Catching Readers Before They Fall

Study Guide

Supporting Readers Who Struggle, K–4

Pat Johnson and Katie Keier

This book is designed to be read by individual teachers and literacy coaches, by teachers in a teachers-as-readers group, as part of a staff development project, or in the context of a college graduate or undergraduate class on teaching reading in the elementary grades.

The purpose of this study guide is to help facilitate discussions around many of the topics presented in the book. We have written it from the perspective we are most familiar with ourselves—that of a member of a teachers-as-readers group—but the study guide may be adapted to all the other settings mentioned above. The format of the guide is as follows:

- A brief summary of the chapter or chapters
- Questions or discussion topics
- Suggested group activities
- Classroom follow-up or reflection

Overview of the Book

Catching Readers Before They Fall: Supporting Readers Who Struggle, K–4 offers information for any teacher who wants to learn more about teaching reading to those students for whom learning to read does not come easily. Understanding the complex, integrated process of how reading works provides the thread woven throughout the text. This understanding is intended to help teachers as they:

- Support students building a functioning reading process system
- Model and prompt readers to use various sources of information to solve words and understand text
- Set up a classroom environment that supports this type of teaching
- Use quality literature for reading aloud, nudging students to make meaning of texts and go beyond the literal level
- Give the most at-risk students an effective start by including beginning strategy instruction, such as self-monitoring, alongside early letter and phonics instruction
- Teach comprehension strategies right from the start
- Develop opportunities to practice the *integration* of all the strategies that proficient readers use
- Assess students in order to plan instruction
- Find the language necessary to answer parents' difficult questions

Chapter 1: Expanding Our Paradigm of Reading
Chapter 2: How Reading Works

Synopsis

The first chapter promotes continued learning by all educators and outlines what will be included in this text. Chapter 2 elaborates on what it means to have a flexible and fluent reading process system. The goal is to have teachers not only recognize when their own systems are working but also begin to view the readers in their classrooms

through a reading process lens. Considerable emphasis is placed on understanding the *integration factor,* that is, how the strategies overlap and interconnect and are used quickly and flexibly by proficient readers.

Questions or Discussion Topics

❋ Chapter 1 talks about the importance of being a lifelong learner. What do you do to continue growing and expanding your knowledge as a literacy teacher? Is there something you have changed over the years in your thinking or in your classroom practice as a result of your learning and growing?

❋ What do you remember about how you learned to read?

❋ The opening of Chapter 2 presents five fictionalized classrooms. Which comes closest to your experience? Discuss how the teaching of readers who struggle is handled in your school.

❋ How do you understand reading process now after reading Chapters 1 and 2?

❋ Discuss Figure 2.2—the difference between the thinking of a teacher who holds a simple theory of reading and that of a teacher who holds a complex theory of reading.

Suggested Group Activities

❋ Chapter 1 talks about having a belief system from which your practice flows. Make a T-chart. List three of your beliefs on the left and how those beliefs manifest themselves in your classroom on the right. Discuss in small groups.

❋ Do an activity with a poem or vignette (similar to the "Wash in the Street" activity in Chapter 2) so you can feel your own system of strategies at work. (Any poem or many of Sandra Cisneros's vignettes in *House on Mango Street* or *Woman Hollering Creek* would work well here.) You can talk about your own reading process as you comprehended the piece.

❋ Turn to "Important Points About a Reading Process System" on page 22. Pick one point and elaborate on it, connecting it to the classroom whenever possible.

Classroom Follow-up or Reflection

❋ Reread the section about Angie, Dawson, and the first-grade guided reading group (pages 15–18). Then listen to two different students from your classroom as they read, and record your observations. First, choose a child who you think has a functioning reading process system. Listen to him or her read and list some things you know he or she can do (in relation to the circle chart in Figure 2.1). Then listen to one of your struggling readers and make note of what you notice in relation to the same circle chart.

Chapter 3: Vygotsky Takes a Seat in Our Classrooms

Synopsis

The work of Lev Vygotsky, with particular emphasis on his zone of proximal development (ZPD), is presented in this chapter. Understanding how to meet struggling readers' needs by teaching within their ZPD and by using explicit modeling and gradual release of responsibility is included.

Questions or Discussion Topics

❊ Talk about a time when you helped a child (outside of the classroom) learn something new. Or remember back to when you first learned how to do something, such as knitting, cooking, playing an instrument or sport, and so on. As you share your stories, look for common elements that are present in all of these teaching/learning situations.

❊ Talk about a time in your classroom (morning message, community writing experience, etc.) when you felt you offered different tasks to different students based on your efforts to keep their learning within their zone of proximal development.

❊ You have most likely heard of independent, just-right, and challenging texts for kids. How do these connect with ZPD? How does your classroom's reading program provide opportunities for all of these throughout the day?

Suggested Group Activities

❊ In Figure 3.2, Katie shares information on the chart about one of her students. Complete the blank chart (Appendix 2) as you think about one of your students.

❊ In Figure 3.7, Katie lists examples of how her language changed during her instruction. Think about a lesson you have recently done, and share how your language changed as the students took more control of the task. Describe the language you used, from modeling to sharing the task, to prompting during guided practice, to observing and reinforcing during individual reading/writing time.

Classroom Follow-up or Reflection

❊ At the end of the chapter is a bulleted list you can use to check whether your classroom incorporates some of Vygotsky's principles. Briefly write a reflection in relation to this list and your classroom.

❊ Implement a change in a classroom practice (writing workshop, spelling program, morning message, guided reading, etc.) to show that you added an idea to try to meet students' ZPD. Bring the information to share at the next meeting.

Chapter 4:   Beyond "Sound It Out"

Synopsis

Often, when a child gets stuck on a word, a teacher's first response is to say, "Sound it out." This chapter presents many ways to support children in solving words by first getting teachers to understand the three sources of information that proficient readers use naturally. The rationale is given for why, from the very beginning, students need to self-monitor whether the word they are choosing sounds right, looks right, and makes sense. Many student/teacher scenarios, as well as classroom lesson suggestions, are included in this chapter.

Questions or Discussion Topics

❊ What does *teaching students to use a balance of the sources of information* mean to you?

❊ Think about yourself as a reader. Can you relate your own reading to the idea that the authors present about "anticipation" and "forward motion" by using meaning and structural sources of information? (See pages 56–57.)

❋ Discuss prompting. When is it appropriate to prompt? Are there certain prompts that you find yourself overusing? As you review some of the prompts suggested in the chapter, think about which ones you have never used but would like to.

❋ Talk about ways to get children to become active participants in solving words.

Suggested Group Activities

❋ With a partner or small group, pick one of the "Reflection Time" sections from pages 59–62. Elaborate on and discuss one of these. Together, come up with a way (write/draw/make a bulleted list) to share your ideas with the whole group.

❋ Pick one of the three subheadings in the Modeling section—teaching about making sense, teaching for balance, teaching confirming—and plan a lesson that would be appropriate for all, or a small group, of the students in your class. (See pages 63–67.)

Classroom Follow-up or Reflection

❋ Try out the lesson you designed in the activity section. Come back and share how it went.

❋ As you work with the struggling readers in your classroom, pay special attention to your prompting. Think about *when* you prompt, *how much support* you are giving, and whether you are prompting in ways that *get the children to take action.*

Chapter 5: A Comprehensive Literacy Framework

Synopsis

A comprehensive literacy approach is a highly supportive framework for literacy instruction. In this chapter, readers are asked to consider how the classroom instruction and environment are carefully designed to meet the needs of all readers, especially those who struggle.

Questions or Discussion Topics

❋ Consider your teaching day. When are children participating in *reading to, reading with, and reading by*?

❋ Choose one of the components of a comprehensive literacy approach, and talk about how it looks in your classroom or in schools you have visited.

❋ Discuss what the other students are doing when you are meeting with guided reading groups. Are students engaged in meaningful literacy experiences? How can you make sure this is happening for all students?

Suggested Group Activities

❋ Plan a book introduction for several guided reading groups at various instructional levels. Share your plans with colleagues and discuss the various levels of support.

❋ Consider the instructional focus of a guided reading group. Use the list on page 75 to help you plan your focus of instruction. How can you link your teaching in shared reading or interactive read-aloud lessons to your guided reading groups?

❋ Look at your guided reading groups and make a schedule to ensure you are meeting with your struggling readers as much as possible. (Reread "Considerations for Scheduling Groups" beginning on page 80.)

Classroom Follow-up or Reflection

❋ If you are not already teaching within a comprehensive literacy framework, choose one component to implement. Read applicable sections from one of the recommended books and make a plan with a colleague to begin introducing the component into your teaching day.

❋ Take a look at your reading and writing instructional focuses and how they are reciprocal. Consider how you can support your reading instruction (see Figure 2.1) through writing instruction.

Chapter 6:   Interactive Read-Aloud: Talking Our Way Through Texts

Synopsis

Interactive read-aloud is a key component of a comprehensive literacy approach. This chapter illustrates the importance of engaging children in quality literature combined with think-alouds, modeling, and interactive discussions.

Questions or Discussion Topics

❋ Talk about the difference between traditional read-aloud and interactive read-aloud. What is your experience with either or both?

❋ Children can get off-topic when discussing a read-aloud book. How far do you let them go? And how do you get them back on topic?

❋ What are some things to remember when teaching kids how to do "turn and talk"? What has been your experience with this?

Suggested Group Activities

❋ Plan an interactive read-aloud. Use sticky notes to mark appropriate stopping points or places where rich discussion would naturally evolve.

❋ Every teacher loves to collect new book titles to read to their students. Share favorite titles with colleagues or meet in the library to look for new books to use.

Classroom Follow-up or Reflection

❋ Students benefit from hearing the same book read aloud numerous times. Consider rereading and revisiting a high-quality read-aloud over the course of a week or longer. What did you notice? How did the children deepen their understanding after the second or third reading? What were some of the prompts or questions you used to move the children beyond the literal level?

Chapter 7: # I Thought I Knew How to Teach Reading, but Whoa!

Synopsis

Most basal reading series and other reading programs begin the teaching of reading with the learning of letters and sounds. This chapter illuminates all the other early reading strategies and behaviors that beginning readers need to have in place. Information is presented on how to support students in getting control of: directionality, voice/print matching, phonics and phonemic awareness, early self-monitoring, early fluency, and so on.

Questions or Discussion Topics

* At the beginning of this chapter, Rachel is teaching children who are struggling readers. Talk about a child from your past teaching experience who had similar difficulties. Share what you did back then and what you might change if given the same opportunity today.
* How are letters and sounds taught in your school? Do you agree or disagree with the methods? Is there anything you would change or add?
* Discuss the difference between Phonics and Phonemic Awareness.
* Choose one of the early reading strategies mentioned in this chapter—checking and confirming, directionality, voice/print matching, early fluency, and so on. Share how the teaching might look for the strategy you chose; this can be a whole- or small-group lesson or a one-on-one lesson with a particular student.

Suggested Group Activities

* Review the assessment tools (Observation Survey tasks) mentioned on page 109. If possible, give these to one student and discuss what information you can deduce from the results—for example, even if a child does not get any words correct on the word list, you can still infer certain information by how he or she attempted those words. (If it is not possible for all the participants to give the tests, then the facilitator can bring in the results of one child's set of tests for everyone to discuss in small groups.)
* Pick a few texts (levels 1 and 2) and develop book introductions. Share the story you were able to create (as McBride did on page 128) with a partner.

Classroom Follow-up or Reflection

* Make an individual ABC book with a student who needs one.
* Read Figure 1, "Making Books to Encourage Self-Monitoring." Then make a book similar to a level 1 or 2 text, but change something so that the child will have to self-monitor for his or her known words. Bring in two ABC books (published picture books) to share at the next session.

Chapter 8: Comprehension: The Bottom Line
Chapter 9: Spotlight on Inferring and Summarizing

Synopsis

These chapters include information on what it means to teach in ways that enable students to take on comprehension strategies. Examples of lessons on questioning, visualizing, inferring, and summarizing are included. The authors also tackle frequently debated questions, such as: Who is strategy instruction for? Is it appropriate for teachers to teach one strategy at a time for prolonged lengths of time? What does effective strategy instruction look like?

Questions or Discussion Topics

❀ What are some of the problems related to teaching one strategy at a time for a prolonged period to the whole class? What misinterpretations of strategy instruction have you seen? How can you raise the level of understanding among your staff about the importance of the integration factor?

❀ Who is strategy instruction for? Do you agree or disagree with the rationale that the authors present—that top readers may need only a minimal amount of specific strategy instruction; average readers could benefit from some; and struggling readers may need careful modeling, shared demonstrations, and guided practice when learning how to use and integrate strategies for comprehending texts?

❀ How can you tell if a child comprehends what he or she is reading?

❀ What are your feelings/understandings about the difference between spotlighting a strategy and heavy-handed teaching?

❀ Discuss the common elements (see "Studying Other Teachers at Work," Chapter 8, page 150) to be considered when designing any shared demonstration lesson on a particular strategy.

Suggested Group Activities

❀ Using either Appendix 10 or 11 (nonfiction passages from *Highlights* magazine), plan a shared demonstration lesson on visualizing with a partner.

❀ Spend some time in your school or public library scanning articles in *Ranger Rick, Scope, Muse,* or other magazines for children. Find a few articles that you think would work well for modeling a particular strategy or for doing a shared demonstration as lifted text on the overhead projector.

❀ Someone in the group reads aloud *Crow Boy* by Taro Yashima. In order to get a sense of what it means to infer, discuss the following: What can you infer about the main character? Was he poor? What was his home life like? Did he have learning problems? What can you infer about his classmates and his teachers? Is there a message in *Crow Boy*?

❀ Chapter 9 lists many picture books to use for inferring. Browse through some of these texts and discuss their appropriateness for use in your classroom.

Classroom Follow-up or Reflection

❉ Review the lists of questions/prompts that a teacher can use during an individualized conference with a student (pages 137–138). Use these (or springboard from these ideas) as you hold a few individualized conferences. Share with a partner or in small groups how one of those conferences went.

❉ Try out a lesson on questioning, visualizing, inferring, or summarizing similar to the ones presented in Chapters 8 and 9. Share with colleagues how that lesson went the next time you meet.

❉ Bring in a poem that you think would work well with questioning, inferring, or visualizing. Talk about how you would use it in the classroom as you share the poem with the group participants.

Chapter 10: Assessment: Looking Closely at Readers

Synopsis

Assessment is a daily part of our teaching, observation, and planning for instruction. In this chapter, we look at the importance of authentic, ongoing, and informative assessment; how we analyze assessments; and ways to organize our assessment tools.

Questions or Discussion Topics

❉ What kinds of assessment tools are you presently using? How are these tools working or not working for you?

❉ What organizational technique did you learn about in this chapter that you would like to adopt?

❉ How could you implement more assessment discussions at your grade-level team meetings?

❉ How is your school helping teachers learn more about running record assessment? Running record analysis? Anecdotal note-taking during individual conferences? DRA2 training? Are there ways your school could better train teachers in assessment methods?

Suggested Group Activities

❉ Take a look at the various assessment tools you use. Share these with colleagues, and discuss the purpose of each tool as well as what you do with the information collected. Rethink any assessment tools that are not purposeful and useful.

❉ Look at the strategies in Figure 2.1 on page 19 and discuss what you might see on a running record when a child is beginning to gain control of a strategy. For example, if a child is predicting at the word level, you would see him or her making a substitution for an unknown word. We have provided a sheet for this activity (see Figure 2, "Strategy Observation for Running Records"). More information on analyzing running records can be found in Pat's book *One Child at a Time: Making the Most of Your Time with Struggling Readers, K–6* (Stenhouse, 2006).

❉ Bring in one or more running records from one child. Discuss the following questions as you share your records with a partner.
  • What is the child able to do?

- What is his or her processing like? (Think of the strategies in Figure 2.1.)
- What does the child do at the point of difficulty?
- What does he or she need to learn?
- How will you teach that?
- What prompt might you use?
- How will you determine if the child "took on" what you are teaching for?
- Was there a fluency issue?
- Was there a comprehension issue?

Classroom Follow-up or Reflection

❀ Reflect on the assessments that are required by your district. Are there ways to make these more meaningful for your literacy instruction? Have a conversation with colleagues and administrators about why these tools are required and what information you hope to gather from administering these assessments.

❀ Are your assessments *authentic, ongoing*, and *informative*? Look at the assessments you use over a day, a week, a month, and a semester. Which ones inform your instruction? Are there any you can choose not to give or can adapt to make more meaningful?

Chapter 11: Sharing Information with Families
Chapter 12: Teachers Make the Difference

Synopsis

Chapter 11 answers sixteen commonly asked questions from parents or family members. The chapter concludes with a generic list of suggestions for talking with parents and community members. Chapter 12 strongly encourages all teachers to continue expanding their knowledge about reading process in order to support struggling readers who are not building such a process.

Questions or Discussion Topics

❀ Pick a question/answer from Chapter 11 that reminded you of an experience you've had. Briefly explain what you said/did.

❀ What ideas can you share for making your ELL families feel welcome in your classroom/school?

❀ Discuss what you think will be hardest for parents to understand about reading process.

❀ Discuss the idea of giving struggling readers the "opportunity to learn," as mentioned in Chapter 12.

Suggested Group Activities

❀ Share a written communication you created for parents (like a *Keier Flyer*).

❀ Page 219 includes a generic list of things to think about when speaking with any parent. Discuss these with a small group of colleagues, and brainstorm a few more to add to this list.

* Review the bulleted list on pages 225–226 in Chapter 12. Which of these suggestions will you consider trying out in the near future? Talk about how you would go about it.
* Make a 3–2–1 chart. List three major points you are left with after reading this book, two ideas that you have carried into your classroom, and one question that still lingers or one topic you'd like to return to in this book or read more about in other books. Share in small groups.

Classroom Follow-up or Reflection

* Reflect on the following quote: "Children flourish best when there is respect and cooperation among the adults who care for them at home and at school. The value to students of open communication and a good working relationship between school and home is clear. Experience and common sense suggest it; research confirms it" (*Parents and Teachers Working Together* by Carol Davis and Alice Yang, page 4).
* Plan a parent night with your grade-level colleagues. This could be for a celebration of the children's work or an information night.

Figure 1:   Making Books to Encourage Self-Monitoring

Many school districts provide their teachers with an adequate supply of books to use with readers at emergent levels. Others, for whatever reason, do not. Making books for or with children alleviates some of the problem of not having access to books appropriate for beginning readers, older readers who are functioning at emergent levels, or some English language learners. We can make books in a way that encourages the reader to monitor for early visual information, such as voice/print match, known words, first letter of the word, their own name, or names of siblings or friends.

I simply cut three pieces of unlined (8½-by-11-inch) paper in half, add a construction-paper cover, staple it together, and I have a six-page book. This is an easy job for parent volunteers. One year I had six volunteers who liked to help by working at home, some of whom were non–English speakers. Each volunteer made one hundred blank books. We divided them up among all the primary teachers, so that every K–2 teacher had a pile of blank books. A teacher could just reach for one when the need arose.

When the child is just beginning to learn to look at print, I start by making a book using the "I/name" switch.

I like hamburgers.
I like Coke.
Sandy likes apples.
I like bananas.
Sandy likes ice cream.

Each line of text appears on a different page. A picture, drawing, or sticker is added to each page as a meaning cue. Don't waste time on drawing. Find ways to move that part of the book-making along quickly by using stick figures or easy drawings. You and the student can create the text for these books interactively, with the child writing any sounds she is capable of, and you writing the rest. Or you can make a book ahead of time to use when reading with the child.

Notice how the switch of "I" for the child's name is random. When the child reads this text, she must monitor for when it says, "I" and when it says, "Sandy." Even that little bit of self-monitoring pushes the child to do some reading work. Children know when they are beginning to really make sense of the print on their own. A reader like Mike

Figure 1:   Making Books to Encourage Self-Monitoring (cont.)

feels a sense of pride when he knows he is actually reading the words and making sense of text, and not just reciting the book from memory.

Later I vary the pattern of the text so that it's necessary for the child to pay even more attention to the print. In order to vary the pattern you can:

◆ Put the child's name in a variety of places. They usually know their name quite well and will be able to search for it in different places. For example, "'I like pizza,' said Anthony"; "Giovanni, do you like to skate?"

◆ Use high-frequency words with both upper- and lowercase letters. For example, try starting the patterned sentence with a high-frequency word, such as, "Is this a _____?" "In go the _____." "My mom can _____." Students need to see that My/my and In/in are the same words.

◆ Make the last page of the book slightly harder, breaking the pattern, even if it means you have to support the child on that page by reading it together. This allows you to give more meaning to the text. The story is actually about something, rather than just a pattern. Many times we try to make it funny on the last page or sometimes we just write a question. Some examples of last pages are: Come on! Let's go! Look out! Run! Oh, no! What a mess! What fun! Which animal do you like best?

◆ Add number words to the text. Example text:

I can see one sun.
Nataly can see one moon.
I can see five stars.
Nataly can see eight stars.
Mrs. Johnson can see four stars.
Look at all the stars!

The change in the subject, the number, and the break in pattern on the last page require the child to carefully monitor.

◆ Add the word *and* on random pages. Sample text:

I like hamburgers.
I like pizza.
Gavin likes tacos.
I like milk and Coke.

Figure 1:   Making Books to Encourage Self-Monitoring (cont.)

I like hot chocolate.
Gavin likes Pepsi and Sprite.

Because there will be multiple pictures on those pages the child
will automatically read the word *and* even if it is not yet a known
word.

♦ Use children's names from the class, the teacher's name, or names
of family members. We find that emergent readers can handle
having various names of people they know in the texts. Many can
even write the names of their siblings (see example).
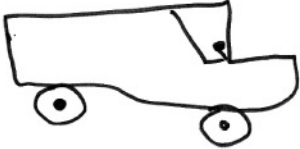
Student Book,
Wendy Likes to Paint

I like to paint a dog.

Gerson likes to paint trees.

Wendy likes to paint a cat.

Jose likes to paint a house.

Mrs. Johnson likes to paint a car.

We love to paint!

Figure 1:   # Making Books to Encourage Self-Monitoring
(cont.)

⬥ Make books with hidden windows, a favorite among most children. Use small pieces of sticky notes to hide the answer to a question. The pattern of the book may be "I see a hippo." "Do you see a hippo?" "Yes" or "No" is hidden under the sticky note. If the answer is "Yes," then a picture of a hippo must be there. If the answer is "No," then just the word is there.

⬥ Use common sentence patterns rather than just a phrase on each page. Some patterns that work well for bookmaking are:

I am _____.
I can _____.
I like _____.
I see _____ or I can see a _____.
Look at the _____.
Here is a _____.
Here comes a _____.
Do you like _____?
Is a _____ in here? (Yes or no under the flap.)
This is a _____.
In Ms. Hatchey's class, we like to _____.
We can _____. or We like _____.
Come and see the _____.

Remember to vary the pattern on some of the pages of the book, forcing the child to self-monitor.

Books made by publishers at early-emergent levels tend to hold fast to patterning all the way through the text. These patterns are great for getting one-to-one matching awareness under way and for giving the children a sense that the pictures and the words of text must match, but the rigid patterns don't allow for enough self-monitoring on the part of the child. By making books for or with children, you are able to hold the difficulty to a level the child can handle, and at the same time add some challenges that enable the child to practice self-monitoring.

Figure 2:   Strategy Observation for Running Records

What would you expect to see on a running record if a child is starting to gain control of:

Predicting:

Searching & gathering:

Using visual information:

Self-monitoring:

Using balance/cross checking:

Linking:

Making multiple attempts: