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What Reading Program Does My Child Need?

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Parents often ask, “My child has a reading problem. What do I do? What program does he need?” Teachers ask similar questions. Unfortunately, for two reasons, these questions can’t be answered.

First, programs do not teach reading-teachers do. As Allington (2002) so rightly asserted:

> In the end, enhanced reading proficiency rests largely on the capacity of classroom teachers to provide expert, exemplary reading instruction. . . . Teaching cannot be packaged. Exemplaryaghing is not regurgitation of a common script but is responsive to children’s needs. In the end it will become clearer that there are no “proven programs,” just schools in which we find more expert teachers-teachers who need no script to tell them what to do. (p. 747)

This strongly suggests the second reason—teachers need to know the struggling reader’s needs: the level of materials he can read comfortably, the concepts and skills he needs to learn (curriculum), the methodology, strategies, and instructional considerations likely to accelerate his learning, and topics and strategies likely to motivate him. This requires a competent reading evaluation, by a reading specialist. Unfortunately, many reading evaluations miss the mark. Instead of designing evaluations to answer critical questions—questions responsive to the struggling reader’s difficulties and learning situation—reading specialists often administer a few routine tests, report the scores, and suggest reading interventions they have not tried with him. Rarely do they engage in the diagnostic teaching needed to determine the validity of their recommendations. This omission, as Wilson and Cleland (1989) noted, can lead to “faulty conclusions” (p. 172). Similarly, they rarely investigate, systematically, the struggling reader’s confidence in his particular abilities (self-efficacy), or his motivation for specific topics. Consequently, the program they recommend may produce resistance.

Instructionally-Relevant Questions

For parents and teachers to effectively work with a reading specialist to design an instructionally-relevant evaluation, they need to know what questions need answering. Figure 1 provides a list of instructionally-relevant questions for Brian, a hypothetical struggling reader. These questions are instructionally relevant because their answers can directly influence the design of instruction, increasing the probability that instruction will accelerate learning.

Levels of Functioning, Complexity of Materials, Tasks

1. What are Brian's instructional, independent, and frustration levels for oral and silent reading?
2. What are Brian's instructional, independent, and frustration levels for narrative and expository materials?
3. What are Brian's instructional, independent, and frustration levels for listening comprehension?
4. What length materials can Brian comfortably read?
5. How much reading can we expect Brian to do in different subjects (e.g., how many pages can he comfortably and successfully read each week from his social studies books)?
6. What degree of complexity is appropriate for Brian in reading and in subjects in which he is typically asked to read (e.g., social studies)?
7. On what kind of reading and writing tasks does Brian typically do (a) well, (b) poorly?

Curriculum

8. What, if any, are Brian's major problems with word recognition, word analysis, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and writing?
8. What percentage of time should be spent teaching Brian word recognition, word analysis, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and writing?
10. What materials should be used to teach Brian to read and write?
11. What realistic, meaningful goals and objectives can address Brian's educational needs?
12. Which goals and objectives are most important for Brian to achieve in the next two to three months?

Instructional Strategies and Considerations

13. What specific reading strategies does Brian need to learn? How can he best learn them? Are particular instructional strategies (e.g., Fernald's VAKT, Glass Analysis) likely to be more beneficial than others?
14. How many hours per week should Brian receive one-to-one reading and writing instruction?
15. How many hours per week should Brian receive reading and writing instruction in groups of five or fewer students?
16. How much guided and independent practice does Brian need to make progress in reading and writing?
17. To what degree does Brian need distributed learning? What schedule would be effective?

18. How frequentlydoes Brain need feedback? What should it emphasize?
19. What modifications in reading materials, textbooks, in-class assignments, homework assignments, and instructional strategies should be used with Brian in regular classrooms and in extra reading and writing instruction?
20. What supports does Brian need to succeed in the regular classroom?
21. What assistive technology or software can help Brian? How successful was he when he tried these? In what situations should these be used?
22. How much homework should Brian get each day? What type of homework assignments could benefit Brian? What modifications are needed to ensure success? What cautions should be noted in assigning Brian homework?
23. How can Brian's parents help him at home? What supports do they need to ensure their efforts are successful?
24. What related or support services does Brian need (e.g., counseling to help with his homework problems and to boost his self-efficacy)?
25. What support services does Brian's teacher need to accelerate Brian's progress (e.g., weekly consultation from a specialist in applied behavior analysis, demonstration lessons by a reading specialist)?

Motivation

26. How frequently does Brian need to be reinforced?
27. What does Brian find reinforcing?
28. What strategies are likely to increase Brian's self-efficacy and motivation?
29. What topics, materials, and activities interest Brian?

Monitoring

30. What data should be collected and analyzed to monitor and evaluate Brian's progress?
31. How often should this data be collected and analyzed and by whom?
32. What is the most efficient way to institute program modifications?
33. How can extra reading instruction be coordinated with Brian's in-class instruction?

Additional Questions

34. Additional question:

Figure 1. Samples of functional questions *

* For each answer, ask, "What evidence supports this answer?"

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Consider, for example, how partial answers to questions from Figure 1 can influence the design of instruction.

- Questions 1, 2, and 22: Brian's frustration level is 5th grade for narrative and expository materials, his instructional level is 4th grade for both, and his independent level is 3rd grade for both. Therefore, homework—usually an independent activity—should be at the 3rd grade level, as he will have to complete it independently. Adding to the need to keep homework assignments at a 3rd grade level—an independent, manageable level—is his parents' unwillingness to help with homework because helping causes family fights.
- Questions 8 and 29: Brian reads words quickly and accurately, even at his frustration level; at his instructional and frustration levels he has difficulty with comprehension. Therefore, teachers should avoid remedial programs that emphasize phonics; instead, Brian's listening vocabulary, understanding of language, interests, and willingness to think about what he's reading should be assessed and reading instruction should emphasize comprehension.
- Question 13: Because Brian has reading comprehension difficulties, he *might* benefit from simple reading comprehension strategies, like RAP: *R*ead a paragraph. *A*sk yourself what the paragraph was about. *P*ut the main idea and two details in your own words (Ellis, 1996). Although using a strategy like RAP makes sense, it's uncertain if it will help Brian. Therefore, before recommending RAP (or any other strategy), the reading specialist should test its effectiveness with Brian by teaching it to him, having him use it, and seeing if it improves his comprehension. As with all the instructionally-relevant questions in Figure 1, if a particular strategy is recommended, parents and teachers should always ask, "What evidence supports this recommendation?"
- Question 18: Diagnostic teaching, interviews, and observations indicate that Brian needs feedback every three-to-five minutes during guided practice, when he works alone. Because he feels "dumb," has little faith in his abilities, and attributes his successes to luck, feedback on moderately challenging instructional level tasks should emphasize effort, persistence, and the correct use of strategies (Margolis & McCabe, 2004).

Not answering the questions in Figure 1, or similar questions, decreases the probability of accelerating learning. Although illustrative and applicable for most struggling readers, the list is not exhaustive. Specific, explicit questions—questions that deal directly with what parents and teachers should do—may be needed to address other issues. Whatever the question, whatever the answer, parents and teachers need to always ask, "What evidence supports the answer?"

DIRECTIONS: Answer each question from the student's perspective—what does the student think? Use the key:

5	4	3	2	1	0
Yes				No	DK (Do Not Know)

Answers to the first section should address a particular activity or task for which the student lacks motivation (e.g., homework). The second section refers to the student's general orientation. If you don't know an answer, write DK for "Do not know." This response suggests that additional information is needed.

Section 1: A Particular Activity or Task

The activity or task (e.g., homework):____

1. Is the task enjoyable? Rating ______
2. Is the content interesting? Rating ______
3. Do I have the ability to succeed if I make a reasonable effort? Rating ______
4. Have I had success with similar activities or tasks? Rating ______
5. Is the subject matter important? Rating ______
6. Am I likely to succeed in the near future? Rating ______
7. Will my efforts produce desirable outcomes? Rating ______
8. Will I get whatever support I need to achieve success? Rating ______
9. Will I be positively reinforced for my efforts? Rating ______
10. Will I be positively reinforced for whatever success I have? Rating ______
11. Are the reinforcers worth my effort? Rating ______
12. Will reinforcement quickly follow success?
13. Are there immediately available activities/tasks I find more attractive or reinforcing? Rating ______
14. Is success important to achieving any long- or short-range goal(s) I have? Rating ______
15. Will the amount of effort I invest help me achieve my long- or short-range goals? Rating ______

Section 2: The Student's General Orientation

16. Are my efforts responsible for the positive things that happen to me? Rating ______
17. Do my peers value school success? Rating ______
18. Is it important that I please other people, like my teachers, parents, and peers? Rating ______
19. Do I have important long-range goals? Rating ______
20. Do I have important short-range goals? Rating ______

Figure 2. Student motivation: A problem solving questionnaire

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Assessing Motivation

The importance of motivation cannot be overstated. Ford (1995) concluded that motivation was "the single most important factor in long-term competence development" (p. 72). Carnine, Silbert, and Kameenui (1997) asserted that "unmotivated students will not receive the full benefit of increased instructional time, careful teaching, and a well-designed program. [They]. . . will continue making the same errors and will perform poorly on new skills" (p. 42). Thus, if struggling readers resist reading, or go thorough the motions in superficial, unengaged ways, the reasons must be assessed systematically. The questions in Figure 2 provide a starting point for discussion and investigation.

Consider, for example, how partial answers to questions from Figure 2 help to explain Brian's "weak" motivation and provide insight for designing instruction and providing support services.

- Question 3: Brian does not feel he has the ability to succeed. This strongly suggests that teachers need to give Brian (a) tasks on which moderate effort produces success; (b) lots of verbal encouragement, encouragement that tells him he can succeed on specific independent or instructional level tasks; (c) frequent opportunity to observe coping models he identifies with and who gradually master targeted tasks (Margolis & McCabe, 2004).
- Question 11: Brian knows that his teachers usually give students checkmarks for completing reading assignments. At the end of the day, students exchange checkmarks for a few minutes of computer time. But Brian's not interested in computer time and he "hates" reading, which he thinks is hard, miserable work; the checkmarks aren't worth the effort. What he wants more than anything else is a few minutes a day to talk to an adult who will listen to his concerns about his future and will treat him with respect. This suggests numerous possibilities, including (a) daily, in-school counseling that helps Brian establish realistic, motivating short- and long-term goals and links reading to these goals; (b) easier reading materials, on subjects that interest Brian; (c) a reward system that lets him exchange checks for time with an adult he respects (Margolis, McCabe, & Alber, 2004).

Monitoring the Program

Despite a high quality reading evaluation that includes diagnostic teaching, and an excellent teacher, a struggling reader might make poor progress. That our ability to predict what methodology will work with an individual reader is no better than our ability to predict the future should not be a surprise: "Trying to predict which interventions will work well for individual students has not been a fruitful endeavor. Therefore, we must test curricular modifications empirically" (Witt, Elliott, Daly, Gresham, & Kramer, 1997, p. 51). And we must test them continuously: "Continuous monitoring of instructional programs is absolutely essential, and adaptive teaching involving modifications in texts, tasks, and materials is desirable" (Lipson & Wixson, 2003, p. 68).

One way to continuously assess progress is to use Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM). One particularly effective CBM procedure is counting the number of words struggling readers correctly read in one minute. This procedure takes little time and can be administered weekly (Scott & Weishaar, 2003). Many other ways of assessing progress are available. The important point, for parents and teachers, is to know how to assess progress, how frequently to do so, and how to respond if progress is poor. For example, before a program is initiated, parents, teachers, and the reading specialist should agree that if progress is poor for three consecutive weeks, they must quickly meet to investigate the reasons and make program adjustments.

"What program does he need?"

Although asking "What program does my child need?" is like asking a physician what medicine a child needs before he's examined, it's an important question—it shows awareness and concern. But to be maximally effective, to go beyond random chance, it must be followed by a reading evaluation that answers critical questions. And the evaluation must be followed by continuous monitoring to assure that an unsuccessful program is changed quickly. If unsuccessful, it's time to (a) modify the materials, instructional procedures, or instructional environment, or (b) add services, or (c) do a combination of these, and (d) monitor the effects. Simply put, ineffective programs cannot be tolerated—they're harmful, changes cannot be postponed.

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