

Understanding the Profiles of Struggling Readers



Evidence suggests that most struggling readers exemplify several common profiles and patterns of reading difficulties. This holds true whether they have actual disabilities, have experienced inadequate instruction, or have risk factors such as poverty or limited knowledge of English. Understanding these profiles and patterns is vital to early identification and intervention with struggling readers as well as effective educational practices for preventing reading problems.



Children with specific word recognition difficulties (SWRD):

- Have at least average listening comprehension and oral vocabularies
- Have problems with word recognition that usually center upon phonemic awareness and word decoding
- Often have fluency problems involving inaccurate or non-automatic word reading
- Have reading difficulties that often emerge early (i.e., K-3)
- Reading comprehension problems are related entirely to word reading

Students with SWRD profiles require explicit, systematic instruction in phonics and structural analysis. They often benefit from fluency activities targeting automaticity of decoding.



Children with specific reading comprehension difficulties (SRCD):

- Have at least average word recognition and phonological skills
- Have reading comprehension problems that frequently involve listening comprehension or oral vocabulary knowledge
- Listening comprehension usually not low enough for speech and language services eligibility.
- Have no history of early decoding problems
- Any fluency problems tend to be based in language, not single word reading
- Difficulties often, though not always, emerge later in schooling (around Gr. 4 and up)

Students with SRCD profiles require instruction targeting the student's specific comprehension weaknesses (e.g., vocabulary, background knowledge, pragmatic language.) Vocabulary and language comprehension development are more likely to improve fluency than are interventions focused on automaticity of decoding. Also consider if slow reading is an adaptive strategy to improve comprehension.



Children with mixed reading difficulties (MRD):

- Have difficulties with word recognition and phonological skills
- Have poor reading comprehension that is only *partly* accounted for by decoding (e.g., poor comprehension may occur even in text the child decodes well)
- Listening comprehension or oral vocabulary also often weak (but again, not necessarily low enough for speech and language services)
- Fluency frequently is poor due to problems in both word reading *and* language comprehension
- Difficulties tend to emerge early in schooling (K-3) due to problems with word reading, but may persist even after remediation of decoding skills, because there is an additional comprehension component to the child's reading difficulties

Students with MRD profiles require both of the above types of instruction. However, special caution is required in designing intervention (e.g., because of the possible trade-offs between decoding and comprehension needs).

For *all* struggling readers, an in-depth diagnostic assessment of reading should include focused assessments of:

- Out-of-context word reading and decoding (including nonsense words)
- Phonemic awareness (for beginning readers or older ones if decoding is weak)
- Text reading accuracy
- Text reading rates and prosody
- Oral vocabulary
- Broad listening comprehension (*with more in-depth assessment of listening comprehension for children whose difficulties include listening comprehension or seem to go beyond the word level*)

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