can be of many types. Children can be at the same ability level or at different levels, and they can be the same age or different ages. A typical activity takes 10 to 15 minutes (Routman, 1994).

According to Koskinen and Blum (1986), "reading, like playing a musical instrument, is not something that is mastered once and forgotten at a certain age. Rather, it is a skill that continues to improve through practice" (p. 70). Research shows that the amount of time spent reading is an important factor for improving reading achievement. Studies demonstrate that during teacher-directed instruction, primary grade students are engaged in actual reading practice for only two to five minutes daily. Students need more time and experience with reading. Students become good readers because of increased opportunities to read. The strategy of paired reading has been successful in providing more time for students to practice reading with specific improvements related to oral fluency and comprehension.

Some teachers use this strategy to mix student groupings and give all students access to valuable literature. Paired reading is an enjoyable way for two children to complete a reading assignment or share a story. One child reads while the other follows along, with the children supporting each other when necessary. Children who use this strategy demonstrate considerable growth in fluency, word recognition, comprehension, and in the love of reading (Routman, 1994).

Strategy 5: Independent Reading

Independent reading is both part of and the goal of learning to read. Children learn to read by reading, so they need time to read appropriate materials by themselves. "Independent reading occurs when a child, on his own, reads materials that do not require the help of a peer or adult" (Depree and Iversen, 1994, p. 43). This reading may be teacher-directed or selected by the student. This reading strategy must be implemented at every stage of

children's reading development. As Mooney (1990) has pointed out, "the teacher's role changes from one of initiating, modeling, and guiding to one of providing and then observing, acknowledging and responding" (p. 72). It also means that children always know that others believe they can read, they want to read, they make time to read, and they are encouraged to do so. Children need to have the time for reading, space, and a variety of materials from which to choose.

The books available for independent reading should include those that have been read to the children and used in shared and guided reading. Reading materials should also have a balance among favorite books, books at the children's current reading levels, some books that have just been introduced, and some new books. In addition, the supply of books should be changed regularly, with the children helping with this process (Routman, 1994).

Setting aside time for reading, with teachers as reading models, is a must in all classrooms. Many teachers find it works well to begin with five to ten minutes a day. Then, depending on the ages of the students, the time can last up to twenty to thirty minutes or more daily. According to research studies, just ten minutes a day of independent reading can improve a child's reading skills (Mooney, 1990).

The importance of independent reading cannot be stressed enough. This strategy provides opportunities to apply reading skills independently, provides time for actual reading, challenges the reader to work on his or her own and to use strategies on a variety of texts, challenges the reader to solve words independently, allows children to select books from areas of personal interest, frees the teacher to work with small groups, provides fluency through rereading, and builds confidence (Clay, 1991). "Knowing that one can read, and being able to choose to do so, is a habit that should be established early and nurtured continuously" (Mooney, 1990, p. 75).

Implications of a Balanced Literacy Approach

Society's view of literacy is evolving. If schools are to meet the current literacy needs of all children, a balanced literacy approach is necessary. The various sources considered seem to agree that the systematic use of the strategies of reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, paired reading, and independent reading strengthens early reading programs and provides the scaffolding delineated by Vygotsky necessary for later educational success.

Setting aside time for reading, with teachers as reading models, is a must in all classrooms

As the functions of literacy have changed toward the expectation of a proficient and advanced literate society, teachers have employed a variety of methods, such as using more varied text to support reading, using children's literature instead of controlled vocabulary text, creating communities of learners who are of varying ages and experiences, and placing more emphasis on each learner's construction of knowledge through his or her own discoveries. We encourage teachers to go further by considering the implementation into their classroom routines of the five strategies defined and discussed.

While we believe that teachers must find their own answers and tailor their lessons to the needs of their students, we also believe that these five strategies deserve strong consideration for implementation because of the research-based nature of their effectiveness. The America Reads Challenge is just that, a challenge for all educators to use in their classrooms the tools that research has proven effective in improving reading skills in our early literacy programs. The foundation must be strong because the demands of literacy for success are not static. They will change in the lifetime of our students as they have changed within our own lifetimes. Our students must have the tools to meet these new

challenges, and proficient reading and literacy are their most important assets for an undiminished future, the future they all deserve.

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MRA Mission Statement

The Michigan Reading Association is a dynamic organization whose mission is to promote literacy by enabling the varied communities of learners to become knowledgeable decision makers and by providing opportunities to share common and diverse interests and beliefs.