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Questions teachers ask about struggling readers and writers

In this informal U.S. study, 191 practicing teachers completed a survey requiring them to list their three most pressing questions about working with struggling readers and writers.

Over the past several years there has been a surge of interest in understanding how best to prepare students for the higher than ever literacy demands of the technological society in which we live. Compounding the challenge is the reality that today's classrooms are filled with students with increasingly diverse needs, stemming from differences in their home languages, learning abilities, and literacy experiences. Interest in the problem has led to several important reports— *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), *Teaching Children to Read* (National Reading Panel, 2000), and *Reading for Understanding* (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002)—and to a growing number of publications aimed at providing teachers with the necessary knowledge to address the needs of diverse learners.

As educators in the United States, we work regularly with primary through upper grade teachers from urban, suburban, and small-town communities. Both neophytes and veteran teachers often voice concerns about the growing numbers of English-language learners (ELLs) in their classes and the students who "just don't seem to get it": Those who can't read grade-level texts; have difficulty writing a composition, paragraph, or even a sentence; and are reluctant to engage in the learn-

ing process. In order to validate informally what we observe through day-to-day encounters with teachers and their concerns and to ascertain common areas of concern, we distributed the survey shown in Figure 1 to the 211 individuals with whom we worked during a one-month period. Other than the directions included on the questionnaire, no guidelines were given.

Identifying the challenges

Because our interest lay in the concerns of practicing teachers, questionnaires completed by administrators, teaching assistants, and preservice teachers were eliminated from the final analysis, which included 191 surveys. Respondents were from New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and West Virginia. Although their teaching assignments varied from kindergarten through middle school, nearly all taught in the range of first through sixth grade. Their level of experience varied from first-year teachers (induction-year teachers), to those in their second and third years of service (developing teachers), to those who have been practicing in the field for four or more years (seasoned professionals).

The 420 questions generated by the teachers were analyzed and categorized according to response type by one of the authors and by two research assistants pursuing doctorates in literacy education. After an initial discussion of procedures, the three began the process of classifying the responses. To ensure consistency in approach, they first reviewed and deliberated the category type of five responses. Then each individual independently examined the responses of 20 teachers and gener-

ated categories. At a second meeting these decisions were compared in order to identify areas of common concern and to establish interrater reliability. Nine categories emerged through this process (see Figure 2).

Once the categories were defined, the remaining responses were classified by one of the research assistants and reviewed by the participating author. Refinement of the categories, as well as placement of any questionable responses, was determined through group discussion. Responses that reflected issues outside the established categories were classed as "Other." All responses were coded by number of survey and of question (1, 2, or 3) and charted under their appropriate category. Separate charts were used for the three experience levels so that patterns of concern could be detected. Examination of the data revealed that teachers across the grades and from the various states shared similar worries, worries that tended to cross levels of experience: induction-year teachers, developing teachers, and seasoned professionals.

A pivotal issue for induction-year teachers ($n = 5$) was how to work with different levels and abilities of students. All but one of these teachers identified variability as a primary concern; the exception, who listed no concerns, made note of being too new to the profession to have "really faced any problems yet."

Experienced teachers were also concerned about variability and expressed apprehension over students' linguistic differences and their radically different literacy abilities, problems that for some were intensified by large classes. Despite these concerns, the critical issue for developing teachers ($n = 17$) and seasoned professionals ($n = 169$) was how to support struggling readers and writers and to what degree. Their questions focused overwhelmingly on their need to learn instructional strategies and skills to improve students' literacy.

Although the induction-year teachers did not cite time, management, or organization as pressing issues, many of the developing teachers and seasoned professionals did. Nearly one fourth of each of these groups (23.5% and 24.3%, respectively) raised questions about such matters as how to arrange for small-group instruction, how to determine the amount of time to work with struggling readers and writers, and how to provide written

FIGURE 2
Common concerns and recommended strategies

Category of concern	Percentage of questions	Strategies
Skills and strategies	31.8	"Safe" writing environment, demonstration and guided practice, read-alouds, and think-alouds
Student variability	19.2	Capitalizing on students' interests and background knowledge; using small-group instruction and the language experience approach; fostering a risk-taking environment, peer support, and communication with other teachers
Time, organization, and management	11.9	Small-group instruction (guided reading), meaningful center and independent work activities, established routines, staggered due dates for writing, and varied feedback opportunities
Motivation	10.4	Instructional-level texts, opportunities for students to choose and talk about books, time for reading and writing, authentic writing purposes, and word processing
Family involvement	7.9	Taking a proactive stance; putting technology to work; utilizing government and association communications, community members, family message journals, and reading backpacks
Testing and assessment	6.2	Doing instructional and grade-level teaching, familiarizing students with question formats, and using rubrics and portfolios for student self-monitoring
Background knowledge	4.5	Professional development, focused on cross-grade-level articulation, and timely and appropriate intervention
Classroom environment	2.6	Differentiating and scaffolding instruction and encouraging active learning through appropriate text and tasks
Materials	2.3	Building collections of materials that vary in genre, topic, and level; considering student preferences; and making book accessibility a school-wide priority
Other	3.2	

feedback to individual students without being consumed by an overload of papers.

The problem of motivating struggling readers and writers was a prevalent concern among the respondents. The teachers sought ways to inspire those whose experiences had caused them to turn off and tune out, or those who had not yet been excited by learning.

Responding to the challenges

In the remainder of this article we address some of the teachers' questions about struggling readers and writers for each of the nine categories of concern. The questions presented voice the kinds of challenges noted by most of the teachers. The suggestions we offer for addressing those challenges are summarized in Figure 2. Because some categories

represent stronger areas of concern than do others for the teachers, and because some recommendations require more elaborate explanations than others, the discussions that follow vary in length.

1. Variability in students' literacy levels and linguistic abilities

"How do you bring children who are two grade levels below into an area of reading in which they are interested (age appropriate)?" Although students who struggle with literacy need time to read relatively easy texts so they can experience success, they can benefit from opportunities to read text that is more difficult. Interest and background knowledge are two factors that enable students to read beyond what is considered their normal reading level (Sweet, 1997). Interest fosters persistence and a desire to understand, while topic knowledge supports children's word identification and comprehension by enabling them to draw on what they know. Teacher knowledge is critical to the students' success: Teachers must know their students' interests and know (or know how to find) books on those topics. Librarians and book reviews in journals like *Book Links* or *The Horn Book Magazine* provide resources for identifying appropriate and engaging books for the classroom library, and interest inventories provide a quick and easy way to discover students' areas of expertise and curiosity.

Instructional formats like literature circles can also aid students' comprehension. When the texts used build on students' interests and knowledge, the combination of knowing a lot about the topic and being able to discuss the text with stronger readers makes it possible for those who struggle to handle material that would otherwise be too difficult. Because books that "hook and hold" readers tend to be nonfiction titles, students need to be taught how to navigate the special features associated with informational text (matching captions to illustrations and interpreting graphs and charts, for example). Teacher modeling through think-alouds and graphic organizers can prepare students to maximize their learning.

The language experience approach (LEA) is yet another way to provide struggling readers with age-appropriate reading material. Although often associated with readers in the primary grades, this technique can benefit many older novice readers—

English-language learners and special-needs students—particularly those who are deaf, hearing impaired, or learning disabled (Padak & Rasinski, 1996). Because LEA relies on children's own language and experiences, word identification is facilitated and reading motivation is encouraged. Students dictate a common experience to the teacher, who writes it down, changing language only when necessary for clarity; this shared piece of writing then becomes the children's reading material.

"How do I best address the needs of bilingual students who struggle with reading and writing but know enough English to test out of the ESL [English as a second language] program?" If the students can read and write in their own language, the situation will likely be less difficult because the literacy understandings they have acquired in their first language can help them achieve literacy in their second language (Graves, 1994; Snow et al., 1998). To ease students' transition to the regular classroom, teachers should form a strong bridge of communication with the second-language teacher while they share responsibility for the students' learning. The ESL teacher can also serve as a helpful resource and provide background information about the children's cultures that may assist with literacy teaching and learning.

Insufficient background knowledge about U.S. customs, slang and idioms, and history may interfere with bilingual students' reading. These students need books that interest them at a variety of reading levels, time for reading, and opportunities to use language. Stories that reflect their culture and experience are likely to be appealing and will enable the students to use what they know to support their comprehension. (Such texts have the added benefit of broadening other class members' knowledge of the ELL student's culture.) Contemporary realistic fiction with its modern-day settings is another good choice as is predictable text, which can ease the word reading burden through its repetition and rhyme. Shared reading experiences and small-group instruction, like that described later, also benefit English-language learners. The small-group setting, coupled with the fact that the group consists of students with similar reading abilities, is likely to embolden ELL students to participate in discussions,

thereby encouraging language development that will bolster their growth as readers and writers.

Small-group or individual minilessons during writing workshop enable teachers to directly address the needs of ELL students who struggle with the conventions of English in their writing. Peer help with revising and editing can also be beneficial. In either case, concerns about correctness should not supercede the child's need to communicate: Writing needs to be taught as a process, with the emphasis on idea generation and drafting before revision and editing. Encouraging English-language learners to write from what they know, for real purposes, and from interest is an important part of this process.

In order for ELL students to feel free to take risks with language in reading and writing, it is essential for teachers to establish learning environments that include not only high expectations and challenging material but also smiles and humor to lighten the intensity of the learning experience. This "Ha-ha factor" is critical for language growth (Cary, 2000, p. 58). It encourages students to use language without fear of making mistakes and motivates them to learn from teacher modeling to communicate more effectively.

2. Time, organization, and classroom management

"Students learn much more during small-group instruction. What is the best way to give students small-group instruction on a regular basis with a class of 22 students?" Small-group instruction is a critical literacy component for struggling learners. Some small groups comprise students with similar reading abilities, and texts and instruction are matched to the readers so that the level of challenge is sufficient but not overwhelming. The small-group format enables teachers to more easily maintain the focus and attention of children who may otherwise be disengaged, and it makes it easier for them to monitor the students' reading behaviors and adjust their instruction accordingly. Ability to carefully observe reading behaviors is particularly important because the grouping for small-group instruction is dynamic. Teachers evaluate students regularly and regroup them as their progress changes.

How teachers implement small-group instruction varies: Grade level, amount of time available daily for the language arts, and the types of groups being formed are influences that must be considered. For guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), teachers typically form four to five groups, each comprising four to six children with similar reading abilities. In the intermediate as well as primary grades, groups are likely to meet three to five times a week, often on alternate days. Sessions usually last 20 to 30 minutes. Other types of small groups, such as those convened for writing or for word study, may meet less often and vary more in size.

When using small-group instruction, teachers must ensure that the instructional time will be productive for everyone. They should plan meaningful tasks for the rest of the class and make it a priority to teach students the routines and expectations for completing tasks at centers and for independent work. Professional resources (e.g., Morrow, 2002; Wong & Wong, 1998) and classroom observations of effective management practices help teachers learn to plan and organize for this type of instruction.

"How do I handle the paper load if I really want to give students individual feedback?" Many teachers ask students to use logs or dialogue journals to respond to their reading during independent work time. If students, particularly those in the intermediate grades, know that the teacher values their observations and reflections, the responses, including those of struggling readers and writers, may be a page or more in length. On the one hand, all this writing is a welcome outcome; however, on the other, the idea of providing feedback to a class of 25 or more students can be daunting. Many teachers handle the problem by staggering due dates: They collect five or so journals a day and provide each child with careful feedback once a week. This system allows teachers to devote time and serious attention to the students' writing in a relatively relaxed and enjoyable manner. If papers from multiple classes are involved, as in departmentalized or middle school settings, biweekly feedback may be more realistic.

In writing workshop, teachers frequently ease the problem of paper overload by providing ongoing verbal feedback. They circulate among students and hold brief individual conferences. Many also

teach students to hold peer conferences so that they are not perceived as the only class "expert." The latter approach prevents the kind of back-up and accompanying off-task behaviors that can stall writers and frustrate teachers as students wait their turns. Furthermore, it frees teachers to help those most in need, enables students to learn from one another, and tends to lead to final drafts of superior quality that require less "going over."

Allowing students to work outside the often used five-day format for writing (Monday—prewrite, Tuesday—draft, Wednesday—revise, Thursday—edit, Friday—publish or do final copy) can also reduce paper overload. Not all writing pieces need to be published, and some do require extended time for development. Although keeping every student "on the same page" will likely result in shorter pieces to critique, it also means that all products will be due the same day. A flexible approach that considers students' interests and needs can result in a win-win situation: stronger writing by students and easier management for teachers.

Finally, many teachers find it easier to evaluate writing when they use a rubric or checklist designed (often with student input) and distributed in advance of an assignment. Various qualities or traits may be addressed, including development, organization, voice and tone, word choice, fluency, and conventions (Spandel, 2001). Some teachers choose to evaluate all of the traits each time, while others opt to emphasize different traits in different papers.

3. Strategies and skills

"Many students have difficulty planning and monitoring their writing. How do you know how much support to give students when writing?" When students routinely have difficulty planning or writing without assistance, one of the first questions teachers should ask is "Have I established a 'safe' writing environment?" This is a critical form of support for all writers but is particularly so for those who struggle with writing. To write freely, students must know that the ideas and experiences they offer will be valued and accepted.

If the writing environment encourages risk taking and students still have difficulty getting their writing started or keeping it going, another question should be asked: "Have I taught them planning and monitoring strategies?" Struggling writers may need to have strategies demonstrated and redemonstrated in different contexts, and they certainly need opportunities to practice their use with teacher guidance. However, sometimes teachers inadvertently provide support that fosters dependence rather than independence. After modeling, we have found that the best way to help students begin writing is to step aside and simply ask them to "Do what I did." If, despite their best efforts, students are still unable to continue, teachers should intervene. Another small-group or whole-class minilesson may be needed to reinforce the idea or strategy. Graves (e.g., 1989), Fletcher (e.g., Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998), and others have described various types of demonstrations that teachers across the grades can use to help students develop as writers.

"What are some good strategies to develop prereaders' comprehension skills? The text in the guided [reading] books is so simple that it is sometimes difficult to draw substantial information from it." Because most novice readers, regardless of their age, are capable of understanding and appreciating texts that are far more demanding than the ones they can already read, successful teachers capitalize on read-aloud experiences as a means for teaching comprehension. They encourage children's active participation during the reading through open-ended questions and discussion (Beck & McKeown, 2001).

It is especially critical to help older students who are just acquiring literacy to develop comprehension abilities beyond the texts they can read. By doing so, we encourage them to maintain an interest in reading and prepare them to understand the more challenging texts they will read as their word knowledge improves. These students need explicit demonstrations of what good readers do while they read; such demonstrations can be effected with exciting picture books or other interesting texts (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). Struggling readers must come to know that their job is not just to answer questions but also to ask them. This may necessitate pointing out that skilled readers question as they read as a way to monitor their understanding and that, far from revealing ignorance, raising questions aids comprehension. By thinking aloud during a read-aloud, teachers can demonstrate the kind of self-questioning, reacting, and visualizing in which

they engage (e.g., *"I'm wondering* why the boy keeps asking this question"; or *"I'm a little confused* by that idea, so *I'll read it over* again"; or *"I'm picturing* the dark clouds moving quickly in the sky"). Over time, and as they share in the read-aloud, struggling readers will come to understand the types of thinking and strategies that enable proficient readers to construct and maintain meaning.

4. Motivation

"How do I motivate a student who doesn't value improving his or her performance in my language arts class?" Students who have repeatedly experienced difficulty with reading or writing may become apathetic, anxious, or even negative when faced with these tasks. Value for improvement will only come with some degree of success. Efforts to motivate disengaged learners should start with consideration of the class environment and the extent to which it encourages success and engagement. For instance, can the students read the texts provided? Typically, at least 90% accuracy in word recognition is expected. This degree of accuracy allows students to focus their attention on comprehending rather than on deciphering the text. In addition, do students have ownership of learning activities? Being able to talk about books and choose their own reading material are factors students find motivating (Oldfather, 1995).

Real discussions (as opposed to the traditional teacher-ask, student-respond format) can stimulate students' interest and involvement and enhance their understanding, and choice can increase the likelihood that they will read. Because many of the books students opt to read have been either read aloud or recommended by someone else (Palmer, Codling, & Gambrell, 1994), it is important that teachers (a) promote students' reading interest through regularly scheduled read-alouds and book talks that tap into their interests and (b) ensure easy access to school and classroom libraries and time for browsing, reading, and talking about books.

Many of the considerations for motivating readers apply to motivating writers. Again, choice is important, as is peer interaction (Oldfather, 1995). Students need occasions to write about what they know and on topics of interest. Because they are apt to be motivated when the purpose is authentic, they also need to engage in writing that is

not merely for the teacher. For example, students might explain how to care for a pet, voice concern over a playground issue, exchange letters or e-mail messages with a pen pal, write to favorite authors, or seek information from experts or agencies. They can share their writings through Author's Chair, poetry cafés, authors' teas, buddy partnerships with other classes, and class magazines or newspapers.

"How do we encourage kids to go beyond the comfort zone to write even more than they have in the past?" There are several issues to consider. Ensuring ample time for writing is critical. This enables students to "warm up" to the pieces they are working on and allows them time to develop them further. Struggling writers, whether younger or older, often play it safe because of their own, or someone else's, expectations. Making correctness a high priority is a sure way to limit risk taking, because the mechanics of writing, particularly spelling, are difficult for these students. This difficulty forces them to switch back and forth between the high-level skill of generating and planning ideas and the low-level skill of spelling individual words, and it can lead to constrained writing, a sense of failure, or avoidance of writing altogether (Berninger, Mizokawa, & Bragg, 1991). Demonstrations of how to approximate the spelling of unfamiliar words and developmentally appropriate word-study instruction (Ganske, 2000) can help students improve this aspect of their writing over time. In the interim, peer editors, spell checkers, bookmarks with high-frequency words, and reasonable expectations can enable struggling writers to focus on ideas. Computers, too, may play a valuable role: They make it easier for students to revise and edit and motivate them to write.

5. Family involvement

"How do I reeducate parents regarding literacy expectations in the classroom when they have such hectic lives and often can't meet with me? Written information is often not helpful when the parents are less experienced in literacy. Some are not readers or writers themselves." Parents and teachers working together toward common goals is an important trait of schools that effectively address the needs of children of poverty (Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2000) and an end well worth pursuing,

though not easily accomplished. Parents may be unwilling to meet with teachers because they feel intimidated or fear a negative report about their child. Some teachers successfully circumvent these problems by being proactive. They make a practice of calling parents early in the school year to put them at ease. They introduce themselves, say something positive about the parents' child, and indicate that they are looking forward to working with them. Proactive teachers also make sure that information they send home is written in clear and simple language that parents with limited literacy can understand. Some involve their students in the writing of newsletters. This yields several benefits: simple language and reading motivation for parents and authentic writing purposes and writing motivation for students. Literacy workshops at the beginning or end of the school day are another means to inform parents. Paperback books or school supplies may be used as incentives for attendance.

Technology can also be of help in communicating with parents. If parents have video players at home, teachers can make videotaped explanations of what it is they want them to understand about their children's literacy learning. The tapes could feature snippets of classroom activities and might also include demonstrations of how parents can help their children with activities, like shared reading, word study, or writing. Local businesses or the parent and teacher organization may be willing to donate videotapes for this purpose. A few tapes used in rotation should serve the needs of an entire class. School administrators may have additional suggestions and will know if parent permission is needed for the taping. Pamphlets, communiqués, and forums sponsored by the International Reading Association and the U.S. Department of Education are further resources for useful ideas on increasing family literacy.

"How do you gain parental support—for homework, practice, et cetera—when the parents speak little or no English?" In many schools with high populations of non-English speakers, district personnel have identified community members who are fluent in the students' home languages and in English. These individuals are often willing to translate written explanations about how parents can best help their children. Some of these people might also be willing to provide oral explanations

to accompany the videotaped demonstrations already described. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Education (2002) has reissued a 12-booklet Helping Your Child series for parents and caregivers. Several of the books are available in English and Spanish.

Most parents want to be involved in their child's learning but may not feel comfortable doing so, especially if they speak little or no English. Family message journals (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000) are used to involve parents or other caregivers daily in their child's learning and to provide authentic writing and reading experiences for young writers. Each day children write a message in their journal about something they learned or did in school or about an upcoming event, and a family member writes back. When English is limited, the exchanges may be done in the child's first language. Reading backpacks (Cooter et al., 1999) also prompt parents to be involved and are particularly valuable in situations where families have limited access to books. At least weekly, children take home a backpack of trade books in English and Spanish on varying topics and reading levels; easy activities for their parents to do with them are also included.

6. Testing and assessment

"How do I teach to their needs when I must prepare them for on-level testing?" We must teach struggling readers at their instructional level to encourage success and motivation. However, to help these students learn how best to cope with the demanding texts they will face in testing situations we can provide additional supported opportunities for them to read at their grade level. We also need to familiarize students with the various question formats used in their tests and understand that this does not mean spending considerable amounts of instructional time teaching to the test (International Reading Association, 1999). Instead, test preparation should be integrated with students' everyday learning. For instance, if they must answer open-ended questions, they should be taught to use the scoring rubric so they can learn to self-assess and revise their answers; practice may be tied to topics they are studying. Teachers who plan a variety of instructional activities in varying formats address both appropriate instruction and sensible test preparation.

"How can I fairly assess their growth without discouraging them and yet not be too subjective about their ability?" Rubrics that include specific descriptors of the learning to be assessed enable us to show students their strengths, needs, and growth over time in fair and objective ways. If clearly described and distributed at the onset of an assignment, they also help students to know from the start what is important. We can encourage students to make improvements identified by the rubric by indicating our confidence that they will continue to progress through persistent effort. Examinations of early and later work samples from portfolios help students to see firsthand the benefits of their efforts and where to set new goals (e.g., Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

7. Background knowledge

"Why don't students come to each grade level more prepared? In our district there is a lack of coordination and continuity of instruction." Individual districts and states set language arts and literacy expectations through curricula and standards. Teachers should become familiar with these to be certain their instruction is meeting the requirements. Even with articulated district and state expected outcomes or benchmarks for each grade level, cross-grade-level dialogues (as well as dialogues between classroom teachers and specialized teachers) are valuable for ensuring continuity of teaching and learning. Without this "flow," children with reading difficulties achieve little progress (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991). Seasoned professionals may know what is expected of children at the preceding or succeeding grade level because they have taught other levels. The same is not true for more novice teachers and for those who have not changed grades. Teachers concerned about continuity might suggest to their administrators that an inservice day (or a portion of it) be devoted to cross-grade meetings to enable teachers to discuss literacy expectations and instruction. However, even when there is coordination and continuity of instruction, teachers should expect variability among students. Students bring unique background experiences to the learning situation that create differences.

"Shouldn't there be criteria set by the state education department or school districts so that children who need early intervention receive it?" Some states and many school districts have addressed this problem or are doing so. Clearly, research points to the need for a preventive stance. Although estimates of the number of school children thought to have difficulty learning to read vary, results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are often cited. The 2000 results (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001) revealed that 37% of the nearly 8,000 fourth-grade students assessed achieved below the "basic" level, a figure that has remained relatively unchanged since 1992. Furthermore, longitudinal study data suggest that those who are poor readers at the end of first grade are likely to still be poor readers at the end of fourth grade (Juel, 1988). However, more recent research suggests that the percentage of children could be greatly reduced with appropriate and timely reading intervention (Torgesen, 2000; Vellutino, Scanlon, & Tanzman, 1998). Intervention can take many forms (such as one-to-one or small-group tutoring, pull-out or push-in, before school or after). It is essential that the instruction be child centered and delivered by those with the necessary expertise. It should *not* be a replacement for effective classroom instruction.

8. Classroom environment

"**How do you keep struggling readers and writers feeling part of the class?"** We can only help these students develop a real sense of belonging if we enable them to be active learners, and this means we must ensure that they are given materials and tasks with which they can be successful (Strickland, Ganske, & Monroe, 2002). Small-group instruction and reading and writing workshops, where instruction is individualized, allow children to work at appropriately challenging levels with teacher guidance. Because all children generally read the same text in content area reading, some students may require access to an audiotape, or if the reading level of the text is not too difficult a chapter could be used during small-group instruction to accommodate special needs. Some children may require reference materials that are easier to read when learning or writing about a topic.

"How do I keep my frustration level down, as well as the students', when they're just not getting it?" When frustration sets in, teachers need to identify what it is the students *are* getting and help them to settle into a bit of successful work, while determining the best next step. Planning instruction at students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) so that what they are expected to do is just beyond what they can do independently helps to reduce the chance of frustration. Students need explicit instruction that includes demonstrations of what they are to do; when they grasp this, they are ready for guided practice. Instruction that is scaffolded in this way enables students to be active learners and to gain independence with activities and strategies. Realizing that struggling readers and writers may require multiple demonstrations and multiple opportunities for guided practice before they can apply a strategy or skill by themselves can reduce frustration on both sides.

9. Materials

"With limited resources, how do we meet the needs of each child? Where do all the books come from?" School districts sometimes designate a portion of textbook money for the purchase of leveled readers for guided reading instruction or budget money for books in grants that they may write. In some schools teachers donate multiple copies of books from their personal collections to a central storage location for sharing; they continue adding to the collection through book club orders and school book fairs. Only four to six children typically make up a guided reading group, so interlibrary loan is yet another possibility.

Because access to books is a key factor in motivation, it is also important for teachers to develop their classroom libraries and to take into consideration student preferences in reading material, especially because these tend to be underrepresented in school collections (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Although many teachers spend their own money to enhance their classroom collections, there are other avenues. Collections can be shared among classes and books rotated. Books can be solicited from parents or community organizations and businesses. Some public libraries have generous loan allowances for teachers. Rather than taking a hit-or-miss approach,

we suggest book accessibility be made a schoolwide issue with faculty, administrators, and parents working together to find solutions that will benefit all children.

Concluding thoughts

The issues and questions raised in this article are important concerns in today's schools and classrooms, though doubtless there are many others, for each situation presents its unique problems. The suggestions we offer for addressing the concerns of teachers are by no means exhaustive. Rather, they represent key instructional strategies and practices that are known to make a positive difference in helping students over the kinds of hurdles that worried the teachers we surveyed. Although the challenges we explored were faced by teachers from different locations, grade levels, and levels of experience, the ease or difficulty of implementing recommendations such as those discussed here will likely depend on teachers' perceived need for change and on the level of support provided to make that change.

Whether easy or difficult, change must start somewhere, and a single step has the potential to start a chain of activity that ultimately resolves the original concern. Our suggestions for practical approaches to common problems are made to start such a chain: to encourage teachers everywhere to question and ponder, to get to know their students and recognize the salient issues, and to seek and try out new ideas to make a difference in their students' literacy lives.

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