Supporting Below-Level Readers As They Grapple with Difficult Texts

"*Struggle* Is Not a Bad Word: Misconceptions and Recommendations About Readers Struggling with Difficult Texts" by Sarah Lupo, John Strong, and Kristin Conradi Smith in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, March/April 2019 (Vol. 62, #5, p. 551-560), https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jaal.926; the authors can be reached at luposm@jmu.edu, jzstrong@udel.edu, and keconradi@wm.edu.

In this *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* article, Sarah Lupo (James Madison University), John Strong (University of Delaware/Newark), and Kristin Conradi Smith (William & Mary) question whether giving struggling adolescents reading material at the instructional level – just above their current reading level (the "zone of proximal development") – is the best way for them to catch up and become proficient readers. This widespread practice stems from four beliefs:

- A high Lexile level means that a text is difficult to read.
- Readers are more engaged and can learn more from easier versions of texts.
- Reading easier texts leads to greater gains.
- Some readers cannot (or will not) read complex texts.

These are all misconceptions, say Lupo, Strong, and Smith: "In our view, literacy educators should adopt the mindset that when it comes to reading, struggle is not necessarily a bad thing. As we prepare students for college and careers, we ought to engage them in texts and tasks with which they will struggle but will learn to be successful with support.… [S]tudents must practice reading difficult texts, with support, in order to improve their comprehension ability." Here are the authors' recommendations, addressing the misconceptions one by one:

• *Consider what makes a text difficult*. Readability formulas (like Lexile) don't take into account a number of factors that make texts more challenging. When deciding on classroom texts, teachers should consider Lexile level, but also: students' familiarity with vocabulary; the amount of academic vocabulary; how frequently words are used; concreteness versus abstraction; sentence length; syntactic complexity (modifiers and dependent clauses); cohesiveness (connections between sentences and ideas); and how formal the language is.

• *Motivate students to read difficult texts*. "Providing easier versions of texts does not necessarily improve learning or comprehension," say Lupo, Strong, and Smith. A study of students who used the website Newsela to access easier versions of challenging texts showed that this strategy didn't boost comprehension. As for graphic novels, the authors don't agree that they make texts easier to comprehend or build important reading skills and motivation (reading a graphic novel version of *Romeo and Juliet* cannot compare to reading the original play with support). "Instead of turning to an easier version of a text to engage students," say the authors, "we recommend focusing on the facilitative role of motivation: what might move a student to read." They recommend: giving students some choice in what they read; maximizing classroom interaction with peers about texts; making connections with students' prior knowledge of the topic; and filling in knowledge gaps with videos, visuals, and other material.

• *Provide more opportunities for students to read*. Reading easier texts may improve fluency, say the authors, but studies have not shown that it improves comprehension. What does help is spending more classroom time reading a variety of texts, including some that are challenging. “Reading experiences need to be rich and engaging,” say Lupo, Strong, and Smith, “with opportunities to talk about and choose texts. Teachers should provide readers with an opportunity to develop a sense of agency to persist through texts of varying levels of difficulty because of their own need to make sense of them.” The authors are critical of using texts to teach certain skills (e.g., main idea, key details), which they say is not supported by research. Better to assemble sets of thematically connected texts – for example:

- A news article about the history of Canterbury (easy vocabulary, well organized);
- An excerpt from *Paper Towns* by John Green (easy vocabulary, challenging theme);
- A video trailer of *Into the Wild* (visual, challenging theme);
- *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (challenging vocabulary, sentences, themes).

“Providing opportunities for students to read related texts,” say the authors, “allows them to garner interest in the topic, draw connections between ideas, and be exposed to vocabulary used in different contexts.”

• *Scaffold students’ reading of quality texts*. “We recommend abandoning the notion that some readers need easy texts,” say Lupo, Strong, and Smith. “Doing so robs them of quality time in quality texts and hardly cultivates a love of reading… Instead of defining a student’s zone of proximal development as a text level, we have found it productive to think about differentiating the instructional supports provided by the teacher instead.” Reading texts aloud can help with motivation, engagement, and a love of reading, but it should be combined with lots of minds-on work with texts. Here are scaffolding ideas for texts that have unfamiliar words, abstract language, lack of cohesion, and difficult concepts and themes:

Before reading:

- Preview unfamiliar vocabulary with definitions, visuals, examples, and non-examples.
- Build knowledge by watching an engaging video or reading easier, related texts.
- Involve students in a discussion about key concepts related to the topic.

During reading:

- Have students read a short section of text followed by a question.
- Use a think-aloud to model comprehension, or a reading guide to help support knowledge and connections.
- Provide a specific purpose for reading short sections of the text.

After reading:

- Have a discussion using the new vocabulary.
- Use a graphic organizer.
- Discuss the text’s purpose.

© Copyright 2019 Marshall Memo LLC