The Power of Strategies Instruction

Erika Daniels

To reach struggling adolescent readers, teach them what proficient readers already know.

My 4-year-old son Gabriel pointed to the glowing green sign above the movie theater door and remarked, "That says exit, Mommy!" I was excited, as any parent is when her child begins to read. And the literacy educator in me rejoiced that our bedtime stories, library trips, and alphabet cookies were doing their job.

My next thought, however, was about the children who don't become readers for a variety of social, cultural, and environmental reasons. I know that Gabriel's literacy development is supported by systematic exposure to the ways print and language work. When he starts kindergarten, he'll already know how to hold a book, understand that print carries meaning, and realize that it's the reader's job to make sense of text (Clay, 2001).

Unfortunately, many children come to school without these basic understandings. They begin at a disadvantage compared with their peers who are growing up in literacy-rich homes. That gap often widens as they move through the grades. They learn how to read, but their peers learn how to read more complex texts. Both groups move forward, but on parallel planes.

Helping Struggling Adolescent Readers

As the literacy coach at Oceanside High School, an urban school in Oceanside, California, I worked with reading support teachers who witnessed firsthand the struggles of students who had not mastered the fundamentals of reading. We knew that many of our 9th graders did not have the requisite reading abilities to be successful in their classes, let alone in college or the workforce. Many of them had never learned what readers do to make sense of text because they did not have support at home to reinforce their school learning. Many had stopped trying early in their school careers.

Of Oceanside High School's approximately 2,600 students, 23 percent were English language learners and 48 percent qualified for free and reduced-price lunch. Many were from military families and had moved frequently because of their parents' deployments or transfers. The dropout rate was 13 percent, and many of those who left school did so because they could not keep up with

high school reading demands. School leaders knew that some form of intervention was necessary. To respond to this need, Oceanside High School created a 9th grade reading support class. Students who scored Below Basic or Far Below Basic on the state’s standardized assessment were required to take the class as an elective. We designed the class to emphasize strategies that proficient readers use and to model how students could apply these comprehension strategies in their math, science, and social studies classes.

What We Taught Our Students

Five reading support teachers taught the class. Each week, we met to talk about the required curriculum, the strategies that proficient readers use, and the unique needs of our struggling older learners. We used Kylene Beers’ *When Kids Can’t Read: What Teachers Can Do* (2003) as a springboard for our conversations. At each planning meeting, we identified a comprehension strategy, such as monitoring for understanding, summarizing, visualizing, questioning, or predicting (Beers, 2003; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). We talked about the strategy, why readers use it, and how we could best teach it to our reluctant, struggling readers. At the end of each meeting, we created lesson plans that focused our weekly instruction on one or more of the comprehension strategies.

For example, we noticed that most of the students’ questions about texts they read were of the "I don't get it" variety. Because proficient readers ask a variety of literal and inferential questions while interacting with a text, we taught our struggling readers to do that too.

During a lesson on *Night* by Elie Wiesel, the teachers read the first chapter aloud. Then they stopped and did a think-aloud, listing questions that came to their minds while reading. Although it sounds simple, the students were stunned that their teachers might not know everything and that they might wonder about something they read. By modeling what good questions sound like and encouraging students to do the same, the teachers helped their students move beyond "I don't get it." Students became more adept at articulating their specific areas of confusion, and teachers were able to help them more effectively.

Another difficulty the students had was creating mental images while they read. When we told them to visualize what they were reading, they looked at us blankly. We realized we needed to explicitly teach visualization as a strategy and show students how the authors give details and clues to aid in the process.

While reading an article about Bethany Hamilton, the teenage surfer who lost an arm in a shark attack, we stopped reading every time the author described the attack, the injury, or Bethany’s recovery. We underlined the adjectives and details that enabled us to imagine what it might have looked like.
like in the water or in the ambulance or in the hospital.

As the students learned how to notice specific details and to imagine what those details might look like, they became more engaged in their reading. By the middle of the year, the students were able to identify details on their own and to draw and describe what they were visualizing as they read.

The reading support teachers taught each comprehension strategy strategically and explicitly. They modeled the strategies for the whole class, gave students time to practice on their own, and provided significant feedback on the process.

Some students needed even more help, however, because they were missing even the most basic of reading skills. Ivan, for example, had arrived in the United States as a 6th grader after sporadically attending school in Mexico throughout his elementary years. Because he had missed large chunks of kindergarten and 1st grade, his phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge were weak. His teacher worked with him individually to develop his understanding that letters always had a sound connected to them.

Because Ivan knew that other students in the support class had the same struggle, he was willing to exert some effort. Although he was embarrassed to be a 9th grader learning that the letter \( b \) makes the /b/ sound, he was more embarrassed when he was called on to read aloud in science class. During the year he was in our class, Ivan’s reading abilities increased tremendously. He came to us with a basic understanding of comprehension strategies but little knowledge of phonics. He left us with a deeper understanding of both and a higher grade in science.

What the Students Learned

Although the students fought us, complained about the loss of a true elective, and told us that reading was stupid, most of them still came to class every day, listened to the direct instruction, and attempted the strategies on their own.

We believed their willingness to show up was due in large part to their respect for their teachers. The reading support team had volunteered to teach the classes because they believed that struggling learners could achieve and wanted to improve their own practice by learning about comprehension strategy instruction. This commitment and respect from the teachers' end helped create classroom environments where the students trusted their teachers and were willing to take risks with their learning.

At the end of each year of the three-year project, most students had improved their test scores and their feelings about reading. On the Gates-MacGinitie exam, the students averaged a growth of two grade levels from September to June. On a test that came with the required Read 180 curriculum (Scholastic), the students averaged an 8 percent increase from September to June.

Although the quantitative data were promising, we were even more pleased about the students’ change in attitude. Initially the students were not
happy to be placed in this "elective" and let us know that frequently. By the end of the year, however, Raul's response represented the majority: "This class has helped me because I know how to read better."

**What the Teachers Learned**

Although the students learned a lot about reading in the content areas, the teachers learned even more about teaching struggling adolescent readers. A large part of our success was due to the weekly team meetings in which we reviewed the previous week, provided mutual support, and focused on specific strategies to implement next.

The teachers worked diligently to learn about the comprehension strategies that proficient readers use and to find ways to teach those strategies to struggling adolescents. Joy, who taught the reading support class and advanced placement (AP) English composition, realized that her reading support lessons were also useful for her AP class. Everyone acknowledged that targeted, explicit strategy instruction was worth the time required because of the improvement in students' reading abilities.

The teachers learned that consistent strategy instruction, continued professional development support, and an unwavering belief that all students can learn to read and read to learn really could make a difference for struggling adolescent readers. At the final meeting during the third year, a team member said, "It was like a long labor—a lot of pain, but a beautiful baby in the end."

**Where Do We Go from Here?**

The reading support class worked because the teachers were committed to their practice, to their students, and to one another. It worked because the teachers systematically and explicitly taught comprehension strategies as a focus of the curriculum. Although the administration has shifted my focus at Oceanside High School away from the reading support program, the teaching team continues the work we began three years ago. Students still enter the class reluctantly at best, defiantly at worst—and they still leave understanding how to use comprehension strategies and reading to learn in their content classes.

Although our team was fortunate to have a weekly meeting time carved out of the day and a literacy coach to provide guidance throughout the year, the primary reason for our success was the teachers' commitment to systematic, explicit strategy instruction.

Reading is not magic. It is the consistent application of a range of comprehension strategies. Once the students learned concrete strategies, they were willing to exert the effort necessary for reading to learn throughout their day.
References


**Erika Daniels** is Assistant Professor, College of Education, California State University, San Marcos, California; 760-750-8547; edaniels@csusm.edu.