Readers Who Struggle: Why Many Struggle and a Modest Proposal for Improving Their Reading

Timothy V. Rasinski

Too many students at all ages continue to struggle in becoming proficient readers, and for many, a lack of a strong reading foundation is the cause. Authentic and engaging foundational instruction can help many students move toward reading proficiency.

I preface this essay by stating up front that the views expressed here are based on my own practical and scholarly work in reading education for more than 40 years. I do not claim to have all the answers for helping students move toward proficiency in reading. However, I feel that my experiences can offer insight and direction into helping many of our struggling readers make significant strides toward proficient reading.

Let's face it: Despite our best efforts over the past several years, despite various policy initiatives at the national and state levels in the United States, despite the work of well-trained and highly motivated teachers and school leaders, despite the ever-growing body of quality literature available for children, despite a documented slow growth in overall reading achievement among fourth-grade students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015) we still have many children who struggle in becoming proficient readers. According to the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), 31% of fourth-grade students scored below the "basic" level in reading performance. Although that is an improvement from 1992, where 38% of fourth graders were identified as below "basic," it still reflects the reality that nearly one out of every three fourth-grade students in the United States struggles in reading. The results at other grade levels are much the same, where 24% of eighth-grade students and 27% of 12th-grade students achieve below the "basic" level.

Students who score below "basic" manifest difficulties in locating relevant information, making simple inferences, and using their understanding of the text to identify details that support a given interpretation or conclusion. They also experience difficulty in interpreting the meaning of words as they are used in the text. In other words, students identified as below "basic" manifest difficulty in comprehending the texts that they read. If comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, these students have not achieved proficiency in this competency.

Why Do Students Struggle in Reading?

Reading is a complex activity, so there are many reasons children can struggle in reading. Teachers and schools have little control over many of them. Poverty has been shown repeatedly to be one of the most powerful correlates to reading difficulty. Children who live in impoverished situations are more likely to struggle in reading. Family and community dynamics, such as parents reading to and with their children, and access to books and other reading material at home and in the community library also play important roles in children's success in reading.

There are, however, specific competencies in reading for which schools take responsibility. Since 2000, with the publication of the report of the National Reading Panel (NRP), phonemic awareness, phonics or word decoding, reading fluency (automaticity in word recognition and expressive reading), and text

Timothy V. Rasinski is a professor of literacy education in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Studies at Kent State University, OH, USA; e-mail trasinsk@kent.edu.

and word comprehension have been repeatedly cited as essential to student success in learning to read. Although I acknowledge that there are other factors, such as motivation, that play a role in a child's reading development, the factors identified by the NRP provide us with a reasonable starting place for examining children who find reading difficult.

Textual comprehension—understanding what one reads—can reasonably be seen as the goal of reading. Students who do not demonstrate minimal competency in reading comprehension can be assumed to be struggling readers. What is it that causes students to struggle in comprehension? Could it be difficulty with phonemic awareness and word decoding? Could it be students who decode words well but manifest difficulties in reading fluency (as measured by speed of reading)? Could it be that readers who decode words well and read with fluency, still experience difficulty in making meaning from texts they read? In reality, all of these possibilities exist. That is why reading and teaching reading are such complex activities. Yet, is there a dominant profile of readers who struggle? If such a profile is possible, then it may be possible to design instruction that meets the needs of such students.

Two reading competencies, in particular, are essential and foundational to reading success: word identification (also known as phonics, word decoding, or word recognition) and reading fluency. Word identification, as the name implies, in its simplest form is the ability to produce an oral representation of a word from its written representation. Clearly, proficient reading with comprehension is impossible without proficiency in word identification.

Reading fluency is a bit more complicated. Fluency is generally considered to be made up of two sub-competencies: word recognition automaticity and prosody. Word recognition automaticity is the ability of readers to decode words with so little cognitive effort that they can direct those cognitive energies to comprehension. If readers have to invest too much of their cognitive energy in decoding words, less will be available for comprehension. Stanovich (1980) argued that rapid, automatic word recognition and the use of general comprehension strategies appear to be processes that distinguish proficient from less proficient readers. One product of word recognition automaticity is faster reading. Thus, reading rate is often used as a measure of automaticity as well as a proxy for overall reading achievement.

Prosody in reading refers to reading orally with appropriate expression and phrasing that reflects the meaning of text. Research has demonstrated a strong correlation between prosodic oral reading and silent reading comprehension. Proficient readers read with expression; less proficient readers often lack expression in their oral reading.

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) have identified word identification and fluency as foundational competencies that should be developed through grade 5. Although I certainly agree with the foundational nature of these competencies, their nature as essential to successful reading comprehension suggests to me that they be developed even earlier in students' reading careers. In her stages of reading development, Chall (1996) suggests that instruction in and development of word identification and fluency should primarily occur in grades 1–3. Because of their foundational nature, I suggest that intentional and intensive instruction and development should begin no later than kindergarten and proceed through grade 3. To what extent does the lack of proficiency in these competencies affect students who struggle in reading?

Describing Struggling Readers

Over the past two decades, researchers have explored the nature of students who struggle in reading, using the framework of the NRP. Valencia and Buly (2004; Buly & Valencia, 2002) studied 108 fourth-grade students who had scored at the "below proficiency" level in reading according to the test thresholds of the state in which they reside. The students were given a variety of reading and language assessments to determine relative strengths and weaknesses in their reading and language processing. The authors were able to categorize students by their performance and found that only about 18% of "below proficiency" readers exhibited reasonably good levels of word identification and fluency (word recognition automaticity). The remaining 82% of "below proficiency" students manifested difficulty in word identification and/or reading fluency.

If students continue to struggle in the upper elementary grades with competencies that should have been adequately developed in the primary grades, it is likely that those areas of concern will continue to plague students' overall reading proficiency. Leach, Scarborough, and Rescorla (2003) looked at the profiles of fourth- and fifth-grade students who manifested reading difficulties that were labeled "late

emerging" after third grade. Sixty-seven percent of the late-emerging students exhibited difficulty in "word level processing deficits" (p. 220). Dennis (2013) examined the reading competency development of 94 middle school students (grades 6–8) who scored "below proficient" on a state standards-based reading proficiency examination. Based on cluster analysis, Dennis was able to identify four clusters or profiles of "below proficient" readers. Three of the four profiles (76% of students) included word identification and/or reading fluency (automaticity) as competencies that were not sufficiently developed in students. Moving up to grades 8 and 9, Hock et al. (2009) looked at 202 students identified as struggling readers. Of these, 95.5% exhibited difficulty in word identification, word meaning, and/or reading fluency. Removing those students who were adequately proficient in word meaning (vocabulary), 81.7% of students still exhibited difficulties in word identification and/or reading fluency (automaticity).

These studies and others (e.g., Rasinski & Padak, 1998) have suggested that difficulties in the foundational competencies (word recognition and fluency) are a major contributor to reading difficulties early on and that if students do not develop early mastery of these foundational reading competencies, it is likely that these concerns will continue into the later grades and will have a profound, adverse effect on students' comprehension and overall reading achievement (Rasinski et al., 2005; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). Lack of adequate development of basic foundational reading competencies is likely to snowball into more generalized difficulties in reading and in subject areas that are dependent on reading. Indeed, students who have not achieved proficiency in reading by grade 3 are 4 times more likely than proficient third-grade readers to not graduate from high school (Hernandez, 2012). Logically, then, the earlier we can help students achieve mastery in the foundational competencies, the more likely that students will be able to make good progress in comprehension and overall reading achievement in the early grades and well beyond.

Instruction That Struggling Readers Need

In this essay, I am advocating, then, for an authentic, intentional, intensive, consistent, and synergistic approach to word identification and reading fluency in kindergarten through grade 2 for all students. *Authenticity* in reading instruction simply means that instruction should involve real reading of real materials for real purposes. Many of the current approaches to word recognition and fluency, for example, are marked by primarily reading words in isolation and practicing reading texts for the purpose of reading them fast. Inasmuch as few readers in real life read texts for the purpose of reading fast, such instruction can be questioned on the basis of its authenticity. By *intentional* and *intensive*, I mean that instruction should consist of instructional elements that have been shown to be effective and delivered in an explicit manner. *Consistency* means that such instruction should follow a predictable protocol delivered on a daily or near-daily basis. And by *synergistic*, I mean that when word and fluency instruction is made up of proven elements of effective instruction, the effect of the instruction will be greater than the sum of those elements.

Reading Recovery (Shanahan & Barr, 1995), one of the few proven instructional interventions for struggling first-grade readers, is a good example of intentional, intensive, consistent, synergistic instruction. Each day, students are taken through a consistent, multifaceted protocol aimed at improving both reading and writing. Though proven effective, Reading Recovery is limited to first grade, provides instruction to only one student at a time, and requires considerable time per lesson (30 minutes).

Much is known about effective instruction in word identification and fluency. Word identification practices such as teaching words taken from texts read, examining words for common word patterns (e.g., rimes), sorting words by critical features, playful practice with words, and classroom word displays (word walls) are often associated with effective word instruction. Similarly, modeling fluent reading by the teacher, assisted reading where the reader hears a text read fluently while reading it her- or himself, repeated reading, and wide reading have all been associated with fluency development. Although classroom instruction in word identification and fluency are essential, coordinating instruction with the home leads to even better reading outcomes for students. Although each of the instructional elements I have mentioned is powerful in itself, combining them synergistically can yield even greater outcomes than applying them individually.

Time and Texts

Time is a critical feature for any type of instruction. The school day is generally limited to, at best, 360

minutes. Within that period, teachers must provide instruction across several subject areas. Thus, it is important to keep word identification and fluency instruction to a reasonable amount of time, say 20–25 minutes per day.

Reading instruction that is effective should always involve students reading real texts. However, when the instruction is limited to less than 30 minutes and students will be engaged in repeated reading, the choice of texts for foundational instruction in word identification and fluency is critical. I have found that poetry is an ideal text for students. Poems for children are generally short, and because poems are meant to be performed orally for an audience, they require rehearsal, which is an authentic form of repeated reading. The rhyming words in most poems allow for explorations of rimes (word families). Moreover, the rhythm and rhyme embedded in most poems lend themselves remarkably well to prosodic reading and successful reading. To achieve success in reading, students need to experience success in their reading. Students who struggle in reading do not enjoy much success. When students are able to master a poem every day and read it with appropriate expression to a receptive audience, success and self-confidence will soar.

Evidence also suggests that occasionally mastering more challenging texts may accelerate students' growth in reading (Stahl & Heubach, 2005; Young, Mohr, & Rasinski, 2015). Many poems can be quite challenging for students, but the relative brevity of poetry and the rhythm, rhyme, and authentic need for rehearsal allow students to master even those texts that may otherwise be above their own reading levels.

The Fluency Development Lesson

With these characteristics in mind, the Fluency Development Lesson (FDL) is a simple, consistent, time-efficient, synergistic approach to foundational reading instruction that has the potential to have a significant impact on literally millions of children who struggle in reading in the primary grades due to not having achieved mastery of the foundational reading competencies.

The FDL (Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Sturtevant, 1994) was developed as a fluency intervention that can be applied to large groups of normally developing elementary-grade students or more intensively to smaller groups of students who have yet to achieve proficiency in fluency and who also struggle in overall reading achievement.

The FDL is a daily lesson in which students are given the task of mastering to the point of fluency a new, relatively short (100–200 words) text each day. The lesson takes approximately 20 minutes and can be implemented with classroom groups, small groups, or individual students. No part of the FDL has an explicit or implicit focus on increasing reading rate; rather, the focus is on achieving a reading marked with appropriate and meaning-filled expression. The general daily protocol for the FDL involves the following steps:

1. In preparation for the lesson, the teacher selects a text for the day. The text can be a passage from a story, an informational piece, a poem, or a song. The texts should be at or slightly above the students' instructional reading level and should lend themselves to reading with good phrasing and expression. The teacher makes two copies of the text for every student and a larger display copy for group reading.

2. The teacher introduces the display copy of the text to students and reads it to the students two or three times while students follow along silently. The teacher can read the text with various forms of expression or lack of expression.

3. The teacher then leads the students in a brief discussion of the text and the nature of the teacher's oral reading.

4. Next, the teacher and students read the display copy of the text two or three times chorally. The choral readings can change from the whole group reading the text to different subgroups reading the passage.

5. Following the choral reading, students are divided into groups of two or three, given their individual copies of the text, and allowed about five minutes to practice the text in their groups. One student reads the passage while his or her partner(s) follow along silently, provide help as needed, and give positive feedback. Each student is given the opportunity to practice in this manner.

6. At this point, students are able to read the text with some degree of fluency. To make the FDL an authentic activity, students are invited to perform their text for an audience. The audience can simply be other classmates, but it can also be made up of volunteer adults stationed outside the classroom or even other classrooms of students.

7. At the end of the performance, the teacher and students select 5–10 words from the passage and engage in quick word study activities. These can include finding other words that contain a selected rime or word family from the passage, sorting the corpus of words in various ways, examining the morphological nature of certain words, and playing word games. The formal FDL ends with the word study.

8. The FDL continues at home. Students take their second copy of the passage and are encouraged to read it to family members at home a select number of times, usually five or more.

9. A new FDL is implemented the following day with a new text. However, before beginning to read the new text, the teacher leads students in reading and celebrating their mastery of texts from previous days.

Teachers employing the FDL are encouraged to vary the protocol to meet their own style of instruction and needs of students. The essential elements of any FDL should include modeling fluent reading, assisted reading, repeated reading, and word work. The key goal for any FDL is for students to master a new text (poem) with each lesson to the point of reading the text with good comprehension and fluency—word recognition accuracy, automaticity, and expression. Students who struggle in reading often do not achieve a sense of success in reading or of making steady progress in reading. Using the FDL regularly, students achieve a sense of accomplishment with each lesson. Moreover, that success can be made on passages that may be relatively challenging for them to read if they were to read them only once.

But Does It Work?

A very common practice in learning to play a musical instrument is to play and replay a composition until it is mastered, at which point a more challenging piece is introduced. Can such an approach, in which students bootstrap themselves, lead to improved learning outcomes in reading? Some of the best evidence comes from real teachers doing classroom-based research on potentially innovative instruction.

Kristy DiSalle is a fourth-grade teacher who decided to implement the FDL with her six most challenged students daily, in addition to their regular reading curriculum, over the course of 50 discrete

lessons spanning 12 weeks. The regular reading curriculum included guided reading activities in which groups of students read, discuss, and respond to stories and informational texts, plus word study and writing. During her intervention, her six struggling readers—who began the intervention reading, on average, at a second-grade, sixth-month level—made a gain of one year and one month in overall reading achievement. Similarly, students made nearly double the gain in word recognition automaticity that would normally be expected (27.6 words correct per minute versus an expected gain of 14). Yet not once did the teacher encourage students to read fast and faster.

The Kent State University reading clinic works exclusively with children experiencing difficulty in reading. Regular use of the FDL (four days per week for four weeks) resulted in substantial gains in word recognition accuracy, automaticity, and comprehension (Zimmerman, Rasinski, & Melewski, 2013). Implementation of a home version of the FDL called Fast Start Reading (Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005) found that at-risk first-grade students nearly doubled the progress over a similar group of students, who received similar instruction in school but no home intervention, in letter and word recognition accuracy and in word recognition automaticity over less than three months. Studies of other synergistic approaches to fluency instruction, such as Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (Stahl & Heubach, 2005) and Read Two Impress (Young et al., 2015; Young, Rasinski, & Mohr, 2016), have reported similar gains not only in terms of fluency but also in overall reading achievement. Given the consistent positive findings of focused, synergistic fluency instruction, perhaps it is time to include such instruction in the regular reading curriculum.

My Modest Proposal

Given that high levels of comprehension are dependent on a strong foundation of automatic (and accurate) word recognition and prosodic meaningful reading that is developed as early as possible in children's literacy development, and knowing also that students who struggle in reading comprehension often manifest difficulties in these foundational competencies, it seems that an early, intensive focus on developing a strong foundation in reading is imperative. My proposal is more than simply a call for "phonics first," where students are given inten-

sive instruction on word decoding. It is not enough for young students to be able to decode words accurately; they also need to develop their word decoding competencies to an automatic and effortless level so that they can read with good expression and focus their attention on reading for meaning.

In my mind's eye, an effective foundational reading curriculum would occur in kindergarten through grade 2. Each day, students would receive the type of literacy instruction that would be considered exemplary: read-aloud by the teacher, authentic reading of stories and dictated texts followed by meaningful response activities, time to read and explore books and other reading material independently, instruction on how words work (phonemic awareness, phonics, and words study), and opportunities to engage in authentic writing. In addition to these critical instructional elements, students would also receive a daily synergistic fluency lesson such as the FDL. Daily employment of an authentic, synergistic fluency lesson would help move students beyond mere word recognition accuracy, where they can decode the words in text but use up so much cognitive energy that they struggle to comprehend, to word recognition automaticity (fluency), where students have freed up their cognitive resources from word recognition and use them primarily for text comprehension. If a lack of fluency in reading is a major contributor to reading difficulty in the elementary grades (and beyond), then it just makes good sense to provide students with authentic, consistent, focused, intentional fluency instruction that addresses those needs. Our young readers deserve nothing less.

REFERENCES

Buly, M.R., & Valencia, S.W. (2002). Below the bar: Profiles of students who fail state reading assessments. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24(3), 219–239. doi:10.3102/01623737024003219

Chall, J.S. (1996). *Stages of reading development* (2nd ed.). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt-Brace.

Dennis, D.V. (2013). Heterogeneity or homogeneity: What assessment data reveal about struggling adolescent readers. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 45(1), 3–21. doi:10.1177/1086296X12468431

Hernandez, D.J. (2012). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy/

Hock, M.F., Brasseur, I.F., Deshler, D.D., Catts, H.W., Marquis, J.G., Mark, C.A., & Stribling, J.W. (2009). What is the reading component skill profile of adolescent struggling readers in urban schools? *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 32(1), 21–38. doi:10.2307/25474660

Leach, J.M., Scarborough, H.S., & Rescorla, L. (2003). Late-emerging reading disabilities. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(2), 211–224. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.95.2.211

National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). *The Nation's Report Card: 2015 mathematics and reading at grades 4 and 8* (NCES 2015-136). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Washington, DC: Authors.

Rasinski, T.V., & Padak, N.D. (1998). How elementary students referred for compensatory reading instruction perform on school-based measures of word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. *Reading Psychology*, 19(2), 185–216. doi:10.1080/0270271980190202

Rasinski, T.V., Padak, N., Linek, W., & Sturtevant, E. (1994). Effects of fluency development on urban second-grade readers. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 87(3), 158–165. doi:10.1080/00220671.1994.9941237

Rasinski, T.V., Padak, N.D., McKeon, C.A., Wilfong, L.G., Friedauer, J.A., & Heim, P. (2005). Is reading fluency a key for successful high school reading? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(1), 22–27. doi:10.1598/JAAL.49.1.3

Rasinski, T., Rikli, A., & Johnston, S. (2009). Reading fluency: More than automaticity? More than a concern for the primary grades? *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 48(4), 350–361. doi:10.1080/19388070802468715

Rasinski, T., & Stevenson, B. (2005). The effects of Fast Start Reading: A fluency-based home involvement reading program, on the reading achievement of beginning readers. *Reading Psychology*, 26(2), 109–125. doi:10.1080/02702710590930483

Shanahan, T., & Barr, R. (1995). Reading Recovery: An independent evaluation of the effects of an early instructional intervention for at-risk learners. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 30(4), 958–996.

Stahl, S.A., & Heubach, K.M. (2005). Fluency-oriented reading instruction. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 37(1), 25–60. doi:10.1207/s15548430jlr3701_2

Stanovich, K.E. (1980). Toward an interactive-compensatory model of individual differences in the development of reading fluency. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 16(1), 32–71. doi:10.2307/747348

Valencia, S.W., & Buly, M.R. (2004). Behind test scores: What struggling readers really need. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(6), 520–531

Young, C., Mohr, K.A.J., & Rasinski, T. (2015). Reading Together: A successful fluency intervention. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 54(1), 67–81. doi:10.1080/19388071.2014.976678

Young, C., Rasinski, T., & Mohr, K.A.J. (2016). Read Two Impress: An intervention for disfluent readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 69(6), 633–636. doi:10.1002/trtr.1391

Zimmerman, B., Rasinski, T., & Melewski, M. (2013). When kids can't read, what a focus on fluency can do: The reading clinic experience at Kent State University. In E. Ortlieb & E.H. Cheek (Eds.), *Advanced literacy practices: From clinic to the classroom* (pp. 137–160). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group.