

UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING STRUGGLING READERS IN GRADE 1: A JOURNEY OF PATIENCE, HOPE, AND GROWTH

by:

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In every Grade 1 classroom, a teacher sees more than just young children learning their ABCs. For many, reading is a magical gateway into the world of knowledge and imagination. But for some, this gateway feels locked, distant, and difficult to access. These children are what educators call “struggling readers”—learners who find reading acquisition unusually challenging compared to their peers.

Struggling readers in Grade 1 are not lazy, unmotivated, or less intelligent. In fact, many of them are incredibly curious, creative, and capable in other areas of learning. The difficulty often stems from a mix of factors—developmental readiness, language exposure, learning disabilities, emotional health, socioeconomic status, and even classroom environment. And while each struggling reader’s story is different, they all deserve the same thing: patience, support, and a belief that they can succeed.

According to the National Reading Panel (2000), foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension must be nurtured in a balanced and intentional way during early childhood. If a child falls behind at this stage, the risk of long-term reading difficulty increases exponentially. Early identification and intervention are, therefore, not just important—they’re urgent.

The journey begins in Grade 1, where teachers are often the first line of defense in spotting reading difficulties. They notice the child who avoids reading aloud, guesses at words, or cannot blend simple sounds.

Some learners may have developmental delays, where the brain simply needs more time to make connections. Others may be English language learners who are still mastering basic vocabulary. In some cases, dyslexia – a neurological condition that affects word recognition and phonological processing – may be the root cause. And in underserved communities, lack of access to books, low parental literacy, or inconsistent attendance may hinder early reading experiences (Snow et al., 1998).

It's essential to understand that no single cause defines all struggling readers. Rather, it's a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that interact uniquely for each child.

For struggling readers, every day in the classroom can feel like climbing a steep hill. While others glide through sentences with ease, they stumble, get laughed at, or feel the teacher's gaze waiting for a correct answer. Over time, they may internalize the belief that they're "not smart enough" or that reading is simply not for them. This belief can damage their self-esteem, increase anxiety, and lead to avoidance behaviors (Morgan et al., 2008).

Imagine a six-year-old child feeling humiliated every time they are asked to read. Without proper support, the emotional scars can last longer than the academic gaps. That is why humanizing the learning process is critical. Teachers must provide not just instruction, but empathy, encouragement, and safe spaces for mistakes.

Teachers play a central role in identifying struggling readers and implementing interventions. Through regular assessments, observations, and targeted instruction, they can determine where the breakdown is occurring – whether it's in phonemic awareness, decoding, or comprehension. Interventions such as small-group reading, guided practice, phonics drills, and reading aloud with modeling have all shown effectiveness in building reading skills (Foorman et al., 2016).

However, a child's reading development doesn't end in the classroom. Parents and guardians are essential partners in this journey. Even just 15 minutes of reading time at home each day can make a significant difference. More importantly, when parents show excitement about books, read to their children, and ask engaging questions, they foster a love of reading that no worksheet can replicate.

Schools can further support families by conducting literacy workshops, providing take-home reading kits, and encouraging regular communication between teachers and parents.

One of the most powerful tools in combating reading struggles is early and intensive intervention. When struggling readers receive the right support in the early grades, many can catch up to their peers. This is where programs like Reading Recovery, Brigada Pagbasa, and MTB-MLE (Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education) come in—especially in the Philippine context, where linguistic diversity and poverty can pose additional barriers.

Early intervention is not about “fixing” a child but about equipping them with strategies, confidence, and consistency. Reading coaches, SPED specialists, and school heads all play key roles in building a system where no child slips through the cracks.

Every struggling reader is a story in progress. Many of today's most successful writers, scientists, and leaders once struggled to read. What made the difference was someone who believed in them—a teacher who gave extra time, a parent who read bedtime stories, a peer who listened without judgment.

In a world that often demands fast results, teaching a struggling reader asks us to slow down, look closer, and listen more. Because when we give these young learners the right tools, the right time, and the right encouragement, we open the door to a future filled with possibilities.

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