

RESOLVING STRUGGLING READERS' HOMEWORK DIFFICULTIES: A SOCIAL COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

HOWARD MARGOLIS

Queens College of the City University of New York, Flushing, New York, USA

PATRICK P. McCABE

St. John's University, Jamaica, New York, USA

Struggling readers often fail to complete homework or complete it in a slipshod, haphazard fashion. Often, this adversely affects grades, erodes motivation for academics, and causes conflict between readers, parents, and school personnel. To help teachers and educational consultants (e.g., reading specialists, school psychologists) help struggling readers improve their homework submission rates and improve the quality of their homework, this article discusses reasons for homework problems and suggests how teachers and educational consultants can apply social cognitive theory to resolve homework problems.

Unless people believe that they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act. (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996, p. 1206)

Ryan is a struggling reader in a fifth grade inclusion class at Hypothetical Elementary School. His general education teacher, Mrs. Piccolo, says that he is cooperative and intelligent, but is often “lost” in class, confused by the work. When she and his in-class support teacher, Mrs. McCormick, provide him with “easy” or “moderately challenging” work, he correctly completes it; without such work and without in-class support, he dawdles and fidgets. Recently, Ryan complained to his teachers: “I hate homework. . . . It’s too hard. . . . I can’t read it. I’m dumb.”

Ryan’s teachers complain that he rarely submits homework. When he does, it is disorganized and incorrect. To complicate matters, his teachers tell his parents that his homework habits are

Address correspondence to Howard Margolis, 1067 Pendleton Court, Voorhees, NJ 08043. E-mail: hm08043@yahoo.com

hurting his grades and progress. Frequently, Ryan argues with his parents about homework. This upsets them. They want to help him, but lack the time; their two younger children and extra jobs devour it. Thus, for Ryan, homework assignments are solitary tasks, tasks on which success depends upon his motivation and ability to independently complete them.

Ryan's story, a composite of many, represents the difficulties faced by countless struggling readers for whom homework is laborious, frustrating, and demoralizing (Bryan, Nelson, & Mathur, 1995). Consequently, many actively resist homework or carelessly rush through it, despite teacher and parent exhortations to try harder. This raises the critical question of how to help struggling readers like Ryan to routinely and successfully complete homework.

To answer this question, we first discuss possible causes of struggling readers' homework difficulties, as school personnel must address causes to resolve difficulties. Second, we discuss struggling readers' beliefs, as beliefs strongly influence behavior and prospects for reversing homework difficulties. Third, because it can help to resolve homework difficulties, we discuss and illustrate principles derived from the instructional literature and from social cognitive theory.

Possible Causes of Homework Difficulties

Understanding the current causes of each reader's difficulties can help to identify potential solutions. Common causes include the following:

Difficult Assignments

Homework is often too difficult for students with disabilities (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001; Bryan & Nelson, 1994; Epstein et al., 1997; Salend & Gajria, 1995). Polloway, Foley, and Epstein (1992), for example, found that students with learning disabilities experienced more "substantial problems" with homework than their nondisabled peers (p. 206). Kay, Fitzgerald, Paradee, and Mellencamp (1994) found that homework problems often exasperated parents of children with disabilities.

Negative Attitudes

Because of repeated failure, many struggling readers develop negative attitudes toward reading (Chapman & Tunmer, 2003; Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003; Lipson & Wixson, 2003; Rasinski & Padak, 2000). Because homework usually involves reading, this attitude may generalize to homework (Bryan & Nelson, 1994; Bryan et al., 1995; Good & Brophy, 2003; Nicholls, McKenzie, & Shufro, 1994; Warton, 2001).

Gloomy Expectations and Learned Helplessness

Many struggling readers expect that any reading task—including homework—condemns them to failure and frustration (Blanton & Blanton, 1994; Chapman & Tunmer, 2003; Pearl, Bryan, & Donahue, 1980, as cited in Bryan et al., 2001). Because they have low self-efficacy for reading—they believe they cannot successfully read—they disengage (Butkowsky & Willows, 1980; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Henk & Melnick, 1995; Walker, 2003). Many adopt a “learned helplessness” approach to challenge (Butkowsky & Willows, 1980; Gaffney, Methven, Bagdasarian, 2002; Gunning, 1998; Lipson & Wixson, 2003; McCormick, 2003; Prater, 2003; Rasinski & Padak, 2000), avoiding tasks like homework, tasks that require them to work independently (Gajria & Salend, 1995; Gunning, 1998). Given their gloomy expectations and learned helplessness, it is not surprising that such students often quit when homework becomes difficult (Gajria & Salend, 1995).

Self-Regulatory Difficulties

Many students with learning disabilities—including struggling readers—have difficulties with the self-regulatory processes essential to completing homework (Bryan et al., 2001; Klassen, 2002; Patton, 1994; Tabassam & Grainger, 2002). They may, for example, have difficulty recording homework assignments, understanding task requirements, establishing task-related goals, assessing personal abilities, identifying appropriate task-relevant strategies, planning how to achieve task-related goals, enacting relevant strategies, monitoring and evaluating progress, adapting strategies, persevering to overcome difficulties, preventing and

overcoming distractions (Bryan et al., 2001; Gajria & Salend, 1995; Ley & Young, 2001; Spafford & Grosser, 1996; Vacca & Vacca, 2001; Winne, 2001; Zimmerman, 2001).

Situational and Environmental Difficulties

Many struggling readers lack a quiet place to do homework and do not have the after-school help they need to complete homework successfully (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Cooper, 2001a; Dawson & Guare, 2004). Many especially those from low-income homes, have after school obligations that interfere with homework: jobs, chores, child care.

Our discussion of causes is only a starting point. There may be other causes (e.g., peer pressure, emotional difficulties). Moreover, causes often interact with one another. Whatever the causes, they need to be identified and addressed to solve the problem.

Influencing Behavior: Struggling Readers' Personal Beliefs

A growing body of evidence suggests that people's beliefs about themselves strongly influence their behavior and achievement (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002, 2003; Ormrod, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 2001; Walker, 2003; Zimmerman, 1995, 2001): "People's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than in what is objectively the case" (Bandura, 1995, p. 2). Therefore, to achieve sustained success, Ryan's belief that he cannot succeed on homework must change.

But often, for beliefs to change, struggling readers' negative experiences with both classwork and homework need to change—work that produces frustration needs to be replaced with work that breeds both success (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002, 2003) and expectations of continued success (Alderman, 1999; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Stipek, 1998).

In many cases, however, success alone will not convince struggling readers that they can succeed; often, they need to learn to attribute their successes to effort and the correct use of specific learning strategies (Alderman, 1999; Bandura, 1997; Kozminsky & Kozminsky, 2003; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Ormrod, 2003;

Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Robertson, 2000; Stipek, 1998; Tabassam & Grainger, 2002; Walker, 2003). If they attribute success to luck, they will not view success as controllable or repeatable; if they attribute it to ability alone, when encountering setbacks they will feel “dumb” and vulnerable and act accordingly (Dweck, 1999).

*Social Cognitive Theory: A Framework for Understanding
Homework Difficulties*

Unfortunately, little research examines how to improve the homework performance of students with learning disabilities (for a summary, see Bryan et al., 2001, and Patton, 1994); virtually none examines struggling readers’ specific difficulties. Waiting for a compelling, persuasive body of research may take decades. In the meantime, struggling readers, their parents, and their teachers will continue to suffer. They cannot wait—the problem must be dealt with now, using the best information available (Patton, 1994).

Fortunately, social cognitive theory examines many potential causes of homework difficulty. By understanding several of the theory’s critical propositions—self-regulation, personal goals, task value, self-efficacy—as well as strategies that influence their development—enactive mastery, social modeling, attribution retraining, strategy instruction, goal setting, verbal persuasion, physiological reactivity (Alderman, 1999; Ormrod, 2003; Pajares, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000, 2001; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001a)—school personnel might better understand the causes of and generate potential solutions to a struggling reader’s homework difficulties. As Zimmerman (2001) posited, the theory’s emphasis on learning and motivation should make it “particularly appealing to educators who must deal with many poorly motivated students” (p. 6).

SELF-REGULATION: PLANNING, DOING, MONITORING,
ADAPTING, PERSEVERING

Because homework is usually a solitary, independent activity, struggling readers’ self-regulatory abilities—including their abilities to set task goals, plan work, control attention, manage time, select and apply appropriate strategies, guide efforts with self-verbalizations, concentrate, self-monitor progress, adapt strategies to progress and current conditions, compare achievement to task

goals (Ormrod, 2003; Schunk, 2001; Winne, 2001; Zimmerman, 1995, 2001; Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovach, 1996; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001b)—must match or surpass homework's self-regulatory demands. When they fall short, difficulties ensue. Thus, school personnel should help readers to develop the self-regulatory abilities needed to successfully complete assignments (Zimmerman et al., 1996), and make sure that assignments do not exceed these abilities (Good & Brophy, 2003).

PERSONAL BELIEFS: TASK VALUE AND PERSONAL GOALS

According to social cognitive theorists, learning and task completion also require that students have the will to engage and persist. This emanates, in part, from students' personal goals and their personal beliefs about a task's value: their belief that the task is important or interesting (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman, 2001), that they will succeed, and that success will produce valued outcomes (Bandura, 1971, 1997; Good & Brophy, 2003; Walker, 2003; Zimmerman, 1995, 2001; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

Students assess value by asking, "Why should I do this task?" (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 60). They will more likely engage in tasks they believe are "worth the effort" than those "not worth it" (Alderman, 1999; Good & Brophy, 2003; Horner & Shwery, 2002; Ormrod, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 2001; Stipek, 1998; Zimmerman, 2001). Believing tasks are "worth the effort" relates the importance of the tasks and interests students assigned to them to the degree that the students believe the tasks relate to their goals (Horner & Shwery, 2002; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Stipek, 1998). Consequently, they will likely assign greater value to tasks they believe will help them achieve personally important goals than to unrelated tasks (Alderman, 1999; Ormrod, 2003; Schunk, 2001; Stipek, 1998; Zimmerman, 2001). Similarly, many students are more likely to engage in tasks they believe will produce immediate, highly desired rewards than those that will not (Good & Brophy, 2003; Maag, 1999; Ormrod, 2003; Schunk, 2001).

In part, self-regulatory processes are driven by struggling readers' personal beliefs about a task's value and the benefits they will derive from success (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Ormrod, 2003; Zimmerman, 2001). Thus, teachers should assign homework that

readers' value and believe beneficial; if readers do not see this, teachers should help them make the connection.

PERSONAL BELIEFS: SELF-EFFICACY

Social cognitive theorists also assert that students' willingness to invest the effort needed to accomplish specific tasks and to persist on tasks emanates from their belief that they have the capability to succeed (Ormrod, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 2001; Zimmerman, 2001). They assess this belief or expectation by asking, "Am I able to do this task?" (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 62). Students derive answers from their interpretations of past experiences with similar tasks and from their attributions—the explanations given for their past successes and failures (Ormrod, 2003; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Walker, 2003; Zimmerman, 1995). Thus, if struggling readers are usually frustrated by homework, get poor homework grades, interpret their "failure" as a lack of ability, and expect to continue failing, they are unlikely to invest much effort and are likely to give up quickly (Chapman & Tunmer, 2003; Ormrod, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 2001).

Student beliefs about their ability to accomplish specific tasks in specific situations—called self-efficacy—influence both their willingness to engage in specific tasks (Horner & Shwery, 2002; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Ormrod, 2003; Walker, 2003; Zimmerman, 1995), such as writing answers to chapter questions, and their cognitive engagement (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). As Schunk (1999) noted:

A key personal variable is self-efficacy, or perceived capabilities for learning or performing tasks at designated levels. . . . Compared with learners who doubt their capabilities, efficacious students are more likely to engage in tasks, expend effort, persist to overcome difficulties, and perform at higher levels. (p. 220)

Thus, if struggling readers believe they can successfully complete a specific task, like reading three pages from their science text and answering short essay questions about them, they are more likely to engage in it than if they believe they cannot (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Ormrod, 2003; Walker, 2003; Zimmerman, 1995). Believing they cannot, they may resist (Gentile & McMillan, 1987; Henk & Melnick, 1995; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Rupley & Blair, 1989; Walker, 2003; Vacca & Vacca, 2001).

Like personal beliefs about a task's value and the likely benefits of success, self-efficacy influences motivation and helps drive self-regulatory behavior (Butler, 1995; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002, 2003; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Ormrod, 2003; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997a; Zimmerman, 2001). This indicates that teachers should give struggling readers homework readers believe they will succeed on if they make a moderate effort. It also indicates that school personnel should help struggling readers transform unrealistic "I can't do" self-efficacy beliefs to realistic "I can do" ones (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Pressley et al., 2003). Failure to change such beliefs can derail attempts to increase homework completion and quality.

Changing Beliefs: The Need for a Sustained, Informed Effort

Changing "I can't do" beliefs is often difficult and requires a systematic, sustained effort in which teachers continually use appropriate instructional strategies and assign work of moderate challenge likely to produce success (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Ormrod, 2003; Stipek, 1998). The idea is to get readers to believe that with moderate effort they can successfully complete classwork and its extension—homework—and that they will benefit. This alone can spur motivation: "As the research has shown, students are motivated to engage in tasks and achieve when they believe they can accomplish the task" (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003, p. 134).

Fortunately, the professional literature sheds considerable light on how to improve students' motivation and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002, 2003; Ormrod, 2003; Schunk, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000, 2001; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001a). By applying this knowledge to struggling readers' homework difficulties—an area lacking a large, impressive body of well-researched solutions—monitoring the effectiveness of interventions, and quickly adjusting them to remedy unforeseen difficulties, school personnel can increase the likelihood that readers will successfully complete homework.

Like all educational recommendations, ours are probabilistic, not deterministic (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). Social cognitive theory suggests they will work for many struggling readers but not all. On-average, however, school personnel who knowledgeablely,

expertly, and systematically apply social cognitive theory and who systematically monitor and adjust homework to reflect its effects, increase the likelihood of improving readers' beliefs and performance.

Suggestions from the Literature: Critical Principles

Although little research validates strategies for helping struggling readers improve their homework (Bryan et al., 2001; Miller & Kelly, 1991; Patton, 1994), the literature on instructing struggling readers and the literature on social cognitive theory strongly suggest that employing the principles below offers promise for improving readers' functioning (Balajthy & Lipa-Wade, 2003; Lipson & Wixson, 2003; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002, 2003; Manzo & Manzo, 1993; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Walker, 2003; Zimmerman, 1995). Instructional suggestions follow each principle.

Principle 1: Stress Challenging Work That Struggling Readers Can Complete Successfully Without Excessive, Laborious Effort

Social cognitive theorists assert that successes, or enactive experiences, "are the most influential source of efficacy belief because they are predicated on the outcomes of personal experiences" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 88). As Ormrod (2003) noted, "Students feel more confident that they can succeed at a task when they have succeeded at that task or at similar ones in the past" (p. 347). Thus, teachers should do everything possible to ensure that struggling readers, readers weary of failure, develop a foundation of ongoing successes. Without this, efforts to resolve homework difficulties will likely fail.

"STACK THE DECK" FOR SUCCESS

Because previous successes positively influence students' self-efficacy (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000), teachers should "stack the deck" for success—they should assign homework that struggling readers can readily and independently succeed on, without feeling highly anxious. Thus, teachers should not assign incomplete classwork—work that readers had difficulty finishing in school—as homework (Bryan et al., 2001; Patton, 1994).

To “stack the deck” for success, teachers should ensure that homework materials are at struggling readers’ independent reading level—readers can quickly recognize 96% or more of the words in context and understand 90% or more of the text (McCormick, 2003). For practice, drill, or review tasks with little reading, a similar rate of accuracy—90% or better—may be optimal (Good & Brophy, 1987; Paul & Epanchin, 1991; Rosenshine, 1983; Schloss & Smith, 1994). If readers are excessively anxious about homework or typically make more mistakes in response to original mistakes, materials of lesser difficulty may be needed. Using materials likely to minimize anxiety and produce high success rates helps to create, but does not guarantee, expectations of success.

To ensure that struggling readers can successfully complete new types of homework, teachers should assign such homework only after readers’ have succeed on similar work in class (Ormrod, 2003; Pajares, 2003; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). When necessary, teachers should help readers and observe the type and amount of assistance needed to successfully complete assignments. As readers demonstrate frequent success, teachers should gradually reduce assistance while observing readers’ success rates and the effort required. Homework should reflect this information.

MAKE ASSIGNMENTS SHORT AND SIMPLE

To improve attitudes toward homework, teachers might initially assign homework that is short and simple and then gradually, over weeks or months, increase its length and complexity, so struggling readers are challenged but not overwhelmed or frustrated. Teachers should keep in mind that (a) struggling readers are more likely to successfully complete short, simple assignments than long, complex ones (Patton, 1994); (b) struggling readers often require far more time than average achieving students to complete homework (Bryan et al., 2001; Good & Brophy, 2003); (c) many experts recommend that elementary school assignments be short and that high school assignments not be excessively lengthy (Cooper, 2001a, 2001b). Cooper (1989), for instance, recommends that in grades one, two, and three, students get three or fewer assignments weekly, each lasting 15 or fewer minutes; in grades four, five, and six, they get four or fewer assignments weekly, each lasting 15 to 45 minutes. Teachers should adjust these guidelines downward for struggling

readers with little tolerance for homework, little ability to work independently, and little in-home support (Cooper, 2001a, 2001b).

Every few weeks, teachers might ask parents how much time their child spends on homework and whether or not it is fatiguing or frustrating. If parents report difficulty or excessive time, teachers might ask about causes. To eliminate frustration and make homework productive, teachers should adjust homework to reflect parents' feedback.

LIMIT THE NUMBER OF ASSIGNMENTS

This helps make homework manageable rather than impossible. It also helps readers to focus on quality rather than quantity. This is especially important for readers who need excessive time to complete assignments and who have immature self-regulatory abilities (e.g., organization, strategy use, persistence).

With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, many struggling readers will participate in after- or before-school reading programs. If so, participation should replace homework (Allington, 2001). Not doing so will overload readers with work and minimize time for resting, playing, and making friends. The likely result: increased stress and decreased motivation.

ASSIGN HOMEWORK THAT MINIMIZES READING

When struggling readers detest or feel extremely discouraged or anxious about reading, temporarily assigning homework that minimizes or eliminates reading and writing may reduce resistance to homework. Substitute assignments might include collecting materials (e.g., automobile advertisements), categorizing information (e.g., pictures of rural, urban, and suburban life), making videotapes (e.g., newscasts), watching assigned television shows (e.g., "Biography"), taking photographs (e.g., storefronts, friends), conducting interviews (e.g., grandparents), or listening to audiotapes (e.g., Lincoln's biography).

Such homework can also help struggling readers prepare for classroom discussions. Simple preparation assignments, such as interviewing parents about the news or watching a DVD on manatees, can help struggling readers develop the background needed for class discussions and future reading.

The suggestion—a vacation from homework requiring more than minimal reading—is temporary. Certainly, a well-balanced

reading program designed to help struggling readers become “knowledgeable, strategic, and motivated” readers (Lipson & Wixson, 2003, p. 130) must stress reading. Sometimes, however, readers need a break from reading, especially if they detest reading and homework. By temporarily emphasizing other aspects of learning and structuring assignments to generate success, teachers might increase the odds that readers who resist homework will eventually complete it in a quality way.

*Principle 2: Design Assignments to Match Students’
Self-Regulatory Abilities*

Personalizing assignments by “stacking the deck” for success, making assignments short and simple, and limiting the number of assignments should help match homework to readers’ self-regulatory abilities. Additional factors, however, often need attention.

MAKE SURE STRUGGLING READERS KNOW WHAT HOMEWORK IS DUE

Students with learning disabilities often have great difficulty recording assignments accurately (Bryan et al., 2001). To address this problem, teachers might consider homework planners (calendars for recording assignments, completion data, and parent-teacher communications; Bryan et al., 2001; Dawson & Guare, 2004). When, however, struggling readers have difficulty accurately recording assignments, teachers might consider printing them on large mailing labels (e.g., 4" × 1.5"), e-mailing or faxing (using the broadcast option) them home, listing them on web sites (Salend, Duhaney, Anderson, & Gottschalk, 2004), or recording them on telephone answering machines.

MAKE SURE STRUGGLING READERS UNDERSTAND THE ASSIGNMENT

Because many struggling readers have difficulty understanding what is said, they often misunderstand homework requirements (Patton, 1994). To assure understanding, teachers should ask students to explain how to do the homework and have them begin it in class (Patton, 1994; Salend & Schliff, 1989). This is advantageous to teachers: it allows them to observe misunderstandings and other difficulties and modify assignments and decide what to re-teach. It is also advantageous to readers: it allows them to ask questions and seek additional help.

MAKE SURE STRUGGLING READERS HAVE NEEDED HOMEWORK MATERIALS

If struggling readers often fail to bring home books and other materials needed for homework, school personnel might (a) check that the readers have the needed materials before they go home, (b) fax (e.g., broadcast) or e-mail (e.g., attachments) required papers, and (c) arrange for parents to have an extra set of books. Salend and Schliff (1989) recommend that teachers help students identify the resources needed to complete homework. Dawson and Guare (2004) offer a daily homework planner that has children answer “Do I have all the materials? Do I need help? Who will help me?” (p. 123).

KEEP ORGANIZATIONAL AND WRITTEN REQUIREMENTS DOABLE

Teachers should keep in mind that many struggling readers, including those with well-developed listening abilities, have extreme difficulty organizing work and cannot compose well-organized essay-like responses that match their instructional reading level (quickly recognize 90% to 95% of words in context and understand 70% to 89% of the text; McCormick, 2003). Some, even with good organizational abilities, find 10-minutes of essay-like writing frustrating. In these cases, teachers should not assign homework requiring lengthy written responses. Results will probably improve if they assign homework that limits writing to a few sentences, asks readers to check items, match items, fill in blanks, circle answers, and make categorical lists.

TEACH NEEDED SELF-REGULATORY SKILLS

Teachers should teach struggling readers whatever self-regulatory skills they need to succeed on homework (Dawson & Guare, 2004; Patton, 1994; Zimmerman et al., 1996). Skills include setting task goals, planning work, following directions, managing time, selecting and applying strategies, self-verbalizing strategy steps, and monitoring and self-evaluating progress (Ormond, 2003; Schunk, 2001; Winne, 2001; Zimmerman, 1995, 2001; Zimmerman et al., 1996; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001b). Some skills are far more difficult to master and require far more time to teach than others. By matching assignments to struggling readers' abilities to function independently, emphasizing practice assignments, and using shaping and behavioral contracts, teachers

may minimize the potentially deleterious effects of self-regulatory difficulties.

EMPHASIZE PRACTICE ASSIGNMENTS

Especially during early attempts to get struggling readers to routinely and successfully complete homework, teachers should assign practice rather than novel homework or homework that requires learning or applying new concepts (Cooper & Nye, 1994; Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997; Patton, 1994; Polloway, Epstein, Bursuck, Jayanthi, & Cumblad, 1994). As the name implies, practice assignments give readers opportunities to practice or apply what they have just about but have not quite mastered. If, for example, when decoding, they have almost mastered applying the initial consonants *f*, *s*, and *m*, teachers can give them homework that has them use these sounds to identify words in a crossword puzzle. To avoid practicing mistakes, their in-class accuracy rate for independently completing similar assignments should exceed 90%.

USE SHAPING TO ENCOURAGE PRACTICE

By making things doable, explicit, and rewarding for struggling readers, shaping can minimize resistance to homework. The underlying ideas are to (a) get readers to routinely submit homework that teachers can reinforce, with reinforcers readers' value; (b) use reinforcers as feedback of progress (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

With shaping, teachers reinforce struggling readers for behavioral changes that increasingly approximate but do not fully match a targeted behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2003; Maag, 1999). If, for example, the targeted behavior is "Ryan will earn a 'B' on 5 consecutive homework assignments at his independent level," and the grading standards are explicit, teachers might initially reinforce Ryan for each "C" he earns. Once he earns a "C" on five consecutive assignments, the reinforcement criteria is raised to the next level, "C+," and "C" work is no longer reinforced. This shaping strategy—gradually increasing criteria for reinforcement commensurate with Ryan's successes—is followed with "B-'s" and then "B's" until Ryan achieves the target of 5 consecutive "B's."

USE BEHAVIORAL CONTRACTS

Like shaping, behavioral contracts that use powerful extrinsic reinforcers can motivate struggling readers to complete independent level homework. A contract might state: “For each correct homework answer, Ryan will earn 2 minutes of computer time during free period. For example, if he correctly answers 3 questions, he can use the computer for 6 minutes; if he correctly answers 8 questions, he can use it for 16 minutes. As with all programs of extrinsic rewards, rewards should be paired with task-specific verbal praise and gradually, almost imperceptibly phased out (Alberto & Troutman, 2003; Good & Brophy, 2003). Greenwood (2003), Maag (1999), and Heron and Harris (2001) offer excellent, practical guidance for developing behavioral contracts.

*Principle 3: Use Peer Models to Create Vicarious Experiences
to Which Students Relate*

Social cognitive theory asserts that modeling is one of the most powerful ways to teach students new behaviors and new information and to raise self-efficacy:

Modeling fulfills information and motivation functions. Modeled behavior provides information about what sequence of actions will lead to success and about which actions have undesirable consequences. Models can raise efficacy among observers who are apt to believe that they will be successful if they follow the same behavioral sequence. (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997, p. 38)

In contrast to adult models, peer models, similar to the student observer, may be particularly effective in strengthening students’ self-efficacy (Alderman, 1999; Schunk, 1999, 2001; Zimmerman, 2001).

LINK MODELING TO HOMEWORK

In most instances, homework is solitary—struggling readers are on their own. In class, however, peer models who struggling readers see as similar (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 2003) can play an important role in preparing readers for homework by demonstrating how to use a skill or strategy and what to say to oneself in the process. If homework closely resembles what readers observed and successfully practiced in class, they will likely anticipate

success, increasing prospects of completion (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997b; Zimmerman, 2000).

USE COPING MODELS, IF POSSIBLE

Peer models can be mastery or coping models. Unlike mastery models who flawlessly use target skills and learning strategies, coping models need to learn the skill or strategy and learn to apply it (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2002). They have trouble and make mistakes. Paradoxically, this can benefit struggling readers. By seeing how coping models, similar to them, make and overcome mistakes in acquiring and applying a new skill or strategy, struggling readers often realize they too can achieve this: “He’s like me. If he can do it, I can.” This can raise self-efficiency (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 2003).

To realize the potential of coping models, modeling must be planned. This involves:

- choosing a skill or learning strategy that the model and the struggling readers should have little difficulty learning—moderately challenging but not overly difficult.
- selecting models similar to the struggling readers (e.g., same sex and achievement level).
- having models explain what they are doing, step-by-step, while they work to learn and apply the targeted skill.
- having models correct their mistakes and explicitly attribute failures to controllable factors (e.g., poor effort) and successes to controllable factors (e.g., correctly using the strategy) and ability (e.g., “By practicing and monitoring what I did, I learned Multipass. Not bad”).
- having readers observe models get reinforced for correctly applying the targeted skill or strategy in a variety of appropriate situations.
- reinforcing readers for correctly applying the targeted skill or strategy in a variety of appropriate situations.

*Principle 4: Teach Students the Learning Strategies Needed
to Succeed on Assigned Tasks*

When struggling readers do not know how to succeed on tasks or how to reach their goals, they are apt to resist or quit. But as Ames (1990) noted:

Children's self-efficacy does respond positively when they learn to set short-term, realistic goals and are shown how to make progress toward these goals. It is not a matter of convincing them that they can do well or even guaranteeing it; it is giving them the strategies to do so. (p. 412)

In line with this, Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein (1997) and Patton (1994) recommend teaching students the study skills they need to succeed on homework assignments.

TEACH STRATEGIES TO THE POINT OF MASTERY

Learning strategies “are techniques, principles, or rules that enable students to learn, to solve problems and compete tasks independently” (Swanson & Desher, 2003, p. 131). They often involve a series of steps or procedures associated with acronyms (e.g., RAP—R: Read the paragraph; A: Ask yourself what the paragraph was about; P: Put into your own words the main idea and two important details; Ellis, 1996). If struggling readers need to use a specific learning strategy to succeed on homework, they must overlearn it so that they can apply it without difficulty when working alone; otherwise, they are unlikely to use it (Swanson & Desher, 2003). Thus, it is important not to select and teach strategies willy-nilly or to teach too many at a time.

FOLLOW A SEQUENCE OF INSTRUCTIONAL STEPS

Because strategy instruction can be complicated, instruction should be orderly, as illustrated by this adaptation of Rosenberg, Wilson, Maheady, and Sindelar's (1997) instructional sequence:

- Determine the struggling readers' current level of competence with the targeted strategy; have them make a verbal or written commitment to master it.
- Describe the strategy in ways that will help readers remember it.
- Model the strategy while using an explicit think aloud; prompt readers to verbally self-instruct themselves while using the strategy; provide corrective feedback.
- Have readers verbally elaborate and rehearse each step of the strategy and explain its purpose.
- Provide ample amounts of guided and independent practice with familiar materials and content.
- Provide ample amounts of guided and independent practice with other coursework materials.

- Tell readers when they have mastered the strategy.
- Discuss how the strategy can be used in a variety of situations, including homework.
- Teach readers to monitor their use of the strategy. To guide their monitoring, teach them to use a checklist of the strategy's steps.
- Teach readers to reinforce themselves for correctly using the strategy.

Throughout the process, teachers should provide task-specific encouragement and merited praise.

*Principle 5: Review Homework and Teach Students to Monitor
Their Progress and Strategy Use*

Unless teachers frequently review homework for completeness and accuracy (Salend & Schliff, 1989), they can undermine its importance (Cooper, 1989; Patton, 1994; Sullivan & Sequeira, 1996). Moreover, failure to provide regular feedback on what readers did correctly and how they can correct mistakes promotes erroneous knowledge and incorrect practices.

FREQUENTLY REVIEW HOMEWORK

By frequently reviewing homework that matches struggling readers' ability to function independently (Good & Brophy, 2003), teachers create opportunities to strengthen readers' self-efficacy by showing them how and why they succeeded. Despite the importance of reviewing homework (Patton, 1994), teachers cannot spend countless hours doing this. Several solutions are available: assign homework that can be reviewed quickly, have paraprofessionals grade homework for accuracy and completeness, grade homework as "acceptable," "needs improvement," or "missing," give students answer keys to informally grade their homework. If used, grading should be minimized and not used to punish readers for poor or missing work (Cooper, 1989).

Because old habits die slowly and emerging ones need nurturing, comments about homework should stress improvement rather than absolute performance (Alderman, 1999; Stipek, 1998). This minimizes the weight given to poor starts and prevents them from becoming black holes of pessimism that impede progress. Stressing improvement can prevent struggling readers from thinking,

“No use trying. With all my zeros for missing homework I’ll never get a good grade.” It can also kick-start them into believing, “If I start doing homework tonight my old zeros won’t count much. The teacher will grade me on what I start doing, now.”

GRAPH SUCCESS AND TEACH SELF-MONITORING STRATEGIES

Frequent feedback about improving performance can boost students’ self-efficacy and improve behavior (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Salend & Schliff, 1989; Sapsolsky, 1998; Schunk, 1999, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997a). One way to provide feedback is to graph improvements (Bryan et al., 2001); such visible, historical evidence of improvement can persuade students that they can successfully complete particular tasks (McCabe, 2003). Thus, by charting struggling readers’ homework successes (e.g., grades, submission rates) and teaching them to observe and record their progress, teachers can increase readers’ homework completion rates (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998; Trammel, Schloss, & Alper, 1994). As Ormrod (2003) observed, “Self-focused observation and recording can bring about changes (sometimes dramatic ones) in student behavior” (p. 351).

Self-monitoring should reflect the struggling reader’s maturity level. For instance, younger readers might enjoy using Countoons (see Daly & Ranalli, 2003), in which they mark cartoons that indicate if they used the proper academic strategy or self-regulatory behavior or completed their homework. To self-monitor and record progress, older readers need graphs that look more businesslike (see Alberto & Troutman, 2003; Maag, 1999).

Principle 6: Teach Struggling Readers to Attribute Success to Controllable Behaviors

Students who believe that they can succeed on specific tasks and who attribute their successes to controllable factors (e.g., effort and the correct use of learning strategies) are more likely to persist in the face of difficulty than students who believe they lack the ability to succeed (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Ormrod, 2003). The bad news is that many struggling readers attribute failure to a lack of ability (“I’m dumb”) and success to external uncontrollable factors (“It was dumb luck”)—this breeds pessimism and low self-efficacy. The good news is that positive, facilitative

attributions—attributions that improve motivation—can be taught (Kozminsky & Kozminsky, 2003).

ATTRIBUTE RESULTS TO EFFORT, PERSISTENCE, AND THE CORRECT USE OF STRATEGIES

In private and small group meetings with struggling readers, and in written comments, teachers should stress to readers how their effort, persistence, and correct use of strategies engendered success (Fulk & Mastropieri, 1990; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ring & Reetz, 2000; Shelton, Anastopoulos, & Linden, 1985): “Ryan, your Mom told me you worked on this for 20 minutes. That’s how long I thought it should take the class to do this. Rereading to make sure your answers made sense was smart. Your effort and rereading earned you an ‘A.’ Great job!” This feedback attributes success to Ryan’s effort and persistence and to his correct use of a monitoring and rereading strategy—factors he can control (Dweck, 1999). It also implies that he has important, controllable abilities—to persist and to use correct strategies. By naming these factors and helping Ryan attribute his success to them, the teacher helps Ryan make the connections needed to strengthen his self-efficacy for homework.

Attributing success to effort, however, can backfire if struggling readers’ think the task is easy and the effort needed to succeed great (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). To prevent this problem, teachers’ attributions of effort should be modest and specific. When accurate, and when the readers’ effort is similar to that of other students, teachers might note the similarity.

When making attributions, teachers should place the evaluation statement (e.g., Great job”) after the rationale (“Rereading . . . was smart”). This prevents the possibility that once readers’ hear the evaluation they will ignore the rationale (Lyden, Chaney, Danehower, & Houston, 2002).

USE THINK-ALOUDS

If struggling readers do poorly on presumably independent level homework, teachers should identify the sources of difficulty. To identify them, teachers might supportively ask readers where and when they did the homework, what was happening around them, and how much time and energy they invested.

If struggling readers are moderately proficient with think-alouds—the “talking through of an endeavor . . . saying aloud new steps [of a strategy] until they become part of our ‘inner voice’ of knowledge” (Wilhelm, 2001, p. 19)—teachers might give them a copy of the homework and ask them to describe what they were *thinking* when they first saw it, started working on it, were midway through it, and encountered difficulties (asking readers to point these out is often revealing). Teachers can use this information to create instructional think-alouds (Tierney & Readance, 2000) appropriate for individual or small groups of readers with similar needs. To model what readers would have to think and do to successfully complete the homework, teachers can, in the think-aloud, combine “I” statements (Walker, 2003) with attribution statements. Thus, a teacher might think aloud before struggling readers: “Next time I’ll preview the material first and I’ll reread it until I know it cold. I won’t give up. This should help me do better.”

DEVELOP PERSONALIZED LISTS OF ATTRIBUTION STATEMENTS

Another way to help struggling readers attribute success to effort, persistence, and the application of specific reading strategies, is for teachers to help them create a personalized list of attribution statements, along with a list of explicit strategy steps, in checklist form. By combining previously developed attribution statements (e.g., “I never gave up”) with explicit strategy steps (e.g., “I succeeded because I used the rereading strategy we used in class”), struggling readers have an emotional and cognitive roadmap for success (Fulk & Mastropieri, 1990). To maximize the success of attribution training, however, requires regular discussions of specific attributions, frequent practice with self-attribution, and a steady, manageable flow of independent level homework activities that produce success. Without frequent success, attributions will ring hollow (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002) and self-efficacy for homework will suffer.

ASSOCIATE EXTRINSIC REINFORCEMENT WITH FACILITATIVE ATTRIBUTIONS

If, with parental support, struggling readers seem resistant to completing well-designed, independent level homework, teachers might consider combining extrinsic reinforcement with facilitative

attributions that emphasize effort and the correct use of strategies. Extrinsic reinforcement uses reinforcers or rewards that teachers or parents give to readers—reinforcers that readers want, lack, and will work to get (e.g., toys, snacks, stickers, game time, free time). These reinforcers provide them with feedback and temporary incentives to do what they typically avoid. If sufficiently powerful, extrinsic reinforcers can kick-start homework. By pairing attributions with highly valued, extrinsic reinforcers, the value and importance that readers give to teachers' attributions may increase.

However, if used incorrectly, extrinsic reinforcement can backfire. It can reinforce a struggling reader's belief that tasks should be done for extrinsic reinforcement only, resulting in a return to old habits when reinforcement ends. Strategies for eliminating this potentially debilitating effect include:

- using the smallest, least conspicuous reinforcers that readers will work to get.
- stressing aspects of work that readers find attractive.
- using task-specific praise that stresses increasing competence.
- linking reinforcement to realistic performance standards.
- systematically and gradually reducing the frequency of reinforcement.

Principle 7: Link Homework to Struggling Readers' Short-Term Goals

Personally relevant goals energize and motivate people (Ormrod, 2003; Schunk, 2003; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997a); goals are what people want to do, get, or achieve. Often, struggling readers fail to understand the importance of homework and its relationship to their goals. This happens when homework is busy work or teachers have not helped readers connect homework to readers' goals.

LINK HOMEWORK TO PERSONAL GOALS

By frequently explaining to struggling readers why a series of homework assignments is important and linking it to readers' short-term personal goals—learning to read television schedules, making money, getting a driver's license—teachers can help to direct and fuel readers' willingness to do homework. This also helps teachers avoid the pitfall of assigning busy work, whose irrelevance can erode readers' motivation for schoolwork (Allington, 2001).

Teachers, without preaching, might discuss with struggling readers how a specific set of homework assignments relates to their lives (Patton, 1994), how it can help them achieve their goals (Rock, 2004), and why, with modest effort, they can succeed. As with most tasks, struggling readers are more prone to complete work they view as valuable—work that will help them achieve their goals—than work unrelated to their goals (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Rock, 2004).

HELP STRUGGLING READERS DEVELOP PERSONALLY IMPORTANT SHORT-TERM GOALS

Because it is easier and quicker to observe progress on realistic short-term goals than on long-term goals and because short-term goals are more quickly achieved, they are usually more motivating and produce higher levels of self-efficacy (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 2003; Zimmerman, 2000, 2001). Unfortunately, many struggling readers lack realistic or personally important short-term goals. By helping readers develop such goals, teachers can fuel their willingness to engage in schoolwork (Rock, 2004).

To help readers develop short-term goals, teachers might discuss with them what they enjoy, what interests them, and what concerns them. Then, using Rock's (2004) ACT-REACT strategy (Articulate short and long-term goals, Create a work plan, Take pictures, Reflect on goal attainment, Evaluate progress daily, ACT again), teachers might help readers figure out how to use short-term goals to achieve long-term ones. Once readers are satisfied with their goals, teachers might increase readers' motivation for homework by explicitly linking it to their goals.

Principle 7: Make Homework Interesting, Relevant, Socially Acceptable, and Worthwhile

Interest enhances motivation, learning, and response rates (Clarke et al., 1995; Ganske et al., 2003; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Mayer, 2003). It affects the use of learning strategies and other learning-related behaviors (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002): "When students are interested in texts and tasks they attend to them longer and remain with them even if somewhat difficult" (Turner, 1995, p. 417). To capitalize on or spur interest, teachers should create situations that bolster struggling readers' successes and confidence, as confidence

can create interest (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). To further galvanize interest, teachers might assign homework that is relevant to readers (Patton, 1994), encourages them to apply schoolwork to real-life situations (Bryan et al., 2001), emphasizes links to people, and is tied to discussions of students' everyday lives (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). They might also let struggling readers choose between assignments, use collaborative social structures, assign look-alike homework, elicit struggling readers' suggestions, and use reinforcement schedules to deliver powerful reinforcers.

EMPHASIZE LINKS TO PEOPLE

People are interested in people and stories (Schallert & Reed, 1997): "We all live by narrative, every day and every minute of our lives. Narrative is the human way of working through a chaotic and unforgiving world" (Wilson, 2002, p. 10).

To make homework interesting, teachers might focus it on stories about people involved in difficult, challenging situations (Schallert & Reed, 1997). They might select coherent, clearly structured materials that are vivid, intense, and emotionally captivating (Good & Brophy, 2003), materials that learners can identify with and that build upon their knowledge (Alverman & Phelps, 1998). In some cases, assignments that emphasize links to people might eliminate the need for extrinsic reinforcement and increase the probability that struggling readers will successfully complete homework.

Consider, for example, a common type of high school assignment given near the end of a period: "Answer questions 1–10, on the Constitution, on page 235." Often, struggling readers find such assignments sterile (Sullivan & Sequeira, 1996) and overwhelming. To make the Constitution and related homework more authentic and interesting, teachers might show and discuss brief, dramatic portions of the video, "Freedom Never Dies" (PBS Video, 1999), the life and murder of Harry T. Moore, a great but forgotten civil rights leader. If the discussion goes well, for homework, teachers might ask struggling readers to check "yes" or "no" to several questions about what they expect the full video to show (e.g., Yes/No: Harry T. Moore's goal was to become rich. Yes/No: Harry T. Moore's work placed his family in danger. Yes/No: The FBI and the Florida police did everything they could to protect Harry T. Moore.). If the video and the discussions capture the

readers' interests, they are more likely to complete such doable, well-designed, relevant homework. The principle is simple: Interest reduces resistance (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).

TIE HOMEWORK TO DISCUSSIONS OF STUDENTS' EVERYDAY LIVES

Discussing topics that are part of struggling readers' lives—topics familiar and relevant and important to them—creates interest that can reduce resistance to related homework (Bryan et al., 2001). By safely discussing such topics in small, mixed-achievement groups, teachers can reduce the isolation and stigma that struggling readers often feel in school, and increase the opportunity for them to competently participate in class.

Engaging struggling readers in discussions can be difficult. The following guidelines, adapted from Vacca and Vacca (1996), can enhance participation:

- Arrange the room so students can see one another and can meet to share ideas.
- Explicitly state the topic and the goal of the discussion (e.g., True or false?: Fear about school safety is exaggerated and unjustified).
- Encourage and reinforce good listening.
- Begin discussions with mixed-achievement groups of two or three students.
- Monitor discussions; keep them focused on the central topic, core question, or problem.
- Use simple language; frequently check for understanding; clarify misunderstandings.

LET STRUGGLING READERS CHOOSE HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS

Pintrich and Schunk (2002) noted that “almost all motivation theories suggest . . . choice increases motivation” (p. 298). Guthrie and Humenick (2004) found that choice produced an effect size of 0.95 on motivation for reading and 1.20 on reading achievement and comprehension. Thus, several times a week, teachers might let struggling readers choose one of several homework assignments.

USE COLLABORATIVE SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Teachers should take advantage of collaborative social structures that increase engagement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004;

Turner, 1995) and make homework more enjoyable (Leone & Richards, 1989). Even simple collaborative structures, like small voluntary groups, in which students help one another do homework, can encourage homework completion as long as students know they are there to help, not to give one another answers. If work is at everyone's independent level, such problems are unlikely.

ASSIGN LOOK-ALIKE HOMEWORK

To minimize stigma and motivate some struggling readers, teachers should, when possible, assign struggling readers homework that looks like that given to the rest of the class (Bryan et al., 2001; Nelson, Epstein, Bursuck, Jayanthi, & Sawyer, 1998).

If the class's homework is at the struggling readers' independent reading or comfort level, but it is too lengthy or complex, teachers should shorten or simplify it. For a twenty-question assignment, they might assign the first five or every fourth question.

If the homework's reading level is too difficult, shortening it will not help. Instead, teachers might assign struggling readers the same type homework, on the same topic, using easier materials. If this isn't feasible, teachers should make sure that readers are taught to read the homework in advance of the assignment, as part of in-class or pull-out (e.g., resource center) lessons. If the reading remains too difficult, teachers should eliminate the homework or make it voluntary (e.g., extra credit; Cooper, 1989).

ELICIT STRUGGLING READERS' SUGGESTIONS

To elicit ideas about the kinds of homework assignments struggling readers prefer and can succeed on, teachers might discuss these topics with them. Teachers might also show them different type assignments and formats and ask for their preferences. It may be, for example, that they prefer underlining to matching and matching to writing (see Alber, Nelson, & Brennan, 2002). By seeking such information, teachers communicate respect for readers' views and insights.

USE REINFORCEMENT SCHEDULES TO SYSTEMATICALLY DELIVER POWERFUL REINFORCERS

Despite assigning struggling readers interesting, relevant, independent level homework linked to their goals, some will refuse

to do homework. Consequently, they might fail subjects or find themselves in frequent conflict with school personnel (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). Preventing this often requires a systematic, intensive, carefully monitored program of applied behavior analysis that uses schedules of reinforcement to deliver powerful, extrinsic reinforcers—what struggling readers will work to get.

In general, teachers should start with a continuous schedule, reinforcing every homework assignment satisfactorily completed. Once struggling readers consistently submit such homework, teachers should gradually, almost imperceptibly, reduce the frequency of reinforcement by moving to thinner schedules, such as variable ratio (VR) schedules, in which reinforcers are dispensed an *average* of once every “nth” satisfactorily completed assignment (see Alberto & Troutman, 2003, and Maag, 1999). If external reinforcers do not improve rates and quality, school personnel should ask:

- Do the struggling readers adequately value what we consider powerful reinforcers?
- Is reinforcement too infrequent?
- Are the reading materials too difficult or the assignments too complex or abstract?
- What else is interfering with homework completion?

*Principle 8: Link Positive Physiological States to School Work
and Homework in Particular*

Social cognitive theorists (Bandura, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000) assert that a prime source of self-efficacy is one’s physiological state or physiological reaction to events. They note that negative affective reactions—extreme stress and anxiety—can impair self-efficacy, which can impair learning. Teachers can often prevent, reduce, or eliminate negative affective reactions by providing struggling readers with continual success, especially on moderately challenging tasks that readers value. Teachers can also improve readers’ physiological responses by creating a pleasant, supportive atmosphere (McCabe, 2003) and arranging for relaxation training (Margolis, 1987, 1990) or counseling to address homework problems (Margolis, McCabe, & Alber, 2004).

Principle 9: Secure Parental Support

Parents are often the key to improving struggling readers' success with homework (Bryan et al., 2001; Patton, 1994). They provide models of behavior and instill values. Often, only they can provide a quiet place and the structure needed to do homework.

To help parents support their child's homework efforts, school personnel might help parents develop a support plan (e.g., set aside specific time for homework; sign their child's homework planner), suggest specific support activities (e.g., read assigned materials or books to their child; name unknown words, when asked), ask parents if they want information about homework (e.g., a list of upcoming topics and assignments), invite parents to participate in a school-home reinforcement system (e.g., reinforce their child for reasonable efforts), and ask parents to monitor and limit homework (e.g., have their child stop working if frustrated).

Principle 10: Provide Needed Support

In essence, everything we have recommended is support aimed at making struggling readers (and teachers) successful. Some readers, however, need more (Dawson & Guare, 2004). They may need daily, after-school help from an in-school homework support center; access to a homework hotline (Patton, 1994); ongoing reading instruction, by a reading specialist, that is carefully coordinated with in-class instruction (Allington & Cunningham, 2002); ongoing, frequent, skilled counseling to help them deal with their academic problems and any emotional difficulties arising from these problems (Margolis et al., 2004); and fun and enjoyment, lots of it, to give them a cushion, a psychological shield to minimize and balance the hurt their reading problems cause. Some, who come from chaotic, neglectful, or dangerous homes, may need social service supports. Fortunately, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1997; P. L. 105-17) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (P. L. 93-112) often provide school personnel with the legal support needed to request extra homework help, reading help, counseling, and social services.

Increasing the Odds of Success

Although the principles discussed and our suggestions for homework practices do not guarantee success, they improve the likelihood that struggling readers with low self-efficacy for homework will increase their compliance rate and improve the quality of homework, especially if the principles and emanating activities are (a) stressed throughout the day; (b) part of an overall program designed to foster readers' beliefs in their abilities; (c) adapted to the needs and characteristics of the struggling readers, their teachers, and the instructional situation; (d) carefully monitored to assess their effectiveness; and (e) modified to reflect findings.

Not addressing homework problems and not addressing low or sagging motivation for school work is a mistake. Continued homework problems—often a proxy for many school and learning problems—will likely create ongoing conflict between parents and children, parents and school personnel, and struggling readers and school personnel, decreasing readers' chances of succeeding in school. Low motivation for homework, reading, and other school work will adversely affect learning and achievement (Lipson & Wixson, 2003), which can adversely affect a struggling reader's entire future. Similarly, low self-efficacy in critical areas—even homework—can adversely affect children's' entire future. As Bandura (1997) has warned:

People who doubt their capabilities in particular domains of activity [low self-efficacy] shy away from difficult tasks in those domains. They find it hard to motivate themselves, and they...give up quickly in the face of obstacles. They have low aspirations.... In taxing situations, they dwell on their personal deficiencies.... They are slow to recover their sense of efficacy following failure or setbacks.... It does not require all that much failure for them to lose faith in their capabilities. They fall easy victim to stress and depression. (p. 39)

Thus, we contend that if homework and related problems adversely affect struggling readers, resolving these problems, in ways that enhance self-efficacy and motivation, must become a primary instructional goal. To do less is to perpetuate a downward cycle of failure, frustration, and conflict.

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