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Every Child a Reader

By building on each child's strengths, your schools can reach even the least fluent readers

By Marie Carbo

"There once lived in a certain large city in China a poor tailor named Mustafa, who was so poor that though he worked hard all day, it was as much as he could do to keep himself and his household from starving."

Those are the opening words of "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp," one of the classic tales of children's literature. But for as many as 42 percent of our fourth-graders, reading the story is as much of a puzzle as getting the genie out of the bottle. That's because these youngsters, according to the 1994 results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), aren't even reading at grade level.

What can your schools do to reach this bottom tier of readers—who account for almost half of fourth-graders? (At the eighth and 12th-grade levels, the number is closer to a third: 31 percent in eighth grade and 30 percent in 12th grade cannot read at grade level, according to NAEP.) Getting stuck in the contentious debate over whether whole language is better than phonics isn't the answer. Over the last century, educators have followed the pendulum swings of fashion when it comes to reading programs, sometimes swearing by phonics, other times advocating approaches more like whole language. But no approach alone has made a dent in figures like these.

Nor are they likely to. The debate over whole language versus phonics assumes that there's one right way for all children to learn to read. And that's misguided. When you ask, "How can we improve the reading skills of the bottom third (or more) of our students?" the answer should be, "By using a variety of strategies that recognize that students have different strengths, different weaknesses, and different reading styles."

And unlike the story of Aladdin, there's no magic to making that happen.

Build on children's strengths

In the past, some people were quick to recognize the limits of teaching all children to read in the same way. Four recommendations made in a 1923 article in *The Elementary School Journal*, for example, still resonate today. "Number one," the author wrote, "phonetics drills have a very real value, but are not essential to every child as a part of the daily program in primary grades. Number two, phonetic drills should at all times be employed with discretion and adapted to the needs of the individual child or special group. Number three, the thing of greatest importance is to arouse, hold, strengthen, and develop the interest of pupils, lead the pupils to crave reading, and having established this desire, supply them with sufficient quantities of the very best material available. And number four, do not use one system for every case; what is food for one may be poison for another. Cull the truth from many systems, study the needs of the different pupils, and then experiment to find the best method for the particular problem encountered."

What that author was saying 70-some years ago is still key today: A good reading program teaches to a child's strengths, not his or her weaknesses, and is highly individualized.

I found out the importance of that insight as a learning disabilities specialist in the 1970s. The school where I taught had a very good phonics program and an excellent teaching staff. Teachers read to students extensively, and the children did lots of reading and writing on their own—the kinds of things that have become part of the whole-language approach to reading.

Still, the major component of this school's program was phonics. As a learning disabilities specialist, I tested children to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and the first thing I noticed was that every child in my program, all 20 of them, had auditory problems. Some of them couldn't hear sounds or couldn't hear the differences between sounds. These youngsters couldn't remember things they had heard, and they had difficulty blending sounds into words. In other words, they couldn't do phonics.

So I didn't stay with phonics. Instead, I tried to teach to the children's strengths, and those, of course, varied. One child, Jeffrey, had severe auditory problems. When I met him in the second grade, he was a non-reader with a capital "N." The only thing Jeffrey could do was hold a book right-side-up. He didn't read any words; he wouldn't even make up a story from a book, the way a 3-year-old might.

Instead of teaching to his weaknesses, as phonics would, I taught Jeffrey, I taught to his global/visual strengths, having him listen to recorded books through headphones while reading along. The stories were highly interesting, which is important to global learners, and the recordings allowed him to see and hear the words repeatedly without any need for phonics, which is excellent for visual learners. I would also write the words he didn't recognize in big letters on a large index card. He would then trace over the word with his finger a few times, turn the

card over, and write the word on his own—thus tapping into his visual and tactile strengths.

The speech therapist, on the other hand, was trying to build Jeffrey's auditory memory and auditory discrimination, both of which were extraordinarily weak. Like a physical therapist exercising an injured limb, she had to "exercise" Jeffrey's weaknesses, rather than his strengths. As a result, she was the one who had to deal with his behavior problems—and the one who had to stock her desk with peanut butter and candy rewards for behavior modification. When the speech therapist and I met, it was as though we were talking about two different children.

I learned a valuable lesson from Jeffrey: When you have to improve a child's weakness—and there are times when you cannot avoid it—you should separate that teaching from the teaching of subject matter. In other words, it's best to teach reading only through a child's strengths.

Recorded books

Teaching to a child's strengths, though, means having more than one strategy at hand for teaching reading. Take the case of a high school special education teacher who first contacted me four or five years ago. This teacher had 33 special education students, most of whom were reading at a third or fourth-grade level, even though they were in the 10th grade. With reading skills this low, these youngsters were at high risk of dropping out—and unlikely to find a good job when they did.

The teacher had attended a seminar I'd given and had heard me talk about the recorded book method. (In this method, a teacher records stories, articles, or books, in three to five-minute sections, speaking at a slower than normal but still animated pace. The students follow along with a script.)

After attending the seminar, she went back to her school district and asked one of her students to give the approach a try. He agreed and, on the teacher's advice, went to the library and chose three articles on topics that interested him: one on motorcycles, another on weight training, and another on steroids. The young man was particularly interested in the article on steroids, because he was thinking about taking them, so he asked the teacher to record that article first. She did so, trying to mimic what I had trained the teachers to do in the seminar.

She then gave the boy the tape and asked him to come back the next day. Three days later, he returned to her class. It turned out that the teacher had recorded 12 minutes worth of the article, when five minutes with this method is the maximum, and the teacher hadn't spoken slowly enough. So this poor boy had 12 minutes of material that, by the way, turned out to be at a 12th-grade reading level.

When the two sat down to discuss the article, the young man was frank: The assignment had been difficult. But he said he was so interested in the material that he had listened to the tape eight times. The two discussed the article, and the teacher found the young man could answer any question she asked. But she dismissed this finding, figuring that anyone who listened to a tape that many times would be able to answer questions about the subject matter.

Her doubts vanished, though, when she asked the boy to read a passage from the article, and he did so flawlessly. She picked out another passage and another and another. Each time, his performance was flawless.

Impressed with the young man's reading, the teacher fine-tuned the approach and used it with him every day. After almost three months—thank goodness she had the sense to test him before they began—she tested him again and found he had gained 2.9 years in reading comprehension. Figuring that must be a mistake, she administered another test, with virtually the same results: an improvement of 2.7 years.

She went to her superintendent, told him she'd never seen results like this in 17 years of teaching, and asked for grant money to investigate further and to record materials over the summer. At the summer's end, she had recorded 200 short stories. She put each of the tapes in a brown envelope along with a printed version of the story and a short, five or six-item comprehension exercise; on the outside of each envelope, she put the reading level of the material (which ranged from second grade to 12th grade).

When school began the next fall, she pretested her special education students and met with them individually to explain the process. "Reading on a second-grade level, you should start with a second, third, or fourth-grade book," she told them, "but the more you stretch yourself, the more you're going to learn to read."

Students could browse through the envelopes and select stories they were interested in, she said. There were only two rules: Students would have to be able to read any material back to her, and they'd have to be able to give her a good summary of what they'd read.

In four months, her students had gone up an average of two grade levels in reading, and some of her top achievers had gone up four.

A continuum of strategies

This is not a one-of-a-kind success story: Many good reading programs reach the least fluent readers as well as the best. These good programs share several qualities. First, like the program this special education teacher used, successful reading programs invariably keep students motivated. Good programs also try to keep stress levels low and interest levels high. Again, that's where matching a child's reading style with the appropriate reading strategy comes in, and that's where choosing high-interest stories is likely to count.

To make that match, though, teachers need to have a continuum of reading strategies at hand, and they need to be able to place children at the appropriate point along that continuum.

The continuum I use includes the following strategies, arranged in order for use with the least fluent to the most fluent readers:

- Shared reading, in which the teacher reads a story from a large book to an entire group of students.
- Recorded books, the method I described above.
- Echo reading, in which the teacher reads a small portion of a text and the student reads it back.

- Neurological impress, in which a teacher reads into a child's ear while both hold the book and read in unison.
- Choral reading, in which two or more students read a passage in unison.
- Paired reading, in which two students take turns reading a passage or story.
- Sustained silent reading, in which students read alone, in periods of between 10 and 45 minutes.

How do you decide which strategy is best for each child? Generally, if children aren't reading fluently and independently, you'll want to use methods at the beginning of the continuum—shared reading, for example, or recorded books. These approaches provide the highest level of teacher involvement and the most use of modeling, which is something these youngsters need. If students are fluent, on the other hand, you'll need to encourage them in more independent activities, such as paired reading or sustained silent reading, which have less teacher involvement.

Here's how it might work: In the average sixth-grade classroom, most students will probably be able to do sustained silent reading, but some will still have trouble with that strategy. It's not that they need more practice. It's that they're stumbling with their books. Or perhaps a classroom has students doing paired reading, which is just one step below sustained silent reading, but neither child is a proficient reader, and both could profit from a little more modeling. In both cases, youngsters might be better served with one of the strategies at the beginning of the continuum, such as shared reading. (This is especially true for children for whom English is a second language; they need to hear the language, and a great deal of it, and they need to hear it correctly spoken so that they can imitate a correct model.)

In other words, when you see that the children aren't performing smoothly and easily, you need to move to the top of the continuum and adopt a different strategy until the child does become fluent.

No more phonics?

Does all this talk about the importance of individualized instruction mean there's no room for phonics? Not at all. Even if you used all the strategies I mentioned above, you'll still find some children who will be better served by direct instruction in phonics.

Phonics has been pushed outside the education mainstream, and many people are demanding that it be the centerpiece of reading instruction once again. But schools need not take an all-or-nothing stance on how children are taught to read. Phonics has its place in education, and we need to put it in that rightful place. But that rightful place is as one of a number of strategies children can use to learn to read well. The more strategies teachers have at hand, the more flexibility and flow they have in their teaching—and the more likely children will learn to read well.

Aladdin or any other piece of literature shouldn't have to be a struggle for students. It can, and should be, a magical delight. ■