Chapter 1

Focusing on Meaning

This book provides 30 sample lessons teachers can use as guides when learning how to be explicit when teaching reading skills and strategies to struggling readers. A struggling reader is a student who is reading below grade level. Almost every classroom has some students who struggle. It is normal.

Struggling readers exist because of individual differences—some students come to school from homes where no one reads; others come from homes where English is not spoken; others had poor instruction in earlier school situations; others may be dyslexic, mentally impaired, or learning disabled. We honor such students as deserving of high expectations and good teaching. We use the term "struggling reader" in recognition that learning to read is complex and takes effort and because it is the term used by teachers.

BACKGROUND

Recently, there has been a national decline in reading scores, with accompanying concern about how reading is taught. One result of that concern is heavy pressure on school districts to buy scripted reading programs or some other highly prescriptive program that promises a "quick fix." However, those reading programs are flawed because they assume (1) that every student is on the same reading level, (2) that "one size fits all," (3) that program directives must be followed without variation, and (4) that motivation is not a major concern.

We believe that a better way to improve reading scores is to focus on struggling readers, differentiate to meet their various needs, provide explicit "how-to" information about reading skills and strategies, and embed skill and strategy instruction in purposeful reading.

However, before describing how to provide such instruction, we need to make clear that skills and strategies are not the goal of reading instruction. The real goal of reading instruction is to get meaning from text. Therefore, skills and strategies must be taught in ways that cause students to think of reading as a pursuit of meaning.

Thinking of reading as a pursuit of meaning is a conceptual understanding. Conceptual understandings are rooted in experiences. Consequently, we want to do as much as we can to ensure that students' accumulated experiences with reading cause them to think of reading as a pursuit of meaning in a text. If students' experiences with reading are purposeful, they develop an understanding of reading as a pursuit of meaning. If, on the other hand, students' experiences with reading are mainly the completion of practice exercises in isolation from meaningful purpose, students do not develop an understanding of reading as a pursuit of meaning.

Consequently, a teacher's first job is to provide experiences that help students build the understanding that the primary goal is reading for meaning.

Making Meaning the Focus

This first chapter provides three kinds of experiences for helping students build the understanding that the focus of reading is meaning getting.

Creating a Literate Environment

The first kind of experience for helping students think of reading as the pursuit of meaning is a classroom environment where a wide variety of texts is easily accessible to students. It is an environment that says, "Reading is what we do here." By making it easy for students to access text, to browse books, and to take books home to read, we are providing students with experiences with reading that are enjoyable and useful. This is especially important for struggling readers because they typically have few experiences with books or other texts.

What follows are six examples of how teachers can create a literate environment designed to give students experiences that cause them to think of reading as pursuit of meaning.

1. *Create a text-rich environment.* If exciting and interesting narrative and informational texts are available in the classroom and students are encouraged to access them, students are more likely to be drawn to reading. The usual guideline is to have at least 30 trade books per student, including a wide range of genres and levels of difficulty, attractively arranged to encourage browsing. To further entice kids to read, the classroom might include beanbag chairs or rocking chairs in an area where trade books are displayed. Additionally, there should be lots of examples of non-book texts, including websites, online texts, maps, globes, computers, student-generated texts, charts produced by both teachers and students, magazines, and newspapers.

2. *Do daily read-alouds.* Reading aloud to students has many benefits. First, it illustrates the teacher's own love of and commitment to reading. Reading aloud also acquaints children with a variety of narrative and informational texts and provides them with background knowledge they might not otherwise encounter on their own. Finally, read-alouds are relaxing times, and yet are experiences that cause students to think about meaning.

3. *Ensure that students have lots of time to read.* Free reading time is an experience that builds an understanding of the meaning-getting focus of reading. It is often squeezed out of today's classrooms by the pressure to prepare for tests. This is a mistake. You can't become an enthusiastic reader unless you read a lot and have a choice about what you read. The general guideline is that students should do 45–60 minutes of free-choice reading a day. Some of this time occurs during daily "free reading" time; some of it occurs when the teacher is engaged in teaching a skill or strategy to small groups while the rest of the class reads independently. Also, free reading time can be broken up, with 15 minutes occurring at the beginning of the day while the teacher is busy with attendance routines, 7 minutes during a break in activities, and so on. But the bottom line is that students will not think of reading as meaning getting if their experiences don't include time and the opportunity to read lots of books.

FOCUS ON CONNECTED TEXT

Students should be reading connected text most of the time. *Connected text* is text that contains a coherent message. A story is an example of connected text; a chapter in a social studies textbook is connected text; an online article is connected text; a newspaper article is connected text;

graphic novels are connected text. However, fill-in-the-blank worksheets or other kinds of practice activities are not connected text. To become readers, students should read connected text.

4. *Make knowledge building a priority.* Knowledge reflects life experiences. The more experiences students have with something, the more words they know about it; the more words they know, the more knowledge they have, and the more knowledge they have the better they comprehend what they read. Content areas such as social studies and science provide new experiences, new knowledge, and new vocabulary. They should be an integral part of a literate environment for many reasons but especially because it is another experience with reading as the pursuit of meaning.

5. *Integrate writing into reading instruction.* Writing and reading are mutually supportive. The more students write, the better they read; the more they read, the better they write. Consequently, writing stories, writing letters, writing informational text in support of a class project, writing notes to friends or family, and writing emails all promote the meaning-getting purpose of language. For that reason, each Part II example provides a suggestion for linking reading and writing.

6. *Encourage conversation.* Just as reading and writing are mutually supportive, reading and oral language are mutually supportive. Traditional question-and-answer formats in which students are put in a passive position does not qualify as conversation. What is needed is discussion in which students have a voice and an active role. So, classroom talk should be collaborative rather than submissive, active rather than passive, and conversational rather than interrogative.

Talking Directly about the Purpose of Reading

Teacher talk is a second set of experiences that builds an understanding of reading as a pursuit of meaning. That is, teachers look for as many ways as possible to publicly emphasize that reading is for getting meaning.

Doing so is particularly important for struggling readers. While good readers often seem to understand the purpose of reading from experiences at home, struggling readers often do not. Consequently, students profit from having experiences in which teachers talk about the meaning-getting function of reading. Accordingly, teachers always look for opportunities to make statements about the following:

- Reading as a message-receiving system and writing as a message-sending system.
- Students being authors when they write.
- Exchanges of notes or emails or chat room talk as communicating meaning.
- Reading as both enjoyment and as a practical tool.
- Real life instances when reading led to meaning and understanding or in which writing was done to communicate meaning.
- How reading served as a problem-solving tool.

You will know students understand reading as communication of meaning by watching them during the normal course of the school day. For instance, you can assume your students are understanding the communication function of reading when you observe things like the following:

- They talk about reading and writing as being messages.
- They talk about reading as useful in solving problems or accomplishing tasks.
- They talk about literature as a source of understanding about living our lives.
- They talk about informational text in terms of action they could take or, alternatively, what they need to do next if a text did not provide the information needed for the task at hand.

Direct talk about the value of reading is also sometimes necessary. It is important for all readers, but especially for those who face challenges when reading, to have experiences in which reading enriches their lives, or enables them to do things they want to do, or answers questions they might have, or prepares them for life. The following are examples of how teacher talk can be an experience that builds understandings of the value of reading and of agency:

- When problems are solved by reference to a text, teachers have public celebrations.
- When students accomplish a goal by reading, teachers point out how the skill or strategy was a stepping stone to what really counted.
- When preparing students for achievement tests, teachers keep reminding students that the tests are important for the school

district but that tests are not as important as using reading and writing to solve problems.
- When introducing lessons, teachers routinely point out that what they are learning will help students to take action toward accomplishing a goal.
- When students are empowered, enabled, or ennobled through the use of reading and writing, teachers provide their highest praise.

The following examples are observational evidence that students have learned to value reading:

- Students laugh out loud when reading a novel.
- Students insist on sneaking a page or two of reading when you are trying to get them to do something else.
- Students suggest things to read to solve problems they encounter.
- Students spontaneously turn to the internet to find answers to questions.

Each teaching example in Part II has a section called "Conceptual Understandings You Can Reinforce During This Lesson." It serves as a reminder that each encounter with reading offers teachers an opportunity to talk to students about the meaning-getting focus of reading.

DEVELOPING AGENCY

When students understand the value of reading, they are positioned to develop "agency," or "ownership" of their reading. Agency is the feeling you get when your efforts influence events or when your efforts have been key in accomplishing a goal. Developing agency is crucial to becoming a competent reader and a competent person. When students doubt their abilities, they set low goals, become confused easily, and often develop a condition called "learned helplessness." That is, they disengage from the learning effort, so they don't have to face their failures. Struggling readers who see no value in reading have difficulty developing agency. But if their reading experiences put them in positions to feel they are in charge of their own pursuit of meaning, they will develop personal agency. Talking to students about how to be in charge of their own reading is a good way to accomplish this.

Teaching Skills and Strategies inside Purposeful Reading Tasks

The final, and perhaps most important way, to build understanding of reading's meaning-getting focus is to teach skills and strategies as an integral part of a purposeful reading task. All the Part II sample lessons have a category labeled "Grounding the Lesson in Real Reading." Each of these describes how high-challenge reading and writing tasks can be organized around a theme or a project having goals students consider sensible and purposeful.

When pursuing such a project, all students, including struggling readers, are a part of a collaborative, class-wide effort to find answers to questions, or to find information to accomplish a particular goal, or to take a particular action. Because the focus is on gathering information to take a particular action, each "Grounding the Lesson in Real Reading" category is a set of experiences emphasizing reading and writing for meaning.

The examples in this book use two kinds of projects. The first occurs when informational text is used and covers several days or longer. For instance, in Example 14: Main Idea, the content is a science unit on flowers. The students' purpose is to find out what action they can take to preserve wildflowers in nature. The goal is to locate information about preserving wildflowers; the main idea strategy taught during the unit is a stepping stone to getting the desired meaning, but it is not the end in itself. That is, we are not learning about the main idea because we need to know about the main idea, but because knowing how to determine the main idea will help get the information needed to preserve wildflowers. The unit or project ends with a culminating activity in which students present their findings about how to preserve wildflowers at the annual science fair.

When a story or a poem is the text being used, the project is often shorter but, otherwise, has a focused purpose similar to longer projects. For instance, Example 7: Theme has fifth-grade students writing stories containing a theme and then reading their stories to second graders. The focus is stories having a theme; the skills or strategies are taught as stepping stones to accomplishing the project goal, but they are not the end in itself. The end, or culminating activity, is presenting their stories to the second graders.

We provide Part II sample lessons as illustrations, but they are examples only; you cannot use them exactly as we've written them because situations differ, kids differ, and local conditions differ. So, you must create your own projects for your students, using our sample lessons as models.

AN EXAMPLE OF TEACHING "INSIDE" A LARGER TASK

Consider the following example of a second-grade teacher. Her assessment reveals several students who need explicit instruction on what an index is and how to use it. She could simply provide a verbal explanation of how to use an index and then give them a worksheet for practice. But she does not do that. Instead, she wants her students to see that indexes are useful when they are doing purposeful reading tasks. Consequently, she uses students' concern about new animal control laws in the township to encourage them to write to the town council to express their concerns. In preparation, she suggests informational text for her students to read. But in the midst of doing that reading—that is, *inside* the larger activity of searching for information useful in influencing the town council—the teacher provides explicit instruction about how to use an index to those students who need it. By first involving students in a purposeful reading task and then teaching them how to use indexes *inside* that task or as part of that task, she accomplishes three goals: She motivates students by engaging them in reading they see as purposeful, she teaches indexes as a practical and immediately useful tool for accomplishing that task, and she gives students experiences that help them learn to value reading.

While few of us can come up with the perfect motivating project every time, we can all try to ensure that instruction does not begin and end with skill sheets, practice exercises, and tests. Whatever can be done to help students see reading as purposeful meaning getting, with skills and strategies being stepping stones to that meaning, is better than focusing exclusively on skills and testing.

THE GAME AT THE END OF THE WEEK

We can better understand why reading for "purpose and understanding" is motivating if we consider a sports analogy. For instance, kids love to play baseball. They will practice skills such as fielding ground balls for hours without complaint. Why? Because there is a game at the end of the week, and it will then be important that they can field ground balls; that is, they are learning to field ground balls *inside* a larger and (to them) more important task—that of winning the game at the end of the week. Similarly, students

can be motivated to learn reading skills and strategies if they see that the skills or strategies are going to be used to do something important and are not just isolated things learned to pass a test.

A teacher can use the following seven steps when developing authentic projects in which skill and strategy instruction is embedded:

1. Usually, the teacher decides on the content. Often, the most convenient source of content is a unit in social studies or science texts or a story the students are expected to read. For instance, a teacher can decide to focus on the science book's chapter on weather, or to focus on a story.

2. The teacher invents, in collaboration with students, the project and the actions they want to take using what they learn. That is, they decide together what they want to do with this content, and what kind of culminating activity to have at the end. This is teacher–student planning. Both teacher and students have input into what the project will be. For instance, in discussing the topic of weather, the teacher or a student might suggest a project in which the content is used to make their own predictions about each day's weather, with the culminating activity being a presentation comparing their predictions with what the meteorologist or the weather app predicted. The teacher is in charge here, but the trick is to have students think they are making many of the choices about how the content will be used and what the culminating activity will be.

3. The teacher and students plan together about what must be done to achieve the project's goals. They decide on what reading needs to be done to obtain necessary information, how writing might also be used, how to proceed, and steps to take to prepare them for the culminating activity.

4. As students begin working on the project, either independently or in groups, the teacher informally assesses by observing individuals or groups of students as they read. When a student has difficulty, the teacher determines what skill or strategy needs to be taught and then plans a small-group lesson to help those struggling students.

5. As some students work independently, the teacher meets in small groups with students that need help with a specific skill or strategy. The sample lessons in Part II are intended to help in the planning of these small-group lessons.

6. The teacher periodically calls the whole class together to coordinate efforts, to discuss what has been discovered so far, how it contributes to the culminating activity, and what else needs to be done.

7. The class presents its findings in the culminating activity. A culminating activity can be reports given to the class, or presentations to an audience, or a written document that is sent to an appropriate place or other "real life" activities in which students take action to accomplish the task they see as authentic. It is a time when the teacher can again reiterate the purposefulness of reading, and students can take pride in their individual contributions and get a sense of closure on the project.

When assessment reveals a need to teach a particular skill or strategy to a small group, as in the fifth step above, the teacher begins by stating the skill or strategy to be learned and where students will apply it in the texts they are using. The purpose is to get students focused on what is coming. For instance, the teacher might do the following:

- Specify in each lesson objective how the skill or strategy will be immediately applied in the project.
- State for each lesson what action students will be able to take or what problem will be solved because of being able to apply the skill or strategy being emphasized.
- Emphasize the value of the skill or strategy in helping students achieve something they desire to do.
- Cite examples of how specific reading and writing activities have empowered, enabled, and/or enriched us.

More specific information on the structure of lessons is included in Chapter 3.

SUMMARY

This book is dedicated to helping teachers provide struggling readers with explicit explanations of the thinking involved in using reading skills and strategies. Such instruction is most effective when students understand that we read to get meaning. Making sure there is a text-rich classroom

environment and explicit talk about the way reading works are important. But perhaps the best way for students to develop the understanding that reading is the pursuit of meaning is to ensure that skill or strategy instruction is taught as an integral part of a project having a goal students think is worth their time. The sample lessons in Part II are a resource you can adapt when planning to teach a skill or strategy as part of a larger project goal.