

# Beyond Explicit Instruction: What Do Struggling Readers Need?

Franki Sibberson

*Struggling readers need precisely what good readers receive—lots of high-success reading experiences.*

**Richard Allington**

I'm not a fan of the words *struggling reader*. But in using them here, I am thinking about students who find that reading is a daily struggle, and because of this struggle, don't yet feel comfortable or confident as readers. Something is holding them back from growing as readers in the same way many other kids are growing.

Over the past few years, I've had a handful of struggling readers in my classroom. I am convinced that reading workshop is the best structure for these struggling readers, as it is one that gives all students the time they need to grow from where they are. It also allows us, as teachers, to dig in and give these students just what they need through minilessons, small-group instruction, and individual conferring.

Struggling readers deserve what all readers deserve. But I notice that our most struggling students do not always *get* the benefits of the entire reading workshop. The focus on the instruction for our struggling readers—the explicit instruction, the pull-out intervention, and the small-group strategy work they need—is an important piece of our work with them. It is where I spend much of my planning time. But this year, I've realized that the planning for small group or conferences is only one part of supporting a struggling reader. Targeted instruction alone is not enough to grow a reader. In the stress of the day and the rush to "catch kids up," we often forget about all the other things readers need.

Explicit instruction alone does not make a reader. We want more for our students than for them to be readers who read "at level" and can pass tests. If we remember that larger goal, we'll remember all the things that go into creating readers.

## **Daily Time for Independent Choice Reading**

All students deserve daily time for choice reading in a classroom filled with great books, one in which a "just-right" book is not defined by level. More than anyone else, our struggling readers need books they can read, understand, and enjoy. And just as importantly, they have to have choice within those books.

For this to happen, the classroom has to have a good variety of books, but it also has to be a place that values lots of kinds of books. It doesn't do any good for a child to be reading a short chapter book if everyone else in the classroom is reading a book the length of a Harry Potter book, because length is what is valued in the classroom. For children to become engaged in books, they need to be in a classroom where many kinds of books are valued for a variety of authentic reasons. I'm intentional about reading aloud and book-talking books that are accessible to lots of students. I also look for authors such as Jon Scieszka and Doreen Cronin who have picture books as well as novels, so the value is placed on an author we love rather than the length or difficulty of a book.

## **Honest Feedback**



### **Franki Sibberson**

*Franki Sibberson is the Lead Contributor for Choice Literacy. She has worked for over 20 years as a teacher at different grade levels and school librarian. Franki is the co-author with Karen Szymusiak of many books and videos on teaching reading in the intermediate grades. You can keep up with Franki on the popular blog she writes with Mary Lee Hahn, **A Year of Reading.***

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