

# INTENSIVE READING INSTRUCTION FOR LEARNERS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

*Roberta F. Schnorr*

*Many students with developmental disabilities demonstrate characteristics of emergent readers beyond kindergarten and first grade, even if they are members of classes full of rich literacy opportunities. Structured shared reading enables teachers to provide systematic instruction that allows students to experience success as readers while developing a strong foundation of critical behaviors and skills for independent reading.*

**S**arah, a fifth grader with Down syndrome, is preparing for transition to middle school. She reads at an early fourth-grade level and uses her literacy abilities flexibly for a variety of academic and personal purposes. Her strong literacy foundation and positive disposition are the outcome of high-quality classroom literacy programs coordinated with individualized, supplemental special education instruction throughout her elementary years.

Unfortunately, unlike Sarah, many students who are identified as having significant developmental disabilities continue to have limited access to comprehensive, high-quality literacy instruction (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Kliewer, Biklen, & Kasa-Hendrickson,



2006; Koppenhaver, Hendrix, & Williams, 2007). Students with significant developmental disabilities may include learners who are identified as having moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, including individuals with moderate to severe autism, Down syndrome, or multiple intellectual, physical, and communication disabilities. Often, these literacy learners

seem invisible, even in schools and classrooms where teachers and administrators are intensely focused on improving literacy learning outcomes for *all* students.

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Too often, the teachers of these students, including special educators, assume that meaningful literacy outcomes are not attainable or that reading and writing are not high-priority goals (Flewitt, Nind, & Payler, 2009; Kliewer & Landis, 1999). For students with developmental disabilities who participate in school literacy activities, there is often limited instructional focus and significantly less time devoted to reading instruction compared with peers who have less severe disabilities.

Whether or not all students with developmental disabilities develop literacy abilities on the same timetable or demonstrate the same outcomes as peers, access to quality literacy instruction holds immediate and life-long benefits. For learners who have

limited or no speech, becoming literate is the critical foundation for a flexible and useful communication system (Koppenhaver, 2000; Millar, Light, & McNaughton, 2004). Ongoing, meaningful access to shared texts can support multiple aspects of language development, whether or not a student has the ability to speak (Erickson, 2000; Skotko, Koppenhaver, & Erickson, 2004; Whalon, Hanline, & Woods, 2007).

Texts, in print and electronic formats, provide an endless source for learning about real and imaginary worlds—worlds we know firsthand and experiences that we may never otherwise touch. Reading and writing connect us. Opportunities to share and respond to texts within and across communities of readers and writers can support and enhance our understanding of ourselves and one another and highlight our common human experience, regardless of individual abilities or supports needed to access print. Given the rapidly emerging technologies that can connect us in virtual interactions, achieving even early literacy abilities can support a lifeline to create and sustain learning and social networks for young people and adults. Evidence that many learners with developmental and multiple disabilities can develop meaningful literacy abilities continues to grow—when these students have access to evidence-based instruction and rich literacy classrooms, including technology-supported environments (Erickson, Clendon, Abraham, Roy, & Van de Carr, 2005; Koppenhaver et al., 2007).

Learners with intellectual and other developmental disabilities have no time to lose. Many enter school with significantly less developed language abilities and fewer literacy experiences than peers who do not have disabilities (Iacono, 2004). Although most

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elementary learners acquire many early reader skills and behaviors in kindergarten, many children with intellectual and developmental disabilities may continue to demonstrate emergent reader characteristics throughout, or even beyond, the primary grades. A high percentage of older learners with developmental disabilities may be emergent readers because they had little or no prior access to consistent, high-quality literacy instruction (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 1995; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Mirenda, 2003).

How can teachers provide systematic and intensive reading instruction to long-term emergent readers of *any* age to nurture their foundation as readers and maximize their opportunities for literacy development?

### **Structured Shared Reading Lesson Frame**

Structured shared reading is a lesson frame that was designed to offer powerful instruction with appropriate levels of challenge and support for whatever length of time students demonstrate characteristics of emergent readers. For some students, this may be months, but for others, it may be years. Structured shared reading is proposed as a format for providing intensive, individualized reading instruction that includes continuous text instruction, even before individuals have control over early read-

### *Pause and Ponder*

- Do all students who have developmental disabilities, including students with limited or no speech, receive high-quality literacy instruction with accommodations and supports, including appropriate technologies?
- Are literacy programs for students with developmental disabilities comprehensive and research based, reflecting priorities from the literacy research for all students?
- Do schedules of students with disabilities reflect the same amount of time per day devoted to authentic literacy learning as schedules of peers who do not have disabilities?
- Do literacy programs for all students with developmental disabilities emphasize instruction and progress monitoring?

ing behaviors needed to begin guided reading.

This frame is based on other documented lesson structures for early readers who need short-term explicit coaching in many aspects of the reading process (Clay, 1993; Tancock, 1994). However, structured shared reading acknowledges that some learners may need ongoing, intensive instruction for longer periods as emergent readers. This frame is flexible and matched to changing learner abilities. In addition to documenting growing literacy skills and behaviors, progress monitoring can include a focus on improved student engagement, participation, and response within authentic literacy routines.

Through structured shared reading, teachers can provide powerful, systematic instruction that maximizes

emergent literacy learners' meaningful participation as readers while supporting student learning about specific key reading competencies. Daily instruction should address foundational goals, such as concepts about print, and incorporate multiple elements of effective reading instruction (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension). Structured shared reading allows teachers to teach reading within a frame of predictable, multilevel routines while adjusting challenge and content within those routines to match changing learner priorities, interests, and experiences (see Table 1).

### Structured Shared Reading Routines

Instructional routines can benefit all learners and are particularly important

for students with developmental disabilities. Familiar steps, activities, and materials maximize students' understanding of expectations, the purpose of activities, and how to participate. The teacher and students can settle in quickly and focus on literacy-related skills and authentic reading of a shared text.

Explicit teacher language is another key feature of structured shared reading. Teacher talk throughout the lesson must continually highlight multiple aspects of the reading process and support students' ability to participate and think like readers. Modeling, prompts, and feedback are matched to individual student abilities (in the moment) and offered respectfully by the teacher, who serves as a guiding, skilled partner in the reading process. Central to the

**Table 1 Lesson Frame: Structured Shared Reading Routines**

Lesson components	Possible materials
<i>Reread familiar book (3–5 minutes):</i> The teacher guides students through a review of reading behaviors through brief modeling and reminders (e.g., directionality, looking at print, voice–print matching by echo reading). Students reread the book with the lowest possible teacher support and focus on enjoyment, success, fluency, and being “readers.”	Print or electronic texts from prior lessons, laptop, iPad or desktop computer, touch screen, accessible mouse or switch, or screen reader software for echoing e-texts
<i>Phonemic awareness, phonics, and word work (5–7 minutes):</i> The teacher provides brief, focused modeling and practice of skills for current goals through interactive, teacher-led activities (e.g., identifying letters and sounds in isolation, making words, word sorts).	Picture cards; letter cards, pocket chart, or alphabet chart; electronic formats for teacher-prepared lessons in making words, picture sorts, or word sorts (e.g., software, touch screen, interactive whiteboard)
<i>Shared reading of new text (15 minutes):</i> The teacher provides a rich, interactive book introduction to activate and build background knowledge, discuss and connect vocabulary to known words and experiences, preview text and pictures, and so forth. Then, the teacher and students read the new book together with <i>high</i> teacher support (e.g., echo and choral read each line or page), stopping occasionally to model or prompt thinking about the text. Next, the teacher and students reread the new text with <i>less</i> teacher support, focusing on accuracy and fluency, with little or no stopping. Finally, the teacher and students discuss and respond to the text, with the teacher modeling, inviting, and supporting student response.	Print or electronic texts with book features: predictable language (e.g., pattern sentences, strong picture cues), varied genres, and topics that match students' age, experiences, and interests; other possible materials and equipment: laptop, iPad or computer, touch screen, screen reader software, or accessible mouse or switch for e-texts
<i>Shared writing connection (5 minutes):</i> Students co-construct brief shared text with high teacher support related to the new book and reread their writing with support.	Today's book, sentence strips, markers, scissors, interactive whiteboard, or writing frames or templates; laptop or desktop computer with talking word processor software, writing template, word bank, whole-word writing software, adapted keyboard or touch screen, or printer

lesson is shared authentic reading of a whole text. Students are always invited and supported to engage, make connections, and offer their own ideas and responses to shared texts, even at the earliest stages of instruction.

### Structured Shared Reading Within a Comprehensive Literacy Program

Structured shared reading is only one component of an individual's comprehensive literacy program. Students who receive daily instruction in structured shared reading should also participate in a variety of rich literacy routines each day, including read-alouds; accessing interesting and age-appropriate texts and content with support; self-selected reading (independently or with support); authentic writing for various purposes; working with language, letters, and words to develop phonemic awareness, vocabulary, phonics, and recognition and spelling of high-frequency words; and learning to use tools for literacy and communication, such as computers, software, and in some cases, augmentative and alternative communication devices. Participation in all of these activities should consider and utilize whatever formats, tools, and supports, including flexible digital formats for materials, texts, and tools, are needed to maximize individual student engagement, participation, and learning (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2007).

### Maggie and Ben

Maggie (all names are pseudonyms) is a 9-year-old third grader who demonstrates many characteristics of an emergent reader and a few characteristics of an early reader. Ben is 8 years old and is a member of a different third-grade class. He also demonstrates emergent reader characteristics; his participation in literacy routines is less active than Maggie's. Both enjoy listening to picture books and will sometimes make comments that reflect personal connections. Maggie is very interested in exploring the pictures, and she notices and points out humorous images in fictional and fantasy stories. Ben likes to name objects in pictures and will add dramatic comments (e.g., he may roar for a lion). Maggie will sometimes describe a character's traits or mood (e.g., "Funny!").

Both students have favorite books that they enjoy browsing independently. Maggie sometimes pretends to read familiar books, based on their pictures. Both Ben and Maggie attend mostly to illustrations and are still developing voice-print matching. They are beginning to recognize some words that have the same beginning sound. Ben and Maggie can name most uppercase and lowercase letters and can identify sounds for about half of the consonants consistently. Both recognize their name in print and between 5 and 15 high-frequency words. Maggie usually speaks

in phrases, whereas Ben speaks mostly in single words and phrases.

Maggie has Down syndrome. She lives with her mother, father, sister, and brother and brings good background knowledge about family routines, nature, and pets. Ben is identified as multiply handicapped. He has mild cerebral palsy, which affects his balance, fine motor coordination, and articulation. School records identify Ben as having a moderate intellectual disability. He lives with his mother and older brother and brings good background knowledge about sports and animals.

At the beginning of the school year, both Maggie and Ben were assessed individually by their classroom teachers and special education teacher to identify their knowledge and behaviors from an emergent literacy frame. Much of the data was collected through intentional observations and video samples taken during familiar classroom reading routines (e.g., attention to storybook reading in small-group and individual contexts; effort, accuracy, and fluency during echo reading of familiar pattern texts; student-initiated and adult-prompted responses to new and familiar texts during storybook reading, small-group instruction, and self-selected reading; time engaged in self-directed or choice reading activities with continuous texts, including electronic texts).

Concepts of print were assessed individually. Picture cards were presented in game-like formats to explore the students' phonemic awareness (e.g., rhyming words, words with same beginning sounds, identifying a word when presented orally in segmented fashion). Letter cards were presented for the student to name and tell sounds and to identify by pointing, for both letter names and letter sounds. Word cards

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from high-frequency word lists were presented individually for students to read aloud one day and again, in sets of four, for the student to identify by pointing on another day. Ongoing assessment included collecting video samples of small-group instruction every 5 weeks and repeating assessments in other key areas every 10 weeks. Additionally, records were kept of new books read for instruction and information regarding student preferences and performance related to text formats and tools, including technology.

### **Structured Shared Reading Lesson for Maggie and Ben**

This session takes place in Maggie's classroom where the special educator team teaches during the third-grade literacy block each morning. Ben's third-grade classroom is next door. He joins Maggie and the special education teacher for this literacy lesson every day. During this time, other third graders meet in small groups in both classes with the classroom teacher or special educator and participate in self-directed literacy routines.

### **Review Visual Schedule for Consistent Lesson Routines**

The teacher presents a laminated schedule, with print and graphics, which lists the lesson components in order. She previews the entire list by reading each line and pointing to the words: "Here's what we are going to do: Read a book we know, practice letters and words, read a new book, and write." Students chime in chorally on parts as she reads.



This is a familiar routine, and the visual helps them remember each step. The teacher points back to the first item: "Time to read a book we know."

### **Reread a Familiar Book (3–5 minutes)**

The priorities for Maggie and Ben for this session are fluency (i.e., rate, phrasing, intonation), voice–print matching, and reading every page—left then right, increasing independence and sustained attention with minimal teacher support.

The teacher presents two copies each of several familiar books from previous lessons and asks Maggie to choose one for today's familiar reading. Both are level A (based on Fountas and Pinnell's guided reading levels) pattern books with one sentence of four or five words per page. She chooses the book *Hot and Cold*, a nonfiction pattern book by Annette Carruthers with color photographs that accompany the simple text.

The teacher points to each word in the title on the cover and models reading it: "*Hot and Cold*. Let's read the title together. Where do you start?" Each student points to the first word on his or her book cover. The teacher reads

it chorally with them as they point and read, "*Hot and Cold*." They read the title page and first page together chorally as well. Then, she prompts them to read on their own: "Now you can read the rest of the book by yourself. Remember to pay attention to the words and make it sound interesting!"

Each student reads individually at his or her rate, pointing to each word. Maggie proceeds at a faster rate than Ben, who sometimes stops. If he does not begin reading after turning the page, the teacher echo reads one page with him, then fades for him to continue.

When both students have finished reading, the teacher offers a marker to Ben while presenting the laminated picture schedule: "We are finished with 'Read a book we know.' [She points to each word as she reads this first item on the schedule.] You can cross it off." Ben looks at the list and crosses off this first item. She points to the next item and asks, "What's next, Maggie?" Maggie replies, "Words." "Yes (pointing to each word and reading), it's time for 'Practice letters and words.'" Maggie touches the words and repeats.

### **Classroom–Program Connection**

Both Maggie's and Ben's teachers have scheduled daily self-selected reading time for all students. Both students have access to familiar print and electronic texts in their classrooms. Maggie and Ben are building their ability to sustain interest in enjoyable texts with minimal or no adult support during independent reading time.

### **Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, and Word Work (5–7 minutes)**

The priorities for Maggie and Ben for this session are to isolate beginning phonemes in familiar words, identify sounds for consonants and short *a*, blend individual phonemes and onsets and rimes to read closed-syllable words with high support, recognize familiar letter patterns in known closed-syllable keywords to read and spell new words with high support, and recognize and increasing number of high-frequency words in isolation and in whole text.

The teacher says, "Let's review our letters and sounds." She presents a reduced alphabet chart (11" × 14") with uppercase and lowercase letters as well as pictures for keyword sounds: "Read with me." The teacher points to and reads an uppercase letter, then its lowercase version, then she points at a picture of something that begins with that letter and leads a chant chorally (e.g., "A, a, ant").

The teacher presents a small pocket chart, which was previously prepared for the lesson. She says to the students, "Let's look at these," while pointing to the first pocket, which has "cat" written on it. She points to *c*: "Watch me touch and say the sounds." The teacher points and reads each phoneme, left to right: "/c/, /a/, /t/." Then, she points again left to right and blends the letters to form the word: "This word is *cat*: /c/, /a/, /t/, cat! Your turn."

The teacher guides each student to touch each letter, say the phonemes, and then blend them to say the word. Then, she points to the next row in the pocket chart below "cat." The letters *a* and *t* are positioned directly below the *a* and *t* in "cat": "Look, these letters are the same as some of the letters in *cat*. Let's say the sounds." The teacher touches each letter and says, "/a/, /t/, at!" Then, she

covers the *c* in "cat" and repeats, "Look, it's the same in this word, /a/, /t/, at!"

The teacher places the letters *a* and *t* in the pocket below "hat" and presents a picture card for *bat*: "What is this?" Ben replies, "Bat." She places the card in the pocket near *\_\_at*: "We need to add a letter to spell the word *bat*." She models, emphasizing onset, by saying, "/b/ -at. What sound do you hear at the beginning of *bat*? /b/ -at." Ben says, "Bat."

The teacher models, "Listen, Ben. Bat, /b/ -at. *Bat* starts with /b/. Can you find the letter up here for /b/?" and presents the letters *r* and *b*. She assists Ben with finding the letter ("Here it is, /b/, *b*") and places the *b* in front of *-at* near the picture of a bat. The teacher models reading /b/ -at and has Ben echo with her. Then, she points to the "at" in "cat" above and the "at" in "bat" below: "Look. These parts of the words are the same in *cat* and *bat*. Words we know can help us read a new word. If you know *cat*, then you know *bat*!" The teacher repeats a similar sequence with Maggie to spell *hat* with less support, then highlights the visual similarities of *-at*.

The teacher presents the visual schedule and a marker to Maggie: "We are finished with (pointing to each word) 'Practice letters and words.' Cross it off. What's next, Ben?" The teacher reads while pointing, "Read a new book." She points again, and Ben echoes, pointing to each word as he reads.



Explicit teacher language and modeling highlight aspects of the reading process on each page of a new book.

### **Classroom–Program Connection**

Both Maggie and Ben also practice individual skills for phonemic awareness, phonics, and word work in three additional 15-minute sessions each day in their respective classrooms. This occurs in teacher-planned sessions facilitated by a paraprofessional during the classroom literacy block. Some of their daily sessions include picture sorts (e.g., beginning sounds), practice with spelling (e.g., making words, attention to letter patterns), shared reading of simple decodable texts, and computer-based programs to practice beginning sounds, letters, sounds, and high-frequency words during literacy center time. These skills are reinforced briefly as part of the structured shared reading lesson to help students recognize connections to reading whole texts.

During the previous school year, both students received daily supplemental instruction using a field-tested

phonemic awareness program. Based on assessments from this program, they demonstrated very limited progress in most areas. The students' current team has chosen to emphasize select phonemic awareness skills within the context of reading and spelling familiar words through routine activities (e.g., making words with the focus on segmenting and blending phonemes, onsets and rimes, and manipulating onsets) as well as authentic reading and writing activities (e.g., focusing on spelling beginning and ending consonant sounds, repeating phonemes, blending closed-syllable words during shared reading and writing).

Some research has indicated that students with developmental disabilities may not demonstrate phonemic awareness before they begin reading, but some older, more proficient readers do demonstrate these understandings later (e.g., alliteration, phoneme isolation and blending). It is possible that these more proficient readers who have developmental disabilities acquired phonemic awareness "through the process of learning to read" (Kennedy & Flynn, 2003, p. 106).

### ***Shared Reading of New Text***

The priorities for Maggie and Ben for this session, all with high teacher support, are concepts of print, including where to begin reading, left-to-right directionality for words, and voice-print

matching; fluency (e.g., rate, phrasing, intonation); increasing vocabulary; recognizing familiar, high-frequency words in text; constructing meaning through connections to background knowledge and experiences; building background knowledge; and sharing personal responses to text.

Today's new book is *In the Forest*, a nonfiction pattern book by Roberta Schnorr. This text has color photographs and mostly five words per page (e.g., "Squirrels live in the forest").

**Rich Book Introduction.** The teacher shows the students the cover of book and begins the discussion:

Teacher: What does this picture on our cover look like?

Ben: Trees.

Teacher: Yes, there are a lot of trees. What is that called? What is the name for a place with a lot of trees?

Maggie: Woods.

Teacher: Yes, that's right. You have woods near your house, don't you, Ben? There are a lot of trees in the woods. There is another word for *woods* that means the same thing. That word is *forest*. Our new book is about different kinds of animals that live in the forest. *Woods* and *forest* mean the same thing; both are words

for places with a lot of trees. Let's think about some animals that we know that live in the forest. I remember when we went on our field trip, we saw a few animals on our hike, and the guide showed us pictures of some others. What are some forest animals you know?

After no response, the teacher presents four picture cards (squirrel, bear, birds, raccoon) to build background knowledge.

Teacher: Here are some animals that can live in the forest. What are these?

Ben: [points and speaks dramatically] Bear!

Teacher: Yes, bears live in some forests. Maggie?

Maggie: [pointing to the card with several birds] Birds.

Teacher: Yes, there are many kinds of birds in the forest. This is a chickadee, and this is a blue jay. This one is a woodpecker.

The teacher intentionally expands on description and vocabulary, naming the different types of birds depicted. She then points to the two remaining picture cards:

Teacher: Here are some other forest animals.

Students: [echoing] Squirrel, raccoon.

Teacher: Let's take a look and see what forest animals are in this book.

The teacher facilitates a thorough picture walk with high support. She guides the students through the book, previewing and discussing only the pictures.

*"Students with developmental disabilities may not demonstrate phonemic awareness before they begin reading, but some older, more proficient readers do demonstrate these understandings."*

She invites the students to name the animals in the pictures and encourages them to speak in sentences (e.g., “This is a deer”). She asks occasional questions to prompt connections to their knowledge and experience:

Teacher: Have you ever seen a skunk?  
What do you know about skunks?

Ben: P-U!!! [makes bad face]

Teacher: [pointing to pictures of a deer and a squirrel] Which of these is a big animal? Before we read, let’s look at some words. Look at this page. [She points at the first page of text and reads.] “Squirrels live *in* the forest.” [She presents a word card with “in” on it.] Can you find the word *in* in this sentence? [pointing and reading again] “Squirrels live *in* the forest.” Point to *in*.

Ben does not respond, so the teacher points to the word in his book:

Teacher: Here it is, Ben. What is that word?

Ben: In.

The teacher then presents the word card for *the*: “This word is *the*. Let’s read again and see if you can find this word in your book.” She points and rereads, “‘Squirrels live *in the* forest.’ Can you find the word *the*?” She helps Ben by pointing to it: “There it is, ‘Squirrels live *in the* forest.’ You will see those words a lot in this book—*in* and *the*. Let’s read this new book together.”

#### Echo Read With Voice–Print

**Matching.** The teacher begins the discussion: “Let’s start with our title. Where is the title?” The students point at it on their books. The teacher models by pointing and reading, “‘In the Forest.’ Your turn.”

Maggie points to the first word, and the teacher points to the first word on Ben’s book to prompt him. Then, they read together chorally, “In the Forest.” The teacher and students echo read each page, with the teacher modeling fluent, expressive reading while touching each word. The students then reread the sentence chorally while pointing. The teacher monitors the students

for voice–print matching, accuracy, and fluency. She prompts thinking about the text every two or three pages (e.g., “Do you know what kind of bird this is? [She points to an owl.] We learned about owls when we talked about nocturnal animals. Owls sleep during the day and are awake to hunt at night. Have you ever seen deer? What do deer eat?”). The teacher and students finish echo reading the text, with the teacher supporting and monitoring student engagement, accuracy, and thinking.

#### Reread the New Text With Less

**Teacher Support.** The teacher says to the students, “Let’s read this book once more. Now we can read it a little faster. Be sure to look at the words and point to each one. Make it sound interesting.” They all return to the cover. The teacher leads the echo reading while emphasizing fluency. There is no stopping for questions or discussion this time unless the students initiate a comment. The teacher monitors and supports for accuracy and voice–print matching.

If errors occur, the teacher models and rereads the page with the students: “Let’s read that again. Maggie, you said, ‘Bears live in the big forest.’ [The teacher models, touching the words on the page.] That’s too many words.” The teacher points and rereads the page accurately. Maggie points and echoes.

**Discuss and Respond to Text.** Again, the teacher starts the discussion: “This book has some animals that I have seen before. [She opens the book to a page with a raccoon.] I have seen raccoons when we go camping. Have you ever seen a raccoon?” After the students reply, she continues, “Look back through the book and find an animal that you have seen.”



Students participate as “readers” through echoing, thinking about, and responding to texts with high support.

The teacher supports Ben by prompting him to think about two different pictures that she guides him to (based on his experience): “Have you ever seen this animal? Or this one?” He points to the deer with excitement. Maggie searches the book on her own and chooses the page with forest birds.

Teacher: Tell us about an animal you have seen, Ben.

Ben: Deer.

Teacher: Tell us in a sentence. I see...

Ben: I see deer.

Teacher: What animal have you seen, Maggie?

Maggie: Birds.

Teacher: Did you like this book? Let’s hear your ratings. [She shows a chart with words and graphics for ratings.] Would you say [pointing to each word and reading] this book was great? Good? OK? Boring?

Ben points to “good.” The teacher responds, “Tell me the whole thing.” She points back to the beginning of the sentence starter and reads while pointing, “This book was...” She points back to the beginning again, and Ben points and rereads chorally, “This book was...” He then he points to the graphic for *good*.

Teacher: What do you think? This book was...

Ben: Good.

Teacher: [conversationally] Why did you think this book was good, Ben?

Ben shrugs. The teacher pursues, with gentle support: “Is it because you like animals? Or did you like the pictures?”

Ben points to the picture of the deer and says, “Deer—my deer.” The teacher

*“The teacher supports Ben by prompting him to think about two different pictures.”*

extends and interprets, “Oh, you liked this book because you like deer. Do you sometimes see deer near your house?” He replies, “Yeah, *my* deer.” The teacher reinforces his personal connection: “This book reminded you of the deer you see near your house.”

She then turns toward Maggie and asks, “What did you think of this book, Maggie?” Maggie shares her response, referring to the chart to point and read with less teacher support: “This book OK.”

Teacher: So you were less excited about today’s book. Why did you rate this book as OK, Maggie?

Maggie: Cats.

Teacher: Oh, so you like reading about cats better than reading about wild animals?

Maggie: Cats—cool!

Teacher: We know you love your cats, Maggie! I remember you really liked the book we read about kittens.

The teacher presents the schedule and a marker to Ben: “We are finished with [points and reads] ‘Read a new book.’” Ben points and echo reads, then he crosses it off with the marker.

The teacher asks the students, “What’s next?” Maggie points and says, “Write!”

**Classroom–Program Connection.** Ben and Maggie also participate in a similar small-group reading lesson (15–20 minutes) with one of their classroom teachers four days each week during their classroom literacy block. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, both students receive instruction during one of Maggie’s classroom teacher’s small guided reading group times. On Thursdays and Fridays, both students receive instruction during one of Ben’s classroom teacher’s small guided reading group times. The two students reread a familiar text, complete a shared reading of a new text with high support, reread the text with support, and complete a brief shared writing connection.

### **Shared Writing Connection**

The priorities for Maggie and Ben for this session, all with high teacher support, are to contribute relevant ideas to co-constructed text, make some author-like decisions regarding content and vocabulary, participate in spelling (e.g., first letter if known consonant sound), construct a pattern sentence with whole words, and reread their writing for accuracy and meaning.

The teacher begins, “My favorite picture was this one of the bear cubs playing. I wrote a sentence about it.” She presents sentence strip, points, and reads, “‘Bears live in the forest.’ What was your favorite picture?” Maggie and Ben share favorite photos, and the teacher replies, “Let’s write about your favorite pictures, too.”

The teacher presents two sentence strips with this frame on them: “\_\_\_\_\_ live in the forest.”

Teacher: What animal is in your favorite picture, Maggie?

Maggie: Birds.

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Identify students with developmental disabilities who display characteristics of emergent readers. (Formerly, these students were called nonreaders.) Chronological age and verbal abilities do not matter. (Nonverbal students can read in their head to echo. A speech therapist can help you learn to integrate alternative and augmentative communication into reading instruction.)
2. Provide multiple, intentional opportunities for students to explore interesting texts with support. Present various formats (i.e., print, electronic). Be sure that students can view print.
3. Read texts fluently to students, pointing to words and commenting on content. Use emergent reader frameworks to note what students know about print after several sessions of consistent reading routines.
4. Adapt phonemic awareness, phonics, and word assessments to explore what students know. Regardless of current alphabetic and print knowledge, all students can begin instruction in structured shared reading while receiving concurrent instruction in phonemic awareness, letters, sounds, and words.
5. Use assessment data to identify individual student goals and group students for structured shared reading instruction. Groups should be limited to two or three students; some may need to begin with individual instruction. Schedule times for consistent daily instruction.
6. Choose appropriate texts and formats, based on student age, experience, and physical and learning characteristics. See your school's literacy coach to locate easy books with predictable language, supporting illustrations, patterns, and familiar topics.
7. Introduce basic, connected reading routines first in the lesson frame because these are the most meaningful. As students learn basic routines (e.g., how to echo read a book), these can be expanded (e.g., adding a book introduction, discussion), and new routines can be taught and added (e.g., writing, word work).
8. Teach, reflect, and revise to support and celebrate all students as readers!

Teacher: Yes there are some different kinds of birds. Do you want to say *birds* or do you want to say a kind of bird, like these blue jays or woodpeckers?

Maggie: Woodpeckers.

Teacher: What does *woodpecker* start with?.../w/.

Maggie: W.

The teacher writes "Woodpeckers" in the blank on Maggie's sentence strip. While pointing and reading, the teacher says, "Let's read your sentence. 'Woodpeckers live in the forest.'" Maggie points and echoes.

Teacher: Is that what you want to say, Maggie?

Maggie: Yes.

Teacher: Repeat with Ben.

He chooses *porcupines*. The teacher continues, "Now read your sentence to your friend." Maggie reads her sentence to Ben, then he reads his sentence to Maggie, with high teacher support, echoing, and pointing.

Next, the teacher says, "OK, I am going to mix up the words in my sentence." She cuts up the sentence strip "Bears live in the forest" into individual words. "Let's put this sentence back together again, so it makes sense. First, let's look in our book and read the sentence again." The teacher and students point and echo read.

To prompt this task, the teacher asks, "What word do I need first? 'Bears.' /b/. Bears. Can you find a word that looks like 'Bears'?" Maggie finds it, and the teacher continues, "That word looks like 'Bears.' *Bears* starts with /b/. What is this letter, Ben?" He replies, "B." The teacher goes on to the next word: "Yes, B, /b/, 'Bears.' What do we need next? Let's read the sentence in our book again:

'Bears live.' /l/, 'live.' Can you find a word that looks like *live*?"

When the word is chosen and in place, the teacher prompts the students to reread (echo read): "Bears live..." Together, they reconstruct the sentence, rereading each time a word is added. When finished, the teacher and students echo read the complete sentence. The teacher asks, "Does that make sense?" and the students reply, "Yes." The teacher further supports the students: "Yes, that makes sense. Bears do live in the forest. Authors always reread their writing to be sure it makes sense."

The teacher presents the schedule and a marker: "We're finished. What did we do?" Maggie, pointing to the word on the schedule, says, "Write." Ben crosses off the last item on the schedule with the marker.

### Classroom–Program Connection

Both classroom teachers and paraprofessional support staff utilize shared writing strategies with models, patterns, and sentence starters to engage Maggie and Ben in co-constructing texts with high support during writing workshop, math, and content studies. For example, when the class was completing a unit on poetry, Ben used a line-poem frame to write a poem using the word *snowy*. A peer partner viewed wintry pictures with him to brainstorm ideas and scribed them for him. Then, Ben and his partner used a template prepared by a teaching assistant along with whole-word writing software with a graphics and picture word bank to "type" his poem. Maggie worked with a partner to choose pictures and complete two pattern sentences about forest ecosystems in a writing frame for a class book. They typed using a template and talking word-processing software.

## Summary

Structured shared reading provides a framework for intensive instruction in reading that can provide a solid foundation for ongoing participation and progress, and ease the transition to guided reading for many students with developmental disabilities. Individualized planning can incorporate more or less challenging content and varied formats (i.e., print, electronic) within any of the lesson components, based on student needs and progress.

It is critical that teacher decisions for structured shared reading facilitate, recognize, and respond to changing learner abilities and needs. This is primarily an *instructional* frame. The goal is to help readers continually move forward as teacher support shifts gradually and appropriately to allow each student to take more control as a reader and participate with more complex texts with increasing independence (i.e., guided reading, independent reading).

However, even if a particular learner does not demonstrate independence and progress to guided reading after years of systematic instruction, the benefits of accessing and thinking about texts through structured shared reading are many. There is no reason to discontinue this path based on a lack of progress toward independent reading.

We cannot predict how far any student with developmental disabilities may progress as a literacy learner. What is certain is that most students with these characteristics will not become literate if we do not teach them.

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

### ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan

- “Developing a Living Definition of Reading in the Elementary Classroom” by Amy Mozombite

### IRA Books

- *Revisiting Silent Reading: New Directions for Teachers and Researchers*, edited by Elfrieda H. Hiebert and D. Ray Reutzel
- *Why Jane and John Couldn’t Read—and How They Learned: A New Look at Striving Readers* by Rosalie Fink

### IRA Journal Articles

- “Implementing a Structured Story Web and Outline Strategy to Assist Struggling Readers” by Tamara J. Arthaud and Teresa Goracke, *The Reading Teacher*, March 2006
- “Making the Very Most of Classroom Read-Alouds to Promote Comprehension and Vocabulary” by Lana Edwards Santoro, David J. Chard, Lisa Howard, and Scott K. Baker, *The Reading Teacher*, February 2008
- “RTI (Response to Intervention): Rethinking Special Education for Students With Reading Difficulties (Yet Again)” by Russell Gersten and Joseph A. Dimino, *Reading Research Quarterly*, January 2006