When Readers Struggle
Teaching that Works

Gay Su Pinnell
Irene C. Fountas

Heinemann
Portsmouth, NH
We dedicate this book to all teachers who care about and work hard to teach readers who struggle.
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Introduction

In every classroom, school, and district, teachers are working with children who find literacy learning difficult. The search for ways to prevent and ameliorate reading difficulties has occupied much of the educational literature for the last fifty years. In recent years, educators have faced the twin challenges of meeting the needs of every child and raising test scores. These two goals may seem compatible, but often they are not. There are many ways to raise test scores, and focusing resources on the very lowest achievers is not necessarily one of them. Yet we must meet our responsibility to raise all readers to the level of achievement they need to function and succeed in the world. Literacy does not automatically guarantee a high quality of life, but low levels of literacy can seriously undermine it. Children who have difficulty in reading often face the struggle throughout their lives.

For many years, there have been flurries of interest around slight upturns in test scores, but those upturns are almost always misleading. Scores fluctuate for a complex variety of reasons, which are often unrelated to any particular bandwagon a school may have jumped on prior to testing.

Decades of school reform have yielded only slight, and we suspect transient, results. On the 2007 reading assessment conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 4th graders scored 2 points higher in 2007 than they did in previous years—up 4 points compared to 15 years ago. Higher percentages of students were performing at or above the Basic and Proficient achievement levels than in previous years. The average reading score for 8th graders was up 1 point since 2005 and 3 points since 1992; however, the trend of increasing scores has not been consistent over all assessment years. If we compare 1992 and 2005, the percentage of students performing at or above the Basic level increased, but there was no significant change in the percentage of students at or above the Proficient level. Furthermore, while white, black, and Hispanic students tended to score slightly higher in 2007 than they did 15 years ago, these improvements did not always result in the narrowing of the achievement gaps between minority and white children (Lee, Grigg, Donahue 2007).

While we greet these point gains with cautious optimism, we also know that a gain of a few points (which will not necessarily hold in the assessment of the next cohort) does not tell us much about the overall state of literacy education. Many millions of dollars have been poured into materials and programs designed exclusively to raise test scores rather than to produce effective readers and writers. We need to see more profound results from these expenditures.

Moreover, in the rush to raise test scores, schools have tended to adopt program after program until teachers are confused. Many programs provide for highly scripted arrangements in which every teacher and child do exactly the same thing; yet, providing the same instruction for every child (if that is even possible) does not assure the same achievement, as scores have shown since testing began. Critics of NCLB can point to the lack of change and say that this initiative has not fulfilled its promise; but we must remember that no initiative since we started having initiatives has made much difference. We still have the same average scores; we still have children who have a hard time learning to read and write.
Just about every teacher in the United States teaches children who find literacy learning difficult. These children exist in every classroom, at all educational and economic levels. They represent a constant concern and challenge. Children want to learn; and teachers want to help them. We are all generally opposed to leaving children behind. But there is no simple solution to helping all children learn. There are many reasons why a child might find learning difficult—some particular to the child but most particular to the inability of the school system to provide the type and level of support our diverse students might need.

Vulnerable children require year after year of excellent instruction and many will need particular kinds of carefully designed interventions and extra instruction as well. The sequence, intensity, quality, focus, and consistency of support are key.

If we are serious about teaching every child, then we need to take the position that no one program or set of policies will result in proficient reading for all children. In the past thirty years, we have seen many promising approaches come and go in school districts, but three factors have stood in the way of real success:

- **Few have been applied with integrity and quality.** Almost always, funding, policies, and lack of resolve result in fatal modifications so that the program or approach no longer does what it was designed to do. Emphasis may shift from outcomes to numbers “served,” whether results are there or not.

- **Few have been sustained long enough to fulfill the promise.** Changing administration, funding sources, and politics constantly force attention in a new direction, regardless of results. We know many school districts with documented results that drop everything when a new superintendent comes in.

- **Attempts have been isolated efforts rather than coordinated and comprehensive systems.**

Over the last thirty years, we have learned much about what it is going to take to truly leave no child behind. The task is daunting, but the consequences of not applying what we know are devastating to individuals and society. “Longitudinal studies reveal that there is a 90% chance that a child who is a poor reader at the end of grade one will remain a poor reader at the end of grade four” (Juel 1998). Low achieving fourth grade readers tend to experience this placement as a life sentence. "Assignment to a group predicts future educational outcomes with alarming accuracy. Most children placed in high-ability groups remain in those groups and go on to college. Most children placed in the low-achievement group remain there and are far more likely (1) to leave school before graduating; (2) to fail a grade; (3) to be placed in special education; 4) to become a teenage parent; (5) to commit a juvenile criminal offense; and, (6) to remain less than fully literate. “It is distressing to think that our schools are so ineffectual with children who begin school with few literacy experiences that we can predict with horrifying accuracy what lifestyles different six-year-olds will attain when they reach adulthood” (Allington 1998). We need to ask ourselves, “How many children are we willing to throw away?” Some authors have rightly referred to the task as “racing against catastrophe” (Natriello, McDill, Pallas 1990).

We need a many-layered and coordinated approach that offers high-quality instruction in the variety of forms necessary to serve each child at the level needed. The goal is achievable for most children. Research indicates that “90-95% of children with reading problems can overcome their difficulties if they receive appropriate treatment at an early age.” (*The Special Edge* 2000, 6—cited in ERS Spectrum.)
In this volume, we offer suggestions for helping readers who find literacy learning difficult. We stress the value of prevention in the form of excellent classroom teaching. Good classroom teachers do make a difference. They deliver instruction all day every day of the school year. The more they can bring low achieving students into active engagement in the classroom, the fewer low achievers there will be.

We also offer suggestions for intervention. If children are not thriving in spite of excellent classroom instruction, then they need extra help. “Without systematic, focused and intensive intervention, the majority of children with reading difficulties rarely catch up and that failure to develop reading skills by age 9 may result in a lifetime of illiteracy.” (Lyon 2001)

Intervention must be effective and focused on outcomes rather than simply on numbers of children served. “Service” is not enough. That rather hopeless view suggests to us that no one really expects children to catch up. We have to ask: “Are they served if they do not become readers?” We would also say that “progress,” as currently defined, is not enough. Children are served in small remedial reading groups year after year. Each year some progress is reported, but these children continue to lag behind the rest; few become truly proficient readers; and almost none become voluntary readers.

The most effective intervention is implemented early in a child’s school career—before the cycle of failure is established. We have seen what individual tutoring, the most intensive level of early intervention, can do, particularly when it is offered at a precise moment in time. For many children who have reading difficulties, well-designed individual intervention at a particular point in time can make all the difference. According to Slavin (1994), “preventive tutoring deserves an important place in discussions of reform in compensatory, remedial and special education. If we know how to ensure that students will learn to read in the early grades, we have an ethical and perhaps legal responsibility to see that they do so.”

We have also seen what can be done in supplementary small group instruction that is intensive and well designed. Currently, most supplementary small group instruction is ineffective because:

- Groups are too large.
- Instruction is not well planned and sequenced.
- Participants in the group are not truly well matched; there is great diversity among members, which makes it difficult for the teacher to plan for instruction.
- Too often, supplementary teachers have the job of dragging children through the assigned classroom materials rather than providing the appropriate reading materials and skilled teaching that will help them make progress.
- Insufficient professional development is provided for intervention teachers.

We believe that supplementary small group instruction has a place in a well-coordinated literacy program. It is the responsibility of educators to fine-tune instructional services so that classroom, small group, and individual teaching occur when and for whom they are needed in a timely way and with high quality. There are three keys to success: (1) expert teaching; (2) good books; and (3) good instructional design. The most important of these is achieved through professional development for teachers.

In all of this, we should not forget the true goal of schooling, which is to support learning that will lead to a higher quality of life for our citizens. We want readers who make literacy an
integral part of their lives and find it both useful and enjoyable. We want readers who pick up books and other materials voluntarily and grow from them. A literate life is the right of every child—even (or especially) those who initially find it difficult. We recognize that accountability is important; a well-coordinated program will have the result of raising test scores and other measures of achievement. But the real measure of a school’s effectiveness is the care taken to meet the needs of every child—not just with service but with real results.

In this volume, we present a variety of ways to help readers, specifically those who need extra help. We will target those approaches toward classroom, small group, and individual instruction, knowing that a coordinated combination of all three will have the greatest chance for success.

Section 1, *When Readers Struggle*, explores the contexts for learning as well as issues related to effective and ineffective processing. In Chapter 1, *A Comprehensive Approach to Literacy Success*, we describe in broad strokes the instructional contexts for teaching within a comprehensive literacy program. An important point in this chapter is that struggling readers require effective classroom instruction. We make the case for coherent instruction that helps readers learn across contexts. You can use the suggestions in this book as you work in whole group, small group, or individual contexts with your students. In Chapter 2 (*Effective Readers: What Do They Do?*) and Chapter 3 (*Going Off Track: Why and How?), we look at the processing systems for reading. In working with struggling readers, it is important to know what effective processing is like, because that gives us a vision for what we want to help struggling readers do. If we intervene to help struggling readers, we want to do so in a way that will prevent further difficulties. The ability to observe and interpret reading behavior is foundational to effective teaching of struggling readers, and we address this in Chapter 4, *Reading Behavior: What Does It Tell Us?* We also need to recognize how the processing system changes over time as readers develop. In Chapter 5, *Change Over Time: Processing Systems in the Making*, you will find specific descriptions of readers at several points in time. Here, we will also show that readers arrive at the common outcome of a self-extending system for reading, but they may take different paths to get there. Finally in Chapter 6, *Text Matters: A Ladder to Success*, we examine in detail the role that a gradient of text can play in supporting readers as they change over time.

Section 2, *Language Systems and Literacy Learning*, goes deeper into the systems of information that readers must acquire and orchestrate to effectively process print. Chapter 7, *Language Matters: Talking, Reading, and Writing*, describes the oral language foundation that is essential for learning to read and write. Chapter 8, *Words Matter: Building Power in Vocabulary*, is also related to oral language. Here, we explore the important area of vocabulary development, the way texts make increasing demands on the reader’s vocabulary knowledge. We also suggest ways to increase word learning. In Chapter 9, *The Phonological Base for Learning to Read and Write*, we discuss the sound system of the language along with ways to help learners become more aware of and learn how to use sounds in words.

Section 3, *Learning Written Language Systems*, focuses on the challenges of learning how written language “works.” In Chapter 10, *Learning About Print: Early Reading Behaviors*, we look at the basic understandings about the conventions of print that young readers must develop early. Chapter 11, *Learning to Solve Words: Effective and Efficient Phonics*, examines nine areas of learning related to word-solving strategies. We provide many examples of ways to help readers learn how to use letter-sound relationships, as well as word patterns and word
structure, to read and write words. In Chapter 12, Building and Using a Repertoire of Words, we discuss the benefit to learners of acquiring the ability to recognize a large body of words rapidly and without effort. Rapid recognition of words fuels fluency and frees attention for thinking about the meaning of texts.

Section 4, Teaching that Works, is the largest section of the book. Here you will find detailed descriptions and examples of ways to work with struggling readers. We begin with descriptions of how to use writing to support readers’ development of strategic actions for word solving and to extend their comprehension of texts. You will find this information in Chapter 13, Extending Reading Power Through Writing. Chapter 14 (Teaching for Problem Solving While Processing Texts: Early Reading Behaviors and Searching for Information) and Chapter 15 (Teaching for Independence in Processing Texts: Solving Words, Self-Monitoring and Self-Correcting Behaviors) focus directly on ways you can teach for, prompt for, and reinforce effective reading behaviors. These chapters present specific examples on how teachers can work with struggling readers from Levels A to N. Chapter 16, Teaching for Fluency in Processing Texts: Six Dimensions, presents a discussion of the important role of fluency in processing texts with comprehension. Here you will find examples of how you can teach for, prompt for, and reinforce several dimensions of fluency. In Chapter 17, Teaching for Comprehending: Thinking Before, During, and After Reading, we discuss the active process of comprehending texts and provide suggestions for helping children deeply comprehend texts. Our goal is to help them think actively while reading: making predictions, inferring and connecting, synthesizing new information, and analyzing and critiquing the texts that they read. Chapter 18, Working Successfully with English Language Learners, brings together many different ways to adjust instruction to accommodate the needs of English language learners. These suggestions can be used while working with whole classes or individuals, but they will be especially effective when working with small groups. The next two chapters, 19 (Engaging Readers’ Attention and Memory in Successful Learning) and 20 (Engaging Readers’ Emotion and Motivation in Successful Learning) focus on factors in the brain that affect literacy learning. A theme that runs through both chapters is deep engagement with texts. We end this volume with Chapter 21, Keys to Effective Intervention: Success for All Children. In this final chapter, we describe multi-layered intervention systems to help readers and give some practical suggestions for allocating teacher time. We also present a framework for intervention lessons, Levels A though N.

Writing this book has allowed us to bring together a great deal of our thinking. We drew from our own experience in teaching children who have difficulty learning to read and write, as well as from the large body of research that is available to us as educators. As with all professional materials, you will want to take from this volume those ideas that will best fit the students you teach and adjust them as learners change over time. We hope that the entire volume communicates the deep respect we have for all of you who work with readers/writers in difficulty. For those children, you provide the gateway to a literate future.

Gay Su Pinnell
Irene C. Fountas
When Readers Struggle

In this section, we look at how processing systems are built and how readers develop over time. We first present the instructional contexts that are essential for learning. Struggling readers need high-quality instruction across all of these contexts. We also focus on what effective readers do, what happens when readers go off track, and the power of systematic observation. This is essential information for teachers working with any reader, but it is critical for working with readers who struggle. We end the section with a look at the key role the text gradient plays in all of our work with struggling readers.
A Comprehensive Approach to Literacy Success

The early years of school are important for every child, but for those who find literacy learning difficult, every one of these years is critical. We do need a coordinated group of services to provide effective intervention if readers are struggling, but we should not forget that they must have excellent classroom instruction. In this chapter, we describe a comprehensive approach to provide strong teaching across classroom instructional contexts and supplementary intervention services. School districts seeking to close the achievement gap must consider good classroom teaching, multiple layers of intervention, the role of short-term intensive tutoring, and the ongoing development of highly qualified teachers.

Almost all the conventional ways of referring to children who find literacy learning difficult imply a weakness in the children. We take the position that teaching must be designed to meet the needs of each child and that educators must constantly search for effective ways to serve the children they teach. Because this book is about teaching children who find literacy learning difficult, whenever we use the word children, those are the children we mean, unless otherwise indicated.

For thirteen years, children spend six hours every day in the classroom. During the academic year, most children spend almost as much of their waking time with their teachers as they do with their parents. We need to provide the opportunity to every child to lead a literate life, recognizing that there will be great diversity in the skills and knowledge children bring to the classroom.

With rare exception, by the time they start school all children have developed the ability to use language
and have learned a great deal about how to do so. Many have:

- Listened to stories being read and followed along with the words and illustrations.
- Experimented with writing.
- Used oral and perhaps written language to communicate with others.
- Observed print in the community.
- Told stories about their experiences.

However, not every culture or every home is focused on literacy. Families deal with different problems and have different values. Economic circumstances vary. After food and shelter have been provided, there may be no money left for purchasing children’s books. Economic or other issues may mean that both parents work at one or several jobs to support the family, and their “quality time” may be spent in activities other than reading or writing. Even affluent families often have schedules that are hectic, and the child care these children receive may not include one-on-one literacy experiences.

Whatever their situation, all children have a natural tendency toward inquiry. They bring to school their intelligence, curiosity, and ability to use language to communicate. In general, children respond to what their environment offers. As important as it is to respect and communicate with parents and other caregivers, and no matter how much the family can help, literacy instruction is the job of the school.

Children’s early educational experiences often make the difference between being actively engaged in learning or being turned off by learning. High-quality preschool programs that build a strong base of language and storytelling are extremely beneficial. Preschoolers are incredibly fast language learners. Listening to stories, telling stories, talking with their peers, and playing oral games and games that include contact with print add a rich foundation of language and literacy to what children already know. Preschool can also be seen as the first level of prevention. These positive experiences provide the information children need to access as they encounter the world of print. They have high expectations of print and are able to bring meaning to it and avoid confusion.

Even when children have had limited literacy experiences prior to kindergarten, school can make the difference. Our Literacy Collaborative experience (literacycollaborative.org) indicates that skilled teaching and rich literacy experiences in kindergarten help most children develop early reading and writing strategies before they enter first grade. And building on the same elements in first grade turns them into readers who have the beginning of a self-extending system, one that enables them to learn more about literacy through reading and writing (Clay 2001). We do not mean that they need no further instruction. In fact, most children need good teaching of reading and writing from kindergarten through high school. Instruction changes with the type and complexity of the texts they are expected to read and write.

We have also learned that some children require more than good classroom instruction; therefore, a range of interventions has been designed to meet the different needs of students. Excellent classroom instruction, accompanied by a powerful intervention (or even several) can make it possible for all students to become successful users of literacy. As a literacy intervention, Reading Recovery is particularly effective (see Gomez-Bellenger 2006; also whatworksclearinghouse.com). Reading Recovery has provided us with a wake-up call. We cannot give up on children just because they enter school with a weak foundation of knowledge or are confused about the basics. We know from the research related to this one-to-one-tutorial approach that almost all children have enormous potential for success in literacy. We also have had excellent success with small-group interventions such as Leveled Literacy Intervention. In this book, we describe ways to work effectively with struggling readers. These techniques may be used in the classroom, in small-group intervention, or when working with individual readers.

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1 Leveled Literacy Intervention, developed and written by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell and published by Heinemann (2009), is a short-term, small-group intervention designed to bring children to grade level performance (Levels A–N). Three systems (Orange, Green, and Blue) are specially developed for children in the primary grades.
Table 1-1 Essential Experiences for Children Who Find Literacy Difficult

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<tr>
<th>Talk</th>
<th>Children need the opportunity to:</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Engage in conversation that helps them expand their use of language.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Engage in conversation about their experiences with texts.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tell stories from their experiences.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Listen and respond to language.</td>
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<th>Texts</th>
<th>Children need to read and talk about:</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A large number of texts every day.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• A large number of texts they can read independently.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Texts they can read with fluency and comprehension.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Texts that interest and engage them.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Texts that contain language they recognize and find meaningful.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Texts in many different genres—fiction and nonfiction.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Texts that, with teacher support, help them expand their reading powers.</td>
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<td>• Texts that provide a strong basis for discussion and writing.</td>
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<th>Texts</th>
<th>Children need to hear and talk about:</th>
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<td></td>
<td>• Texts that interest and engage them.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Age-appropriate and grade-appropriate texts.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Texts in many different genres—fiction and nonfiction.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Texts that offer opportunities to expand their vocabulary, language, and content knowledge.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Texts that provide a strong basis for discussion and writing.</td>
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<td>• Texts that help them learn more about writing.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Children need to respond to texts in meaningful ways:</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Talk about reading with their teacher and their peers.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Write about reading in a variety of genres and forms.</td>
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<td>• Draw about reading.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Children need explicit, clear, effective instruction so that they:</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understand letter-sound relationships (phonics).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Understand how words “work” (use visual analysis, word structure, spelling patterns, word-solving actions).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Understand how to use their knowledge of letters, sounds, and words while reading texts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understand how to use their knowledge of letters, sounds, and words while writing texts.</td>
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CHAPTER 1: A Comprehensive Approach to Literacy Success

**Essential Literacy Experiences**

Essential experiences for supporting children who find literacy difficult are summarized in Figure 1-1.

**Talk**

Every day, evaluate whether your students have enough time to talk with others and share their stories. The more effectively they can use oral language, the more knowledge they can bring to becoming literate. And there is only one way to develop oral language—through meaningful interactions with others. Nothing is as important for children as the interactions you have with them. Your conversations with children are authentic in that you listen and talk with them about something that really matters. You intentionally structure your conversations to increase student learning. The interactions may take place during whole-class and small-group instruction as well as individual conferences, but the key is the give-and-take of the interchange and your genuine interest in their stories, their questions, and their feedback. Simply talking to students is not as effective as having genuine interactions with them.

**Texts**

Rich texts are necessary to give children the foundation they need to become proficient readers and writers. They need to hear many age- and grade-appropriate texts read aloud; and when that experience is accompanied by discussion, children’s understanding of the language and meaning of texts increases. Reading aloud and discussing texts with children helps them become interested in print, notice characteristics of genres, and expand their vocabulary and content knowledge; it gives them something of substance to think about and talk about. Text-based conversation supports them as they take on new language structures.

Even more than children who learn easily, children who have reading difficulties need to process continuous text (meaningful books). They need to read texts that are interesting and engaging. They need to expand their reading abilities by reading “just-right” texts with your support; they also need to read many easy texts on their own. Fill your classroom library with many texts your students can read independently. Quantity matters. The higher the quality of the texts they read and comprehend, the stronger their foundation for talking and writing.

**Teaching**

Finally, whatever your classroom curriculum, children who find literacy learning difficult need strong teaching in many contexts. Children need to hear numerous texts read aloud and have the opportunity to engage with the language. It helps young children to hear the same texts (their favorites) read several times so that they can internalize the structure of written language.

Making adjustments to help readers who are having difficulty may occasionally seem inconsistent with the essential experiences just described. In small-group instruction, you may need to limit text choice; create a very precise sequence of texts; slow down to work closely on a text; or provide some very explicit and systematic work with letters, sounds, and words in isolation. All of these adjustments, however, are temporary and are made with the goal of reading continuous text with ease and understanding. The bottom line is that children who find literacy learning difficult need to spend most of their time reading and writing continuous text, and they need carefully designed instruction as they do so.

**Designing Programs with Coherence: Getting on the Same Page**

It has long been said that classroom teachers, reading teachers, and special education teachers must work together so that children experience coherent instruction, but opportunities for this level of cooperation are rare. Far more commonly, supplemental instruction is very different from classroom instruction, and children receive mixed messages. Alternatively, children
are dragged passively through a classroom curriculum they don’t learn, nor do they learn how to learn.

Thus the challenge is still there: we need comprehensive literacy approaches in which the efforts of every teacher a child works with are complementary and enable students to make faster progress. The test of any kind of supplemental instruction is whether children have learned how to do something as readers that they can do independently in the classroom literacy program.

We consider the importance of effective teaching in three contexts: the classroom; supplemental early intervention programs; and education for students with special needs (supplemental or self-contained). An example of the flow or layers of services in a coordinated, cohesive design is shown in Figure 1-2.

The classroom is the first venue for providing expert help for readers. Good first teaching is essential at every grade level. Children who enter school with a rich knowledge of literacy can survive almost any kind of instruction because they fit new information into already understood constructs of reading and writing. Children who do not start with a rich literacy foundation are vulnerable as they try, with greater or lesser success, to make sense of the instruction that is offered. So adjusting classroom instruction to individual differences is very important.

Children who show early signs of confusion may need early intervention, either as a member of a small group or individually. This intervention should be short term and intensive, in order to enable children to make accelerated progress so that they can fully benefit from classroom instruction. For many children, high-quality early intervention works so well in closing the gap that they can continue to learn after the supplemental help is no longer provided, given competent classroom instruction. For a few children, specialized teaching is needed, sometimes for several years. Here, again, the goal is to enable children to read and write independently in the classroom.

> Classroom Literacy: Good First Teaching

Most of the essential experiences that low-achieving children need can be provided only in a classroom in which there is time to engage deeply with texts. Only in classroom instruction will children have the opportunity to hear a wide variety of texts read aloud, to discuss these texts with peers, and to read and write for long periods of time. Only in the classroom is there time for daily, specific lessons to help children learn the building blocks of print—letters, sounds, and words.

An elementary education curriculum must comprise an articulated, cohesive system of language and literacy experiences. The classroom is the foundation, and differentiated instruction needs to be provided to meet diverse needs. The high-quality language and literacy teaching in the classroom needs to bring most of the children to at least grade-level expectations. A small number of children may also require supplemental instruction. If classrooms produce too many children who seem to need extra help, then a central focus should be on improving the effectiveness of classroom instruction.

**FIGURE 1-2** Coordinated Services to Children
Classroom literacy instruction is implemented in many ways, and at-risk children need to experience them all. There are numerous opportunities throughout the school day to provide essential classroom experiences through whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction (Figure 1-3). All of these contexts are directly beneficial to children who find literacy learning difficult.  

Whole-class instruction in the classroom encompasses the following contexts:

- **Interactive read-aloud.** The teacher reads a story aloud and invites thinking before, during, and after the reading to help children deepen their understanding and develop the ability to talk with one another about texts.

- **Shared/interactive writing.** The teacher acts as scribe as she guides children in composing and then reading a text. As the teacher writes, she may draw children’s attention to specific aspects of print, including letters and sounds. Shared writing becomes interactive writing when the teacher invites children to “share the pen” in writing the text.

- **Shared reading.** The teacher and children read a text in unison, talk about the meaning, and attend to aspects of text such as directionality, voice-print match, punctuation, letter-sound relationships, or parts within words. Children have the opportunity to behave like readers with the teacher’s support.

- **Reading minilesson/individual work/group share.** The teacher provides a brief, explicit lesson on a particular aspect of reading. Often texts that have previously been read aloud are used as examples. The minilesson is usually followed by small-group work (such as guided reading, literature discussion, or literacy centers) and independent reading. Children then share what they have learned.

- **Writing minilesson/individual work/group share.** The teacher provides a brief, explicit lesson on a particular aspect of writing. Often texts that have previously been read aloud are used as mentor texts. After the lesson, children work on their own pieces and then share their writing.

- **Phonics/spelling minilesson/individual work/group share.** The teacher provides a concise, explicit lesson on a principle related to letters, sounds, and words: phonemic awareness, letters, letter-sound relationships, high-frequency words, vocabulary, spelling patterns, word structure, or ways of solving words. The minilesson is followed by an application activity in which children individually apply what they have learned and then by a group share.

Small-group instruction in the classroom encompasses the following contexts:

- **Guided reading.** The teacher works with a small group of children who have similar enough needs that they can be taught together. From a series of texts organized by level of difficulty, the teacher selects a book that the children can read with support. The teacher provides explicit instruction to help the children read the text proficiently and at the same time learn more about the reading process. Guided reading usually includes several minutes of explicit word work at the end of the lesson.

- **Book clubs.** Children read or listen to a book being read and meet in small heterogeneous groups to discuss the book with one another. The teacher demonstrates how to think and talk about books and supports the children’s discussion.

- **Guided writing.** The teacher brings together a small group of children, all of whom need to attend to a particular aspect of writing, and provides a specific lesson that they can use to...
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Improve their writing. The goal is to have children apply the learning to their own writing.

Individual instruction in the classroom encompasses the following contexts:

- **Individual interactions during guided reading.** After introducing the book, the teacher listens to individuals in the group as they read the text for themselves softly or silently. On-the-spot assessment may prompt a powerful teaching interaction; alternatively, the teacher may have in mind specific instruction to help the student in a previously identified area.

- **Reading conferences during the reading workshop.** As children are reading self-selected books independently (from browsing boxes of books the teacher has prepared or from author, series, genre,
or content collections in the classroom library), the teacher engages them in brief interactions that support the student’s comprehension, word solving, and other reading strategies.

- **Writing conferences during the writing workshop.** As children work on their writing, the teacher conducts conferences with individuals. The conference may focus on any aspect of writing that is relevant to the student’s work.

- **Word study applications.** An independent hands-on activity (such as sorting words or letters, matching letters and sounds, playing a word game) takes place after a word study mini-lesson and helps the children apply what they are learning. They may work as individuals, with a partner, or in small groups. The teacher may conduct brief individual interactions during this time to reinforce and extend learning.

Teachers organize their day by moving between whole-class, small-group, and individual work as appropriate. Many teachers of young children also have them engage in meaningful, productive work at literacy centers. These centers can greatly enhance young children’s literacy opportunities by providing:

- Experiences with reading or responding to poetry.
- Opportunities to listen to audio recordings of texts.
- Further work with letters, sounds, and words.
- More independent reading (and rereading) of texts.
- More opportunities to write about reading or content-area learning.
- Chances to respond to or interpret texts through art and drama.

Adjusting instruction to help the lowest achievers and trying to take advantage of every learning opportunity can be challenging, especially when you have the varying needs of twenty-five to thirty students to consider. A school day of six hours sounds long; in reality, however, it is hard to find enough time to teach. When planning for the literacy support of low-achieving children, administrators, leadership teams, and teachers first need to examine teaching in classrooms. More time can be found to help low-achieving readers by:

- Minimizing time spent on logistical announcements and school assemblies.
- Creating large blocks of time in which to provide concentrated instruction.
- Scheduling special subjects, such as art and music, so that they do not fragment the day.
- Avoiding unnecessary testing.
- Providing rich and varied text resources so that all readers have appropriate selections for independent reading.
- Managing transitions so as not to lose time.

## Early Intervention

When we think about what readers need, the first consideration is what can be done in classrooms. Without rich classroom opportunities, no intervention will work. But what about children who have difficulty learning to read and write even in classrooms where the literacy opportunities are many and of high quality? Children who are confused about aspects of literacy often do not fully profit from classroom instruction. A child who has trouble identifying letters that are embedded in continuous print, for example, may not know where to look when you ask the class to find the first letter of a word. Children who have trouble hearing individual sounds in words will have difficulty connecting them to letters when you help them try to solve words. Children who have trouble remembering how specific words look will not be able to locate those words in a text. Children who are focusing only on the print may not understand what you mean when you try to help them anticipate the next word or understand dialogue. Children who are attending to aspects of print may “mumble along” during shared reading without looking anywhere near the right place in the print. Classroom instruction, even though excellent, may help the majority of children but miss the mark entirely with a few.
You will have no trouble identifying these children, and there are many ways of adjusting instruction to help them, including making whole-group instruction multilevel, providing small-group instruction, and tailoring individual interactions to support learners. This book offers suggestions for adjusting instruction to maximize opportunities for children who find literacy learning difficult. All of them can be used with whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction.

But there are always children who need supplemental help, some for a very short time, a very small percentage for their entire school careers. For these children, a layer of early intervention is imperative. We cannot wait until failure takes its emotional toll and the gap is too great to bridge. It must take place early in the child’s school career. There are critical times in learning when it is easy to get back on track. The longer we wait, the harder it is to move children into the mainstream of instruction—where they must be able to take advantage of good classroom teaching. The intermediate and middle school grades benefit from the combination of good primary classroom teaching and early intervention: special needs services are then provided for the few children who need help for a longer period of time.

Early intervention is supplemental teaching—extra help above and beyond good classroom instruction. This extra teaching should not take the place of opportunities to learn in the classroom. A great deal of coordination and communication is necessary to accomplish this goal with coherence and efficiency.

Small-Group Supplemental Instruction

Since the late sixties, it has been common to take children out of the classroom (pull-out) or bring a reading teacher into a classroom (push-in) for compensatory small-group instruction in reading. Yet the number of children who have difficulty learning to read remains about the same and in some cases has even increased. Critics of pull-out programs claim that too much time is lost when children are separated from their classmates for thirty to forty-five minutes a day, that the instruction children receive is often inadequate and disorganized, that much instructional time is lost in transitions, that the instruction is not coordinated with the classroom, and that the children might be better off participating fully in classroom instruction (Allington 1983, 1994; Allington & McGill-Franzen 1989). Analysis also shows that during supplementary group instruction, children get very little opportunity to read and write and spend most of their time on “activities” and drill (Pinnell et al. 1993). Yet teachers continue to demand extra small-group help for more and more of their students. Too often the help is not “extra” help, as it takes the place of classroom instruction.

Supplemental small-group instruction has not worked in the past because:

- It is inefficient (going down the hall and returning, moving to another area of the classroom, getting out materials and putting them away, etc.).
- It is not usually coordinated or cohesive with the classroom program; children are often confused by two very different approaches.
- It does not include large chunks of time spent reading continuous text with expert teacher support. Some are essentially phonics programs, not reading programs that include phonics.
- It often involves dragging children through texts or assignments that are too difficult for them.
- It often makes children dependent on adults to help them complete work.
- It is not true intervention but rather long-term remediation; children tend to stay in the groups year after year, losing hope and motivation.
- A stigma is attached to participation.
- Characteristics vary widely. Some teachers use highly prescriptive programs that do not fit children’s individual learning paths; others provide too little structure to help readers know how to move forward.

Supplemental small-group instruction can enable children to make faster progress in reading and thus profit from good classroom teaching as long as you recognize three facts:

1. To make a real contribution to students’ learning, small-group instruction must be organized, coherent, highly effective, and more uniquely
tailored to students’ needs than the instruction they would be getting in the same amount of time in the classroom.

2. The small-group instruction must be supplemental to good classroom instruction.

3. Some children will require individual tutoring; small-group help will not be sufficient.

Small-group supplemental instruction has many advantages, especially if children are well-matched and the groups are small. It makes no sense, for example, to offer extra instruction to eight or more children who are inevitably too different from one another to profit from the same instruction. All the suggestions in this book will be appropriate as you work with children in groups and interact with them individually. Review the general suggestions for making supplemental small-group instruction work in Figure 1-4. These suggestions range from efficient transitions and management to the precise kind of teaching you will be doing with small groups. While we know that the urge is to serve as many children as possible, supplemental group work must be kept within a reasonable range to be effective. Special instruction without results is a misuse of public money. It is better to work intensively and effectively with a small group for thirty minutes than to double the group and provide ineffectual instruction for an hour. It is better to work with a smaller group (three or four) for half a year, than a larger group (five to eight) for a whole year. Keep the group size to five or fewer; three or four is best. Remember that many of the young children who receive supplemental instruction are confused or find the learning difficult. They need your continuous attention to help them focus and learn. The smaller the group, the better the results.

It is essential to create a strong structure for supplemental small-group instruction—a lesson framework that reflects both your readers and your curricular goals. A predictable sequence of activities offers children security, and they learn and use essential learning routines more quickly. A predictable lesson framework also helps you pace your instruction to include reading, writing, and word study, all of which are necessary for helping at-risk readers. Within the framework, you can adjust your instruction to your learners’ precise needs.

**Individual Instruction**

Some children have so much difficulty that they require one-to-one tutoring. The U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences identified “one-on-one tutoring by qualified tutors for at-risk readers in grades 1–3” (Institute of Education Sciences 2003) as meeting the gold standard for what works. For children who have extreme difficulty in their first year of classroom instruction, Clay (2003) recommends a short series of individually designed lessons. When well-designed individual lessons are applied at the right time, the long-term effect on initially struggling readers can be profound.
The most dynamic and highly regarded example of individual tutoring is Reading Recovery, which has demonstrated the ability to help well over a million low-achieving first graders make accelerated progress and get “back on track.” (See Schmidt et al. 2005 for detailed information about Reading Recovery and its results.) Researchers have examined Reading Recovery and found the following benefits (Schmidt et al., 78):

- Instruction is at an appropriate level and is built on the child’s current strengths.
- Expectations and challenges are appropriate.
- The pace of instruction is appropriate.
- The child’s attention is focused on literacy tasks.
- The child is an active and constructive learner.
- Time is designated daily for reading and writing continuous text with skilled guidance.
- Language and communication skills are enhanced.
- The child receives immediate feedback and explicit guidance.
- There is an opportunity for accelerated learning and a quicker, successful return to mainstream literacy instruction.
- Children receive emotional support that fosters learning—support that enhances attitudes, motivation, confidence, and trust.

Simply providing one-to-one instruction will not do the job. The instruction must have the advantages listed above and be delivered by a teacher who has been trained to work with learners who have the most difficulty learning to read. Pinnell, Lyons, and Deford (1993) identified three factors required for successful intervention: (a) one-to-one teaching, (b) a structured lesson framework with procedures designed to provide very specific help to learners, and (c) long-term professional development for teachers so that they can make the most of the individual time. Clay (2003, 303) insists:

> There is a categorical difference between the kinds of teaching and learning interactions that can occur in individual instruction and the kinds of teaching that can occur in group and class settings. We will have to differentiate our theories rather than treat the two categories as if they were one. It is acceptable to believe that in learning to play golf and learning to play the cello, individual tuition will be more productive than group tuition, and I believe that following surgery, individual intensive care suited to my critical condition will be the treatment of choice for a short period of time even when the level of care provided in the general wards of hospitals is superb!

Many school districts in the United States provide short periods (twelve to twenty weeks) of daily one-to-one instruction for children in grade 1 who are in the lowest achieving twenty to twenty-five percent of the class. The payoff is great because tutoring at this critical time helps the great majority of children accelerate to the point that they can progress with their peers. Applying one-to-one intensive help early on greatly reduces the number of children who need continuing service of any kind (see Schmidt et al. 2005).

### The Role of Professional Development

Simply providing a variety of contexts for learning and early intervention in classroom instruction—supplementary, small group, and individual—will not guarantee success for low-achieving children. The key is teacher knowledge and skill. Effective teachers of children who need extra support:

- Have a deep understanding of the reading and writing processes.
- Know how to observe and analyze children’s precise reading and writing behaviors.
- Are able to use the information from their observations to make effective moment-to-moment teaching decisions while working with children as a whole class, in small groups, and individually.
Differentiate instruction, making decisions that are tailored to individuals, even in group settings.

Know how to listen carefully to children and respond to their ideas.

Use clear, precise language to help children understand concepts and principles.

Know how to interact with children effectively, having conversations that will help children expand their use of language.

Create and use strong frameworks for instruction.

Know how to analyze texts and understand their role in supporting children.

Know how to select high-quality texts that engage children and help them expand their language and content knowledge.

Use instructional time effectively.

Understand the role of language in literacy, particularly when working with English language learners or other children whose home/community language is not English.

Understand language and cultural differences and their implications for teaching and learning.

Learn from teaching as they engage in it and have experiences with different children over time.

Examine their own teaching effectiveness, always taking responsibility for children's learning and continually seeking greater skill.

The most vulnerable children need the best teaching, and the key to providing it is ongoing professional development. Teachers need support to become more expert with every year of teaching. School districts seeking to close the achievement gap must consider good classroom teaching, multiple layers of intervention, the role of short-term intensive tutoring, and the ongoing development of highly qualified teachers.
Suggestions for Professional Development

EVALUATING THE DESIGN AND OUTCOMES OF SUPPLEMENTARY APPROACHES

1. Work with your colleagues to make a list of the current approaches you use to help children who are having difficulty learning to read and write.
2. Discuss the potential of each approach and its current level of effectiveness.
3. After examining “Essential Experiences for Children Who Find Literacy Difficult” (Figure 1-1), ask yourselves these questions:
   - How are we considering the effectiveness of classroom programs as part of the prevention of reading difficulties?
   - What are the results of our classroom programs?
   - What aspects of classroom instruction particularly support these readers? What needs to be developed?

- What kind of supplemental literacy services are provided in the school? Are they efficient, structured, coherent, and coordinated?
- Do we need to reduce the number of different programs offered to at-risk readers in order to increase their effectiveness?
- What kinds of changes can be made to provide a more coordinated and cohesive program—classroom instruction, supplemental small-group instruction, and tutoring?
- What kind of professional development will be needed to make these changes?

4. Think and talk about the effectiveness of your current supplemental small-group instruction. Use “Making Supplemental Small-Group Instruction Work” (Figure 1-4) to ground your discussion. Discuss any changes you might want to make.

5. Develop an action plan for revising or improving your program for helping children who have difficulty in learning to read and write.