

# Teaching Struggling Readers: Capitalizing on Diversity for Effective Learning

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In order to meet the unique academic needs of each student, it is important that teachers value the differences each child brings to the classroom. Literacy teachers routinely focus on academic differences such as known literacy items (i.e., knowing letters and words) and reading strategies (i.e., knowing how to solve difficulties in reading), but they do not always capitalize on other differences that can greatly affect learning, such as differences in previous literacy experiences, differences in language and communicative practices, and differences in personal passions and interests. Responsive teaching involves recognizing and capitalizing upon the vast range of differences that students bring to classrooms. It is crucial that teachers attend to all of these differences.

## Differences That Matter: Children's Reading Processes and Ways of Being

So, what differences matter for struggling readers? The differences that children bring to literacy classrooms can be divided into two broad categories: (1) reading processes and (2) ways of being. The first category, reading processes, refers to human capacities of the mind such as “perception and attention, representations of knowledge, memory and learning, problem solving and reasoning, and language acquisition, production and comprehension” (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004, p. 42). Specific reading abilities in this category include letter/word knowledge, reading fluency, strategic problem solving in text, vocabulary learning, and reading comprehen-

sion. These are the “in-the-head” processes that are the focus of the U.S. National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) and most commercial textbook series. The second category, ways of being, acknowledges the students' lived experiences that extend well beyond the classroom walls.

Clay (2002) explained that excellent teachers of struggling readers are astutely aware of the reading processes that students control. Clay's commitment to observation is central. In *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (2002), Clay invited teachers to observe children as they engage in a range of literacy activities. Teachers observe children to identify what they know and do. Observation involves noting small details: What sources of information does the child use? How does the child attend to sequence across a page or within a word? What does the child do when he or she encounters difficult problem solving? When applying retrospective miscue analysis procedures, Goodman, Watson, and Burke (2005) apply observation when teaching older readers. Not only does the teacher become an expert observer of readers, but also readers learn to observe and reflect upon their own processing.

Reading processes alone, however, do not capture the full range of differences that teachers must recognize and use as they work with struggling readers. The phrase *ways of being* captures the social and cultural dimensions that affect literacy learning. This category includes the values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, experiences, and relationships that children bring to literacy learning. The work of Barton and Hamilton (1998), Dyson (1997), and Gutiérrez,

Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejeda (1999) explored the intersections between different ways of being and literacy learning. Ways of being are often enmeshed in complex relationships with race, culture, class, language practices, media practices, and literacy practices. These ways of being are grounded in children’s experiences in the world and their relationships with significant people.

While observation of students can begin to reveal the reading processes that students bring to literacy learning, learning about children’s ways of being requires additional effort by teachers. Interviews with students and conversations with family members are crucial, as are developing trusting relationships and demonstrating respect for the different ways of being that students bring to the learning environment. Teachers may need to consult members of students’ communities to understand the ways of being that children bring to classrooms. Addressing both differences in reading processing and students’ ways of being requires much from teachers. They must not only be expert teachers of reading who bring rich understandings about literacy, but also they must be social and cultural “border crossers” who can recognize, extend, and capitalize upon the rich differences among all children. This is particularly challenging because teachers inhabit a world that privileges certain ways of talking, acting, interacting, and valuing, and these privileged ways of being are often in conflict with students’ ways of being. Educators must recognize and confront assumptions, especially when working with children and families who bring different experiences and understandings to our classrooms.

When teachers align attention to reading processing with attention to students’ ways of being, rich learning experiences can be provided that are particularly effective and potentially powerful—not only in helping children to read but also in helping children to value themselves as readers and learners.

## Three Scenarios of Struggling Readers

The following brief anecdotes demonstrate a small sampling of the ways teachers might address students’ reading processes while acknowledging the ways of being that three students bring to texts. David, a European American boy; Laron, an African American boy; and Maria, a Mexican American girl represent children I have taught in recent years (all student names are pseudonyms). Table 1 shows the students’ reading processes and ways of being.

### *Yu-Gi-Oh Meets the Tiger*

During one of his first tutoring sessions, David was attempting to write the word *tiger*; he had already written the *t* and the *i*. I said the word slowly emphasizing the *g* so that he could hear that troublesome letter.

Author: *T-i-g-er*. What makes the /g/ sound?

David: A *g*.

Author: /g/ Mm-hmm. Good.

David: Like in Yu-Gi-Oh.

David is building on what he knows. He knows a lot about the word *Yu-Gi-Oh* and the world of Yu-Gi-Oh

**Table 1**  
Three Students’ Reading Processes and Ways of Being

	Reading processing	Ways of being
David	Letter–sound correspondence The /g/ sound	Media interest and knowledge: experience with Yu-Gi-Oh
Laron	Reading fluency versus word-by-word reading	Music interests and knowledge: experience with rap music patterns and rhythms
Maria	Hearing and recording sounds in sequence	Language interests and knowledge: familiarity with spoken Spanish

cards and characters that he shares with some of his 6-year-old peers. Because of his familiarity with these cards, he connects the /g/ sound in the word *Yu-Gi-Oh* with the letter *g*. In this example, David adeptly integrates his home/peer knowledge of media with his budding knowledge of words and letters.

### **Fluency and Rap Music**

It was the beginning of December and Laron was reading the book *Ten Little Bears* (Ruwe, 1976). Laron was successfully reading the words, but he read this patterned and repetitive text in a slow, word-by-word manner. When I modeled fluent reading, he imitated me, but when we encountered the repeated pattern on the next page he went back to word-by-word reading. The repetition and the rhythm of the line “Then nine little bears were left at home” (p. 5) inspired me to comment that it almost sounds like a song. I attempted to sing the line of text, but my effort did not impress Laron. Then I suggested, “You know this could almost be a rap.” I modeled the line applying my white, middle class attempt at rap rhythm and Laron’s eyes brightened. Immediately, he assumed a swanky position in his chair and repeated the line with an excellent rap rhythm complete with posturing and a be-bop bounce. He suddenly knew what I was asking and “Read it like a rap” became a useful prompt in a variety of texts.

### **Connecting English With Spanish**

When I first met Maria, I asked her what she liked. She told me her favorite television show was *Dora the Explorer* because “Dora speaks Spanish.” Maria nodded her head enthusiastically when I asked her if she could speak Spanish. That day, with my help, Maria wrote “I like my cat” in her journal and drew a picture of a cat. Despite being a novice reader and writer, Maria was an expert at hearing and recording sounds in sequence when she wrote. Knowing that Spanish was important to Maria, I suggested that she label her picture with the Spanish word for *cat*:

Author: I bet you know how to say *cat* in Spanish.

Maria: It’s *gato*.

Author: Yes, you can write *gato* under your picture.

Maria: Oh, I can’t. I don’t know how to write words in Spanish.

Maria had no idea that the same process for hearing and recording sounds in English words would apply to Spanish words. For Maria, Spanish and English belonged to two different worlds—English was a school language and Spanish was a home language. Maria had assumed that the rules for writing in these two languages were equally separate. Making connections between the language Maria associated with home and the people she loved and the learning that occurred in school was a valuable insight.

### **Bringing Disparate Dimensions Together**

In each of these scenarios, I was able to connect the ways of being that children brought to classrooms together with the literacy processes that the children were learning. I was able to do this because I had spoken with the children and their family members about their interests and experiences. The children trusted me, and in turn I worked to convey respect for their different ways of being. But a critical caveat is in order. Just as all European American 6-year-old boys are not fans of *Yu-Gi-Oh*, not all African American 6-year-old boys are familiar with rap music, and not all Mexican American students speak Spanish. The ways of being that are relevant for children cannot be essentialized based on the sociological categories we place upon our students. There is always variation among groups, and knowing the ways of being of individual students is critical.

Purcell-Gates and her colleagues (2004) identified a split between researchers who focus on reading processing, which they referred to as cognitive practices, and researchers who focus on the ways of being children bring to reading classrooms, which they described as sociocultural practices. They explained that while children’s reading processing abilities are embedded in their socioculturally shaped literacy practices, or ways of being, chasms within the field of reading have prevented educators from developing a comprehensive understanding of the varied resources that children bring to classrooms. They argue that explicit attention to compatibilities that link cognitive and sociocultural practices will lead to richer and less fragmented experiences for children as they learn to read. Building on either reading processes or students’ ways of being without attention to the other is incom-

plete and will ultimately limit the ability of children to use all of what they know as they learn to read.

## The Challenge of Teaching Struggling Readers

The solution to helping struggling readers is simple but also infinitely complex. The difficulty in teaching struggling readers is that they are all different and they differ on myriad dimensions. The scenarios featuring David, Laron, and Maria only begin to explore the many ways we can connect ways of being with the literacy processes that children bring to text. These stories illustrate the complexity of teaching and why it can be so difficult. We are not merely teaching letters and words, we are also teaching children. Too often we tend to focus on decoding skills, book levels, reading strategies, and writing mechanics—instructional methods that are often accompanied by materials that can be readily published and sold.

We must remind ourselves that there is more to literacy than accurate decoding of written text and that all children bring rich resources to classrooms. Children who may not have been read storybooks may know dozens of jump-rope rhymes and music lyrics and may have watched numerous episodes of *Sesame Street*. They may have viewed thousands of stories in the forms of cartoons, movies, and television programs; listened to stories told for their benefit; and overheard stories recounted in adult conversations. They may have participated in church performances or cultural events. They may have language and literacy skills in more than one language. They certainly witness written language each time they walk down the street or enter a store. These are assets to literacy learning and can be powerful tools, but they are often overlooked when we help children learn to read. As Irvine (2003) said,

The student's age, developmental level, race and ethnicity, physical and emotional states, prior experiences, interests, family and home life, learning preferences, attitudes about school, and a myriad of other variables influence the teaching and learning processes.... It is mind-boggling and humbling to contemplate the complexities of this much-heralded precept of effective teaching [meeting the needs of children]. (p. 47)

The task is challenging but not insurmountable. There are several strategies that teachers can use to recog-

nize, extend, and capitalize on the differences brought by the struggling readers:

- Teachers need to be expert observers of students as they interact with texts.
- Teachers need to speak with students, family members, and community members to better understand the ways of being that children bring to the classroom. Trusting relationships and respect are critical.
- Teachers need to know their students' passions and their dreams.
- Teachers must build time into their busy schedules to get to know the children in their class who struggle with reading.
- Once teachers know their students, they need to create opportunities for combining the students' ways of being with their learning of reading processes.
- Teachers need to be alert to times when students are making connections between reading and their ways of being and knowing.
- Teachers need to rethink their own expectations for success with literacy and recognize the vast strengths and abilities that students bring to the classroom, even when they do not align with school expectations.

All children are different, and attention to difference is particularly critical when working with children who struggle with literacy. Although differences make our jobs as teachers more challenging, differences also offer rich possibilities. When we align our attention to the reading process with attention to students' ways of being, we provide students with the richest possible learning opportunities that not only help children learn to read but also enable struggling readers to view themselves as people who find literacy relevant and valuable. They can begin to see themselves as readers.

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