

Swimsuits and Books

by Trish Prentice

Tomorrow my husband and I are leaving for the beach. This trip is a needed respite from my extensive summer to-do list. Today was spent running errands to prepare for being away for a few days. Mystery books to read...check. Groceries...check. Sun screen...check. Bathing suit...ah...that's a problem. How I hate wearing a swimsuit! As a child, I lived across the street from a city park with a pool. I spent each day, all day, wearing a swimsuit. But as I've grown older and wider, I don't find the same joy in swimsuit shopping I once did. In fact, I avoid swimming because I don't like the attire. But since the beach is a four-hour trip from home, surely I won't run into anybody I know. Maybe I could take the plunge, literally, put on a swimsuit and enjoy the water.

Off to the store to have a look at what's available in swimsuits these days. Maybe one with gathers around the middle or a whisper of a skirt would work. As I walk down the aisle, I see a 50% off swimwear sign. Perfect! At least I don't have to pay full price for a slice of humiliation. Better yet, there are lots of suits left to look through. Surely there's something here that will work. As I thumb through the rack, I see plenty of size 2, 4, 6, and a couple of 8's. There are none in my size, not one! (No, I'm not telling my size.) My overwhelming thought was...women who wear these sizes look good in anything! Why do they need so many swimsuits to choose from? Where's my size? All gone. Bummer!

As I'm driving home feeling sorry for myself, it suddenly strikes me...could it be that the frustration I feel is similar to what struggling readers experience when they go shopping for books in class? "These books are all too hard. Looks good, but I can't read it. Everybody else seems to be able to read. What's the point, these don't fit. There's nothing here for me. I can't read. I give up." Sobering thoughts indeed.

Do our classroom libraries contain enough "sizes" of books for everyone? Most teachers collect books at their grade level. Plus, it's exciting to add books for the children that are ahead of the game. But what about the "hard-to-fit sizes." Do we have enjoyable books for them? Is there a sufficient amount to provide choice and variety?

I began thinking about what we can do to promote "good fit" books for this precarious group of children:

1. Get to know your struggling reader's preferences immediately! Work on these children first. Talk with them, question their parents, ask last year's teacher. Watch and listen. We know that children will show more enthusiasm for reading books about topics that are important to them.
2. Check with teachers in different grades for book recommendations at the levels you do need. Maybe they will even share.
3. Book Divide. Each teacher on a team provides an agreed upon number of books targeted for the reluctant reader. Mark the spine of each teacher's selection of books with a different color of electrical tape. Every class gets a turn with each color for a specified time. Make note of the popular books; they may be ones you want to obtain permanently for your classroom.
4. Intentionally spend your "school supply budget monies" for one year on gathering quality books for struggling readers. As long as you teach you will have challenged readers in every class. The books will not go unused.
5. Redeem all your book club points on books for specific students. If you are a new teacher just building your classroom library, this may be hard to do. Just try to make sure every third or fourth book you acquire is a book for a struggling reader.
6. Talk with parents. They might be willing to purchase books for their child to have "just right" choices. Give them a list of book titles to choose from.
7. Allow students to bring familiar books from home to add to their book boxes.
8. Look for those fabulous books that contain few words but are packed with meaning. Be sure to include those in your read-aloud selections. Discuss the idea that a book filled with words does not necessarily mean it is a "harder" book to read. It's the ideas in a book that determine complexity, not the number of words. Now that's a good lesson for everyone, parents too.
9. Get your librarian involved. They won't be able to resist a plea to match a child and a book.

As an adult, I don't often put myself in a situation where I know I'm likely to be unsuccessful. That's why my last swimsuit is well over ten years old. Yet think of the discouraged reader who has to face book choice week after week. If you never find a book that fits, or one you like, you'll avoid reading altogether as soon as you can. I won't let that happen in my class. Matching a child to a book may be my most important task as a teacher. I want my students reading for a lifetime. That's more important than swimsuits any day!

Independent Reading

Independent reading is the practice of reading *by* students. Reading is a skill that requires practice and therefore independent reading is a key component of a balanced literacy program. Just as a child learns to swim by swimming and to play the piano by playing, children need to read in order to get better as readers. Acclaimed author, educational consultant and researcher Richard Allington (2001), found a direct correlation between the amount of time spent reading and reading performance. Allington emphasizes that in order for children to progress as readers, they need to read with volume, stamina and fluency.

As part of a balanced literacy program, students have time daily to read independently during the reading workshop. The heart of a balanced literacy environment is the classroom library which has a variety of texts for students to read that range in reading difficulty, genre, author and topic. While reading texts, students are independently applying the fluency, comprehension and word attack strategies that are modeled and explicitly taught during interactive read aloud, shared reading, guided reading and reading strategy groups.

The materials students read for independent reading are those they select from the classroom library. The self-selection process of independent reading places the responsibility for choosing books in the hands of the student which teaches them that they have the ability to choose their own reading materials and that reading independently is a valuable and important activity. Students are taught how to choose appropriate texts referred to as "just right books" (i.e., texts that are at their independent reading level).

Teachers use a variety of informal and formal methods to assess students' independent reading levels. Many teachers use running records to determine independent reading levels of students. A running record is a valuable assessment tool because it assesses fluency, comprehension and word accuracy. The independent reading level of a student is the level that he/she reads with 96% to 100% accuracy as well as with fluency and comprehension (e.g., literal, inferential, interpretive). By matching students with texts that are appropriate, students are able to read with volume (i.e., many texts), stamina (i.e., longer periods of time) and fluency - the habits of proficient readers.

Most importantly is that by reading independently a student becomes confident, motivated and enthusiastic about his/her ability to read.

Classroom Libraries

*...think of the library in your room as the **heart** of effective literacy instruction (Reutzel and Fawson, 2002).*

Teaching children to read and providing them with something worthwhile to read is not a job for the faint of heart in this world. But I'll keep at it, and I won't be alone. You'll come too. We're fortunate, you know. Too many people in this world spend their lives doing work that doesn't really matter in the great scheme of things, but bringing children and books together does matter. And we get to do it (Patterson, 1999).

Knowing my books and my children, and making a match between them, is one of the most important things I do and one of the most demanding. It is exacting work that has led me to adjust my priorities in how I use my planning and classroom time (Taberski, 2000).

The Importance of The Classroom Library

A large, varied, and often-refreshed collection of books in the classroom is a vital ingredient in improving reading performance. Recent studies on literacy confirm that the more contact children have with books, the better readers they become. Teachers promote better reading performance by reading to children daily (see [Read Aloud with Accountable Talk](#)) and by having them interact with books through the extensive use of classroom libraries (Neuman, 1999).

Benefits of Surrounding Children With Books

- For virtually all children, the amount of time spent reading in classrooms consistently accelerates their growth in reading skills (Anderson, 1996; Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998).

Important Role of the Classroom Library in Developing Literacy

- One large scale study (Neuman, 1999) revealed that with books in close proximity to classroom activity: (1) time spent reading increased by 60%, (2) literacy-related activities more than doubled, and (3) letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, concepts of print and writing, and narrative competence rose 20%.

Characteristics of an Effective Classroom Library

- *A large supply of books.* Fountas and Pinnell (1996) recommend a collection of about 300-600 books, depending on the grade level and number of copies of each title.
- *A wide variety of books, replenished regularly.* The library should include books that range in difficulty as well as both a permanent and revolving collection of texts.
- *A variety of genres.* For example, traditional stories, fantasy, realistic fiction, historical fiction, information, biographies, etc.
- *High-quality books.* High quality books that are new, bright and have eye-catching cover illustrations and titles will catch children's attention and keep them engaged.
- *An attractive setting.* Recommended design features include partitions, ample space, comfortable furnishings, open-faced and traditional bookshelves and literacy displays and props.

Regular Reading Improves Literacy and Comprehension

- Children need to read a lot (Allington, 2001). This refers to both reading volume (i.e., number of texts) and reading stamina (i.e., number of minutes). For more information view [Independent Reading](#) and the attachments (e.g., Allington Research, Allington Guidelines, The Art of Teaching Reading) below.
- Children need books they can read, in other words, texts that they can read accurately and fluently (Allington, 2001). For more information on "just right" or independent books please view [Frequently Asked Questions](#).
- Children need to read fluently. Fluency is an important milestone in reading development; research shows that there are definitive links between fluency and comprehension (Allington, 2001). For more information on fluency please view the fluency attachments on the [Independent Reading](#) page.
- Children need to develop thoughtful literacy, in other words, demonstrate various sorts of understanding of texts read. (This is in sharp contrast to what has been traditionally labeled as comprehension tasks which focused largely on remembering, a very narrow slice of what is needed for understanding what is read.) By participating in frequent conversations about texts read, students are able to develop and demonstrate their thinking and understanding (Allington, 2001). Research also shows that opportunities to talk about books helps foster a love of books and enhances children's motivation to read (Newman, 1999). For more information on the importance of talking about books read, please view the attachment below [Three Principles of Reading Achievement](#).
- [The Art of Teaching Reading; Chapter on Leveled Libraries](#)

- Allington Research Overview on Volume and Stamina
- Allington Guidelines For Volume Across the Levels
- Three Principles of Reading Achievement

Matching Books to Readers; Positive Aspects of Leveling Books for Readers

- Children will make the most reading progress when their books are not too easy or too difficult (Allington, 2006).
- By reading just-right texts, children are able to read fluently and comprehend better, thereby developing the traits and habits of proficient readers (Allington, 2006; Rasinski, 2003).
- Children who read just-right books experience success and are therefore more likely to read with more stamina and engagement (Allington, 2006).
- Reading acceleration is possible for all children when the text/reading level is matched (O'Connor et al, 2002).
- Groupings of books into levels can make it easier for teachers, parents and children to select books to read (Sibberson, Szymusiak & Kock, 2008).