

# HELPING STRUGGLING READERS AND STUDENTS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Halfway through the school year, my phone rings. It is a distraught mother seeking help for her 7-year-old son, Stanley,\* who is at risk of failing 2nd-grade reading. Stanley lacks the skills and experiences that a normal student should have developed by this time. Stanley is *Reading Disabled*.

Maria\* is a Spanish-speaking student in my grade 1 class. A recent immigrant, she has no English phonetic skills or awareness, and no parental or sibling role models to help her read in English. Her parents are eager for her to learn English. I speak no Spanish. Maria is *Reading Disadvantaged*.

**T**eachers in the Seventh-day Adventist school system must address the needs of students from varied backgrounds and diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic, and socio-economic groups. In addition, a growing number of students have visual, speech, and hearing impairments, developmental delays, learning disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disturbances. Some are gifted and need an enriched curriculum. This is the scene in almost every 21st-century classroom.

Ensuring that all of these students read well deeply concerns many teachers, for academic success depends greatly on reading ability. Due to the size of Adventist schools, they usually have limited resources to address the needs of students such as Stanley and Maria. Many teachers know what reading materials and strategies work with most students, but lack the background to address the specific needs of struggling or disabled readers, those identified as reading disadvantaged, and those for whom English is a second language (ESL) or who have limited

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English proficiency (LEP). Therefore, this article will examine reading expectations for students, particularly in kindergarten through grade 3, as well as strategies that regular classroom teachers can use to identify and assist struggling readers.

## Learning to Read

Children learn to read, mastering the skills and strategies necessary to be successful readers, by 3rd grade; they read to learn, using their reading skills and strategies to further expand their knowledge and understanding in the content areas, after 3rd grade.<sup>1</sup> Grade 3, then, serves as the transition from “tool learning” to “tool using” for students. Despite the change in the reader’s focus during this time period, these are related and complementary processes.

Two recent U.S. presidents have made it a priority to promote literacy among early elementary-grade children. President Bill Clinton, in his America’s Reading Challenge, stated: “Forty percent of all children are now reading below basic levels on national reading assessments. Children who cannot read early and well are hampered at the very start of their lives. This will be truer as we move into the twenty-first century . . .”<sup>2</sup> President George W. Bush, in his No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, recognized that this problem had not yet been solved. Reutzel and Cooter suggest that this act was “intended to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers . . .”<sup>3</sup> These initiatives were prompted, in part, by concerns about the number of students failing literacy-related assessments.

In addition, research done by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) suggests that “Children who fall behind at an early age (kindergarten and grade 1) fall further and further behind over

\*Not their real names.

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time. Longitudinal studies show that of the children who are diagnosed as reading disabled in third grade, 74% remain disabled in ninth grade.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Grossen’s research asserts that children need “developmentally appropriate” activities, “using appropriate instructional strategies at an early age—especially in kindergarten.”<sup>5</sup> Due to the significance of reading instruction for children in the early grades, K-3 teachers need to be familiar with recommended practices for struggling readers.

### Identification of Reading Problems

Students who struggle to read at grade level often have difficulty decoding words, utilizing cues from sentence structure, and making sense of text. According to NICHD research: “The best predictor in K or 1st grade of a future reading difficulty in grade 3 is performance on a combination of measures of phonemic awareness, rapid naming of letters, numbers, and objects, and print awareness.”<sup>6</sup> In comparing “dependent” readers with their more skilled “independent” peers, Kyleene Beers says that independent readers “figure out what’s confusing them, set goals for getting through the reading, use many strategies for getting through the text, know how to make the mostly invisible process of comprehension visible.” By contrast, dependent readers “stop, appeal to the teachers, read on through, keep the mostly invisible process of comprehension at the invisible level.”<sup>7</sup>

G. Reid Lyon provides further insight about children who have difficulties in reading:

“In general, children who are most at-risk for reading failure are those who enter school with limited exposure to language and who have little prior understanding of concepts related to phonemic sensitivity, letter knowledge, print awareness, the purposes of reading, and general verbal skills, including vocabulary. Children raised in poverty, youngsters with limited proficiency in English with speech and hearing impairments, and children from homes where the parent’s reading

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levels are low are relatively predisposed to reading failure. Likewise, youngsters with subaverage intellectual capabilities have difficulties learning to read, particularly in the reading comprehension domain.”<sup>8</sup> Among this group are students classified as ESL/LEP who struggle to read because English is not their first language. They often lack the experiences that foster English language learning and vocabulary development. Vacca and Vacca point out that “cultural variation in the use of language has a strong influence on literacy learning” but add that “language differences should not be mistaken for language deficits among culturally diverse students.”<sup>9</sup> Lentes warns that “it is important to note the age and literacy background of the second-language learner; one observation does not fit all.”<sup>10</sup>

“Nevertheless, the research we do have shows that English reading and writing development processes are essentially similar for both English learners and native English speakers . . . . That is, in reading, all learners gradually come to use their developing English language knowledge, of print conventions to put their ideas on pages.”<sup>11</sup>

Students’ reading difficulties can be identified in a variety of ways. Reading assessments include phonemic awareness and fluency tests, informal reading inventories, anecdotal records, interest surveys, fluency, running records, portfolios, and standardized diagnostic reading tests. An informal reading in-

ventory (IRI), consisting “of a series of graded passages that students read and answer questions about,” is a good place to begin the assessment process.<sup>12</sup> Additional assessments may be administered, depending on the results of the IRI.

### Instructional Strategies for Struggling Readers

Reading instruction for students in kindergarten through grade 3 usually focuses on the “Big Five” areas: (1) Phonemic Awareness and Alphabetic Knowledge, (2) Phonics and Word Attack Skills, (3) Vocabulary, (4) Comprehension, and (5) Fluency.<sup>13</sup> “Phonemic awareness refers to the understanding that spoken words are made up of individual speech sounds,”<sup>14</sup> whereas “phonological awareness includes identifying and manipulating larger parts of spoken language, such as words, syllables, onsets and rimes . . . , rhyming and alliteration.”<sup>15</sup> Lindamood-Bell identify children’s difficulty in identifying sounds within words as the primary cause of decoding and spelling problems. “Weakness in phonological processing causes individuals to omit, substitute, and reverse sounds and letters within words. This is also a cause of difficulty in learning a second language. Individuals with weak phonological processing cannot get the words off the page: they cannot judge whether what they say matches what they see.”<sup>16</sup>

Phonics instruction emphasizes systematic and predictable relationships between spelling and speech sounds. Roe, Smith, and Burns assert that, “For phonics instruction to be effective, students need to be ready to learn phonics, and teachers need to provide context and reinforcement—a reason to learn phonics.”<sup>17</sup> These authors advocate the use of two types of phonics applications: Synthetic and Analytic. In synthetic phonics, the student is taught “speech sounds associated with individual letters,”<sup>18</sup> while in analytic phonics, sight words are taught first, followed by the sounds within the words. Bright Solutions for Dyslexia suggests putting individual

letters and sounds together (synthetic), and breaking them into smaller pieces (analytic).<sup>19</sup> Analogic phonics, where sounds are taught within the context of word families, is another option.<sup>20</sup> Whichever approach is adopted, Marilyn Jager-Adams states:

“[D]eep and thorough knowledge of letters, spelling patterns, and words, and of the phonological translations of all three, are of inescapable importance to both skillful reading and its acquisition. By extension, instruction designed to develop children’s sensitivity to spellings and their relations to pronunciations should be of paramount importance in the development of reading skills. This is, of course, precisely what is intended of good phonic instruction.”<sup>21</sup>

Smith, Walker, and Yellin point out that, “Many beginning readers struggle with decoding a text. Lack of appropriate instruction; reading text at the frustration level; difficulty with phonological awareness, including the inability to segment phonemes (i.e., unable to divide a word into its individual sounds); and ineffective phonemic synthesis (i.e., unable to connect the sounds to form words) are a few ways that some readers get off to a rough start.”<sup>22</sup> The National Reading Panel also cites “solid evidence that phonics instruction produces significant benefits for children from kindergarten through 6th grade and for children having difficulties learning to read. The greatest improvements in reading were seen from systematic phonics instruction.”<sup>23</sup>

Phonemic awareness and phonics instruction for struggling readers should always be taught in the context of authentic text. We need to hook struggling readers to books that they not only are able to read, but also want to do so.<sup>24</sup> Shanker and Ekwall outline principles for teaching students with reading difficulties. Their recommendations emphasize both the part (i.e., letter, word level) as well as the whole (i.e., sentence, text level) in the reading process:

Most students require a certain amount of systematic, sequential skill

instruction to learn how to decode or pronounce unknown words. The amount of instruction required varies from student to student. Nearly all remedial readers require direct instruction, in which the teacher clearly presents information in small increments, while guiding and monitoring the pace of student learning. All students should be taught at, and should practice reading at the level of difficulty which ensures that they experience frequent success. All too often, disabled readers are assigned material that is much too difficult for them. From this experience, they learn only frustration, instead of how to read successfully.

All students need substantial amounts of reading practice to ensure that they learn and use important skills as well as to help them appreciate the value and joy of reading. Far too many struggling readers spend too little time actually engaged in the act of reading.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, students should learn strategies that promote vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency so they can read independently:

“Good readers ask questions before, during, and after they read . . . go back and reread for understanding . . . use what they know to make predictions . . . know when they make a mistake and go back to fix it . . . use many different ways to work out a word that they don’t recognize . . . read fluently and with expression . . . use their background and experiences to help them understand the book . . . make connections to other books they have read . . . understand what they have read and can talk about those understandings . . . READ, READ, READ!”<sup>26</sup>

Additional suggestions for ESL/LEP learners include the use of methods “that bridge cultural background knowledge and whatever texts are being read . . . , contextualize instruction . . . within the composing and comprehending process . . . , [and] use authentic materials from the learner’s community.”<sup>27</sup> The new Seventh-day Adventist reading program for North American Division schools uses a thematic approach with much focused reading across the curriculum, which

incorporates language-oriented skills and activities.

## Conclusion

As we accept the challenge of teaching students with diverse backgrounds and abilities, we are reminded of Ellen White’s statement: “True education is not the forcing of instruction on an unready and unreceptive mind. The mental powers must be awakened, the interest aroused.”<sup>28</sup> After identifying the needs of each student, teachers can choose from a variety of instructional strategies that address the specific areas where students are experiencing difficulty.<sup>29</sup> “Exemplary classroom programs cannot always ensure that all children will become proficient readers . . . but they can dramatically reduce the number of children who are currently classified as reading disabled or remedial readers.”<sup>30</sup>



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