

Example Situations

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Excerpted from *Volunteers Working with Young Readers*

Consider the following situations. Each of these scenarios is organized to give you a thumbnail sketch of some of the possibilities. As you read you will find a situation introducing a child and a bit of literacy history. This will be followed by some things for you to consider before taking action and a few suggestions for working with the specific situation. This in turn is followed by a brief description of how the principles above are working in each situation. As you read, pause after each situation and note what you would do if you found yourself working with the child featured. Then compare your initial reactions to the considerations and suggestions given. Where there are differences in what is presented here and in your initial reactions you might want to talk the situation through with your host teacher or the coordinator of your volunteer project. Clearly what is presented here is by no means an exhaustive list of possibilities. Many things must be considered, and each situation involves an individual child with his or her personal history. These situations are here merely to acquaint you with some of the possibilities and to provide a demonstration of the thinking process you might adopt before taking action when working with children in literacy development.

◀ IN THIS SECTION

Example Situations and Principles in Practice

- Nathan, Age 7, Grade 2
- Meg, Age 9, Grade 3
- Erica, Age 6, Grade 1
- Trent, Age 7, Grade 1
- Eddie, Age 8, Grade 2

SITUATION: NATHAN, AGE 7, GRADE 2

Nathan brings a copy of *Frog and Toad Together* to his third meeting with you. As you listen to him read you notice that when he comes to an unfamiliar word he almost always stops and looks up at you. Occasionally, he will attempt to sound out the first letter, but usually he just sits looking at you and waiting.

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT ...

- whether Nathan has had adequate time to become familiar and comfortable with you? Could he be searching for cues from you as to how you wish to deal with unfamiliar words? Remember that adults don't all agree on what is best for children in many situations. Nathan has lived long enough to discover that different adults have different expectations. He may be simply feeling his way through to find your expectations.
- what Nathan typically does when confronted with an unfamiliar word while reading in the classroom alone or in a small group?
- whether Nathan believes that the good readers are those who get all the words right?
- whether Nathan believes that he will be corrected or criticized for missing a word?

HAVE YOU TRIED ...

- asking Nathan what he usually does when he is reading alone and comes to an unfamiliar word?
- encouraging him to skip over the word and read on to the end of the sentence, paragraph, or page when he comes to a word that causes him to stop and look at you?
- asking him to read through a section of the story or text, then stopping to retell that section? Does he understand what he has read? Is the individual word critical to the meaning of the story? Can he return to the word with the meaning of the whole and make sense of the word he had trouble with? showing Nathan how to preview the material before reading. On a sticky note make a list of any of the words you expect him to stop on. Then you could try any of the following:
 - ✓ Cover those words with a small sticky note and read along with Nathan. Tell Nathan that when he comes to one of those places, he can just keep going. At the end of the selection have him retell the story. Ask yourself: Does Nathan understand what he has read? Is the individual word critical to the meaning of the story? Can he return to the covered words with the meaning of the whole and make sense of them?
 - ✓ Cover those words with a small sticky note and have Nathan listen and follow along. While you are reading aloud for Nathan, model the above strategy for him to see how readers make sense of unfamiliar text. As you complete the selection, retell what you read. Go back into the text and stop at each covered word and use the context to show what the word might be. Uncover the word and use the letters/sounds to verify your attempts. By thinking aloud at these points in the text you can show Nathan how readers use the cues of language to identify unknown words. As you verify those words that had been covered, continue reading softly-just say the word and allow him to join in again when and where he is comfortable with the text.

Literacy Develops over Time

Remember that you are working with Nathan because he needs more time, more attention, more demonstrations, and guidance. Not only does he need time on the clock and the calendar, but he also needs time with books, time listening to language in story and text, time in the presence of a literacy mentor who will live out the strategies he is trying to develop.

Reading Is Understanding

Remember that getting the words right is only one concrete way the world has to determine whether a person did read. However, when getting the words right becomes a child's (or adult's) definition of reading, the focus is shifted away from making sense and constructing meaning-understanding. Continuously demonstrate through your comments, questions, strategies, and other interactions with Nathan that the goal of reading is to make sense of what is written.

Instruction Needs to Be Provided in a Supportive Environment

Remember that you cannot teach Nathan if you cannot reach Nathan. In other words, he has to understand that you are there to support him and guide him. He has to know, without doubt, that he can trust you to honor and respect his honest attempts. No child (indeed no student of any age) will take the risk to explore with new strategies and ideas unless the teacher, tutor, mentor has demonstrated his or her trustworthiness. From the first moment you meet you must always focus your demonstrations and instruction in ways that support Nathan's strengths and lead him to grow into the next possibility.

SITUATION: MEG, AGE 9, GRADE 3

In your meetings with Meg you notice that she gets most words right as she reads aloud for you. When there is a word she falters on, she usually stops and quietly sounds the word out. She doesn't always come up with the correct pronunciation, but she seems confident that she is correct. At times she comes up with a pronunciation that does not even sound like a word, but she continues to move along in the text. When she reaches the end of the story or selection she remembers only a few facts and details. She has difficulty summarizing or retelling the story. She also has a difficult time making connections between events in the story.

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT ...

- whether this pattern is typical when Meg reads aloud?
- whether Meg shows any sign of looking for meaning while reading? Does she make comments like, "Oh, I didn't think he would do that next." Or "Mmmm, that doesn't make sense."
- whether she ever rereads a line, sentence, or paragraph to gain context for those unfamiliar words?
- whether she ever reads on beyond the unfamiliar word to gain context?
- whether, when Meg reads in her class, the students are encouraged to discuss the story, sharing their connections, interpretations, insights, and confusions?
- the books Meg usually reads from in class? Read through a few of the selections yourself. Is there a significant story line? Are the characters believable, do they have personality? Is there conflict or tension in the plot that gives the characters something to do? In short, is there a story? Is there real language? Or does it seem that the purpose of the material is more one of providing practice with identifying words?

HAVE YOU TRIED ...

- reading a short story, a picture book, or a traditional tale to Meg, having her listen to the story without the task of decoding the print? Try it. After reading aloud for her, ask Meg to retell the story to you. This will help you determine whether Meg can focus on the overall frame of the story. If you find that Meg is able to retell the story that you read aloud to her, you can be fairly comfortable with the notion that she can also manage the same when reading similar material on her own.
- selecting meaningful reading material with Meg and having her read the piece in chunks? You could pre-read the text and place a self-stick note on the page at the most critical junctures. I'd select those places where the characters have a dilemma or conflict that must be resolved and the author has not yet revealed the solution. Meg's focus would be on naming the issue, conflict, dilemma and making some prediction about how the character(s) might resolve it. She could just jot down her thoughts on the self-stick note and move it as she reads on to determine the outcome. In most stories or chapters there would be only two to four places where you would logically stop for this sort of thinking. You might find it necessary to read the selections together so that Meg learns how to identify those critical junctures in the plot. That is essential to having her able to use the strategy in your absence. And remember, our goal is to develop readers and

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writers who function independently. Therefore, we should focus on strategies that are both lasting and transportable. That is, we need to give our students those strategies that will work in many situations and ones that can be used without us present to validate them.

Reading Is Understanding

Here again, a key point is to help developing readers of any age broaden their definitions of reading. Meg's actions provide windows to her beliefs about reading. Her use of "sounding it out" to arrive at a nonword and then continuing on to the end could signal that in her thoughts a good reader is one who can pronounce all the words and "read" to the end. The difficulty she has with summarizing or retelling is a signal that she doesn't see reading as a meaning-making process. This leads us right into another key principle.

Meaning and Making Sense Must Serve as the Frame For Considering Skills

Reading strategies and habits are acquired through consistent demonstration. Meg has most likely been told over and over to "sound it out." She may have even been interrupted during her reading to be told that she had gotten a word wrong. The implicit message she has heard over and over is that good readers use these skills and always get the words right. In situations like these it is very easy for the child to gradually shift attention away from understanding the language to pronouncing all the words. We must remember that any skill can be overemphasized, that no skill is the panacea, that unless the reader constructs meaning from the reading, the skill has proven fruitless. Clearly, there are many useful, essential skills and strategies that readers need to develop. Let us remember the function of each of them is to assist the reader in making sense of the print.

Reading Materials Should Be Authentic

Remember that Meg can read for meaning only if there is sense and meaning in the material she is reading. Many of the materials developed for reading instruction focus more heavily on decodable print and patterns in language than on telling a story. If Meg is to use her reading skills and strategies to make sense of the story, to get at the meaning, there must be identifiable characters with some depth and personality. The story must be couched in a setting that can be imagined, that is clearly establishing a sense of place for the characters to act. The actions of the characters must be played out in a plot that allows the characters to deal with issues, conflict, tension, resolutions, etc. In essence, there must be a story and not just a collection of words strung together just to give the child practice in applying the skill of the week (*The fat cat sat on a mat. The thin pin is in the fat mat. The fat pig can do a jig*).

SITUATION: ERICA, AGE 6, GRADE 1

While working with Erica you notice that she seems to be "frozen to the page" each time you listen to her read. It seems that she struggles with words and seems to move through even simple text at a slow, tedious pace.

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT ...

- how often Erica has the opportunity to hear fluent reading models in her daily routines?
- the words Erica seems to have control over in her reading?
- the typical strategies you have seen Erica employ when encountering an unfamiliar word?
- whether she tends to use the same strategy when reading back her own words?
- whether she writes her own thoughts and language?
- whether she recognizes words in the story as you read aloud to her whether she recognizes and identifies the logos commonly used in her community?

HAVE YOU TRIED ...

- reading aloud to her at every meeting? Choose something she enjoys and read to her with smooth, fluent expression. Don't be fake and overdramatic; just be sincere and read with a voice you'd enjoy listening to. Remember, your purpose here is not to teach her new words or strategies for identifying words. Here the point is to give Erica a sampling of the beautiful language, vivid images, chilling adventures, warm memories that can lie in wait among the words and pages of books. Your job, then, is to provide consistent exposure to great stories and proficient, fluent models of reading. It is important for young readers to hear the rhythms and cadences of language read aloud. Just as in other aspects of learning, the student needs to see print, observe the strategies of a good reader in use, to hear the language of authors come to life through the voice of a proficient reader. Having this consistent demonstration provides the young reader with the experience to envision what readers do when they interact with print, to create a "sound image" of the voice of written language.
- providing a selection of predictable books for Erica to listen to, read alongside you, and read for you? If you read *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* aloud and let Erica see the illustrations and print as you read, she could both see and hear the patterns in the language and the additional support provided by the illustrations. After you have read the book to her once or twice, invite her to read along if she hasn't already done so on her own. Pause where you can allow Erica to chime in, using the clues from these patterns to identify words in the story. As you read together note which clues and patterns Erica seems to use. Take the opportunity to point out any additional clues along the way.
- having Erica use taped read-alongs? She could have a selection of "comfortable" books, those books she has read successfully and has confidence and control with. Using these "comfortable" books, Erica can listen to the tape and read along. Beginning this process with "comfortable" books is important because these allow Erica to focus on rhythm, *flow*, and cadence in the voice of the taped reading. As she listens and silently follows along she is rehearsing that rhythm, *flow*, and cadence-fluency. After listening and reading along silently she will be invited to read along aloud. You could have her listen with earphones or

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without. Using earphones will provide a continuous model and support while you have the opportunity to hear her read along and note her progress.

Children Bring a Wealth of Knowledge to School

Erica has six years of experience in the world as a language user. She listens, initiates, and responds in conversations. She can recall events in detail and sequence from this morning and from her last birthday party-a year ago. She lives in a world virtually littered with print-billboards, street signs, advertising, labels, logos, magazines, and newspapers. She, like most children, is a frequent viewer of television. She interacts with family and friends with ease. Erica has favorite family stories, memories from birthdays and holidays, knowledge of rules for the games she plays with other kids who live near her. Through television she knows about places she has never visited. She has an extensive collection of shells and thinks of herself as an expert. Remember that knowing the child is essential to teaching the child. All that experience, all that knowledge, all that language is the foundation upon which you will build. Think of the power of books and stories you two could develop around family tales, rules for games, classifying the shell collection.

Literacy Is Language

Remember that it is language we read and write. Clearly there are differences between written and spoken language, but they are both language. Because this is so, the child's facility with spoken language should be used as a bridge to written language. Developing Erica's ear for the flow and rhythm of written language in stories gives her a way to anticipate the writer that parallels her ability to anticipate a speaker and finish his or her sentence. Developing her ear for the language of stories, poems, information books builds a frame for her to use as a writer just as the language of her most immediate family builds the frame for her first attempts with speech. Erica's reading and writing are grounded in her listening and speaking. Literacy is language.

Literacy Develops over Time

Here again, it is essential to remember that learning occurs over time through repeated demonstrations by others who play a significant role in the child's life. Erica is six years old. Continuously provide demonstrations of what you hope she will grow into. Show how you use the strategies and skills you hope she will develop for herself. Demonstrate how those important pieces help you to make sense of the written language in the world. Telling about it is never enough. You must live it out before her very eyes and it must be tied to something she finds relevant. Once is never enough. It takes time.

Meaning and Making Sense Must Serve as the Frame For Considering Skills

Remember that skills are useful only when they lead to making sense and helping the child understand the written language. Remember that skills and strategies are useful only when they can be utilized independently by the child. That is, when the teacher/tutor/mentor is not present to verify the outcome. In Erica's case it would be too easy to jump to the conclusion that what she needs is an array of word-attack skills. Just remember that any skill, in order to be useful, must be presented in the context of its function. That is to say that Erica has to learn skills and strategies as they are useful to her in the process of making sense of print.

SITUATION: TRENT, AGE 7, GRADE 1

As you read with Trent, you notice that his confidence is much greater as a reader than as a writer. He tends to select books that are appropriate to his proficiency. When selecting books of high interest that are beyond his own ability, he seeks someone to read aloud to him. When he reads aloud, there is confidence in his voice and he uses "story inflection." Although he has good strategies for identifying unfamiliar words and good fluency when reading aloud, he frequently skips entire lines of the story.

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT ...

- why Trent sometimes skips entire lines while reading aloud?
- why he might be so reluctant to write even though he seems to have developed some good reading strategies?
- Trent's ability to select materials at the appropriate level for his purposes?
- the possibility that Trent's reluctance to write could be linked to his ability as a reader and sense of self as a literate individual?
- that his reluctance to write may result from the power of his ability as a reader? For example, he may be unwilling to attempt committing his thoughts to print when he is very aware of the fact that what he writes is not like what he sees in the books he reads. Because of that awareness, Trent may be less likely to commit to writing all those words he uses in speaking and can identify when reading.

HAVE YOU TRIED ...

- encouraging Trent to use a bookmark to slide down the page as he reads? The bookmark could cover the lines of print he has read. This would help focus his attention on upcoming text and help with his habit of skipping entire lines of print.
- using a "talking book" to encourage Trent to write? This can be a notebook dedicated to conversations you have with Trent where neither of you speak. You write to him and he responds to you, like e-mail in a notebook. The point here is twofold. One, you provide a constant demonstration of putting thoughts and ideas in print. Two, you provide an opportunity for Trent to write for a clearly identified audience that is nonjudgmental. That is to say that you, as audience, will be the only one to read the conversations, you are present to clarify when necessary and do not hold the power of grading the work. The book has an added benefit, that is, it becomes a permanent record of progress.

Language Is Social

Remember that language is a means of sharing what is known. Trent clearly understands the potential of language to communicate the ideas of others, as he is developing as a proficient reader. He has a well-developed expressive vocabulary as a speaker and initiates as well as responds in conversation. Here you have the opportunity to help him realize the same potentials in written language. The language potentials he has realized as a reader can be useful in helping him to develop as a writer.

Instruction Needs to Be Provided in a Supportive Environment

Remember that Trent has many strengths as a learner and as a language user. Be careful to provide demonstrations for Trent that build on these strengths and allow him to make approximations or try out new things as a reader/writer without fear or penalty.

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Children Bring a Wealth of Knowledge to School

Trent brings not only his experience in the world, he also brings successful strategies as reader. As with any child, the wise among us would make use of this knowledge as a foundation for other learning. Trent's confidence and competence as a reader can be a useful hinge for growing him into an equally confident and competent writer.

SITUATION: EDDIE, AGE, GRADE 2

In your very first meetings with Eddie, it becomes clear, that he has very little confidence, as a reader. He is reluctant to attempt print and generally responds, "I don't know that word," or "I can't read." If nudged, he will struggle with the first sound, make a random guess, pick out the few words he knows, or create a story to explain the illustrations when they are present.

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT ...

- what has stripped Eddie of his confidence as a reader? Building an image of oneself as a reader is something that occurs over time. It is through several successful experiences with print that this sense of self slowly builds. Losing that confidence is also something that occurs over time. It is unlikely that a single event would be the cause. Therefore, it is worth the time to explore how Eddie has developed this image of himself.
- the significant impact of self-confidence upon performance? Think about your own experiences in life. Don't you usually do better in those areas or tasks you believe you will be successful in? Don't you experience much greater anxiety over those tasks that you believe yourself less competent in? In many ways, confidence is gained through successful attempts at a task or experience. Likewise, confidence can fuel further attempts. This cycle leads to competence. In short, confidence begets competence.
- how you can help Eddie regain the confidence and reestablish that sense of self he needs to move forward? What can you do during each meeting with Eddie that will build both confidence and competence?
- the knowledge of story-structure and language that Eddie must have? In order to create a story to explain the illustration, Eddie must have an understanding of the structure and organization of stories. He must also have a grasp of the language used in stories. The key here is to learn to recognize and attend to the strengths a child brings to any experience. It is much too easy to focus on the deficits, that is, what the child can't do. When it becomes our focus, we too often fail to see what the child can do.
- how could you build on Eddie's knowledge of story structure and language to advance his confidence and proficiency as a reader?

HAVE YOU TRIED ...

- working with Eddie to create a book of labels, logos, and print from advertising and product packaging? You could bring several sales papers from the local area and ask Eddie to bring some logos and labels from products he uses at home. Ask Eddie to sort through them and select those he can read. Clip those he selects and ask him to name them for you. As he does, he could paste them in a blank book. I'd suggest one item per page. As you complete a few, review the pages asking Eddie to read the logo on each page. As he names the product, confirm his reading; then write in clear, bold print This is _____. In the blank you would write the word Eddie provides. For example, if JIF is the logo he selects, and he reads it as *peanut butter*, you'd write This is *peanut butter*. Here you'll have a common pattern (This is _____) on each page. The new word on each page will be keyed to the logo featured there. Eddie's familiarity with the logo will provide the support to take the risk to believe himself able to read the page. This security will give Eddie successful experience and a context for developing skills.

- inviting Eddie to tell the story presented in a wordless picture book. As Eddie tells the story presented in the illustrations, you can write his "text" on sticky notes to accompany each illustration or spread. Place the notes on the appropriate pages as they are written. As each page is completed, re-read it with Eddie or invite him to read it for you. When the entire story is complete read it back to Eddie as he follows along and listens for anything he might like to change. When you've read it through twice and he is satisfied with the text, you might rewrite it on sticky notes or type it on a word processor so that you could have several copies. Eddie could have one copy of just the text. Another might be cut into strips and paper clipped to the pages to approximate typical book print. Once again, you provide a support system for him. The illustrations that stimulated Eddie's language for the text will still be there. Eddie's language will be there as well on the sticky notes or from the word processor. Again, you demonstrate that ideas, images, experiences are expressed through language which can be captured in one form through print, which can be revisited again and again through reading.
- using a similar process, you can create several new texts for Eddie to read. Use any significant event, photo, comic strip or memory that Eddie indicates an interest in. Talk with him about the event and make notes. Use the notes together with Eddie to stimulate elaboration, adding details, sequencing, and generation of a written draft. Encourage Eddie to write as much of this as possible. Although you are generating a text for Eddie to improve his reading confidence and competence, you must also attend to the whole of his language development. That of course, includes his development as a listener, as a speaker, as a reader, and as a writer. And inasmuch as language is a dynamic thinking process, you will sharpen his ability to reason, consider multiple points of view, observe, question, categorize, classify, and articulate his insights and confusions.

Literacy Develops over Time

It is true that Eddie has had time on the clock and on the calendar; he is eight years old. But, remember that it is more than the passing of minutes, days, months, and years that developing readers need. They need to spend time engaging in purposeful and meaningful interactions with written and spoken language. Just as it takes time to develop confidence and competence, it also takes time to slowly dissolve those same attitudes and abilities. The essential piece is how the time is spent, which takes us into the next principle.

Instruction Needs to Be Provided in a Supportive Environment

Sometimes the most well-intended instruction may be perceived by the child as foreign, intrusive, abstract, and confusing. Providing instruction in a supportive environment is less about your intentions and genuine caring than it is about building on what the child knows and understands. Clearly the child needs your emotional support, that is, your kindness and empathy. More important to the child's success is the support you provide by ensuring that materials are relevant to the child's experience and interest, by ensuring that the strategies you demonstrate are clearly connected to making sense of written language, by ensuring that the strategies you demonstrate are ones the child will be able to use even when you are not there to verify, and by assuring the child that you will continue providing the demonstrations as long as they are necessary.

Reading Materials Should Be Authentic

Remember that for Eddie to construct meaning from the text using the strategies you demonstrate, there must be meaningful language on the page. To be authentic, the material has to be relevant to Eddie and in language that could stand alone outside the world of school and reading instruction. Remember, if the materials were written to provide nothing more than practice pronouncing words and practice imple-

menting a particular rule, then there is nothing authentic about them. And in that case they will be all the more abstract and meaningless to Eddie.