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7 Hands-on Strategies for Struggling Readers

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7 Hands-on Strategies for Struggling Readers

Abstract

Struggling readers are found in almost every classroom across the world. With differing learning styles and abilities, teachers are encouraged now, more than ever, to be innovative when teaching foundational reading strategies. Within this article, readers are provided with a literature review of research and educational literature that discusses how multisensory, hands-on activities promote engagement and active learning for all students. The recommended seven hands-on learning strategies that can promote learning and support for struggling readers during literacy instruction include *Build the Words*, *Feel the Words*, *Whole Body Letters*, *Five Finger Retell*, *Sight Word BINGO*, *Elkonin Boxes*, and *Word Swat*.

Keywords

Exceptional Children, literacy, sensory, tactile learning, kinesthetic learning

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Young children learn in a variety of sensory ways. By providing a variety of sensory activities within the classroom, the teacher can engage children with their surroundings and ultimately the curriculum. One of the necessary sensory aspects is by exploring learning through touch. By teachers providing hands-on materials and activities, consequently students can develop their sense of touch, which lays the foundation for learning other skills (Gainsley, 2011). Identifying objects by touch, and using fine-motor muscles, assists in connecting the activity to specific content. Moats and Farrell (2005) describe how engaged active learning, in which students are encouraged to link new literacy and language information with established memory through multisensory (input from more than one sensory receptor) experiences, is more effective than rote or passive memorization. According to Martin (2020), when students are forced to *do* something, the students are engaged in active learning. By the students practicing the skills and putting knowledge to the test, active learning occurs. Most importantly, students are actively *creating* knowledge, instead of passively consuming it (Martin, 2020).

Literature Review

According to research and educational literature, hands-on and movement activities have a positive impact on student engagement and achievement of exceptional learners. Teachers use hands-on instruction to motivate and encourage participation, as well as to promote active learning in the classroom (McGregor et al., 2015). According to Walet (2011), multisensory instruction that employs kinesthetic, tactile, visual, and auditory learning strategies can be used in the classroom to motivate and engage struggling readers in order to support learning. There are many evidence-based multisensory strategies that teachers can utilize in their classrooms to help struggling readers (Walet, 2011).

Not all children have the same learning style. Children can learn by seeing, listening, reading, writing, and doing. Research recommends that teachers incorporate multisensory instruction to actively engage all learners (Walet, 2011). Hands-on learning “is another way to learn” and encourages students to practice skills that have been previously learned to help retain the specific content or skill (Martin, 2020). Learning by doing through multisensory, hands-on instruction allows students to be “natural” learners (Wise, 2020; Walet, 2011). Hands-on activities also allow teachers to chunk or break down content into segments during literacy instruction to help meet the needs of struggling learners (Wise, 2020).

Not only can hands-on instruction through a variety of sensory strategies meet students’ needs by promoting active participation and engagement, but some hands-on activities can also incorporate movement and motor skill development. Gross and fine motor skill development has a positive relationship to cognitive development and student achievement (Fernandas et al., 2016) in the areas of reading, language, and math (Magistro et al., 2015). In a study conducted by Dinehart and Manfra (2013), it was determined that fine motor skill development in early childhood (specifically handwriting) had an important impact on academic achievement as children got older. According to McGregor et al. (2015), research has shown kinesthetic movements also contribute to active engagement of students and retention of information. Incorporating movement to lessons allows teachers to take a break from the routine of having students sit and learn (McGregor et al., 2015). Allowing students to actively learn by doing

provides instruction to meet the needs of students who benefit from kinesthetic activities (McGregor et al., 2015; Wise, 2020).

As previously mentioned, research supports the positive effect of multisensory, hand-on learning strategies on student engagement and achievement. Teachers can implement movement and activities where students practice their skills by doing to help meet the needs of all learning styles within their classrooms. Multisensory, hands-on activities can also be incorporated to differentiate literacy instruction to provide content on multiple instructional levels (Walet, 2011). The following sections of this paper provide teachers with 7 hands-on learning strategies to help struggling readers.

Build the words

“Building the words” not only focuses on fine motor skills but it gives the student the opportunity to physically and visually build words and/or sentences using a variety of manipulatives. To have the students “build the words”, classroom teachers and/or parents can use different strategies within the classroom or home. The manipulatives can include tactile magnetic letters, letter blocks, or manipulatable foam, PlayDoh, or wired letters. The strategies could involve the students identifying letters and/or letter sounds, identifying blends, building consonant vowel consonant (CVC) words, and building simple sentences using the manipulatives. Using tactiles help students learn best by doing, not just by reading, seeing, or hearing (Education Planner, 2021).

Feel the Words

According to Dinehart and Manfra (2013), a great predictor of future academic success is handwriting readiness. Encouraging students to use their hands to “feel the words” not only strengthens fine motor skills but it also engages children in letter identification and writing words. Giving students the ability to feel the letter formations increase muscle memory and site recognition. “Feeling the words” can also engage students within the classroom to a degree in which they don’t realize learning is occurring. Using individual fingers or a whole hand to write letters and/or words in shaving cream, sand, and flour can be interactive and highly engaging (maybe even a little messy). Giving opportunities to use handwriting, opposed to typing or voice texting, is important for the early recruitment in letter processing of brain regions known to underlie successful reading. Handwriting therefore may facilitate reading acquisition in young children (James & Engelhardt, 2012).

Whole Body Letters

What better way to get students engaged in learning than to get them moving? Physical activities not only keep students engaged, but it also gets them mobile. Using kinetics within the classroom increases blood flow to the brain and increases learning through play. One activity that can help struggling readers make letter formations and identify letters is by making whole body letters. This is where the students physically make the letter with their body. This can be a “brain break”, warm up exercise, or a daily routine. Making whole body letters gives students the opportunity to cross their midline. According to Weldon (2019), crossing the midline of your body helps build pathways in the brain and is an important prerequisite skill required for the appropriate development of various motor and cognitive skills. Students who have difficulty

crossing the body's midline often have trouble with skills such as reading, writing, completing self-care skills and participating in sports and physical activities (Weldon, 2019).

Five Finger Retell

Students who struggle with reading often lack the ability to retell information or comprehend what has been read. Retelling stories also involves vocabulary and expressive language that may also be a weakness for a struggling reader. A study conducted by Reed and Vaughn (2012), indicated that literal information was retold more frequently than inferential, and students with learning disabilities or reading difficulties needed more support to demonstrate adequate recall. A strategy to address adequate retelling in the classroom is called Five Finger Retell. This strategy teaches the students to name the five elements of a story by using their own hand as a visual. The students describe the setting, characters, problems, events, and solution. To add to this strategy, the students could indicate how the story made them feel or the main idea of the story represented by the palm of their hand. Using the Five Finger Retell gives the students a visual representation of information the student should gain from the story. Never underestimate finger puppets with visuals and/or written prompts to initiate their retelling until students master this skill, especially when making inferences and text to self-connections. Also, this strategy can be expanded as the student progresses. By using the other hand, students can indicate additional details to expand their retelling skills, and ultimately their comprehension.

Sight Word BINGO

Sight word instruction has been a part of primary classrooms for decades. Sight word acquisition is meant to help students increase reading fluency and comprehension by recognizing words as the student sees them instead of decoding the words. Engaging sight word games can promote sight word acquisition (Gibbon et al., 2017). Sight word BINGO using daubers is a hands-on, engaging activity to help students fluently recall sight words. When students are engaged, motivation to actively participate and learn occurs. The results of a study conducted by Gibbon et al. (2017) indicated that the implementation of sight word games like BINGO within remedial reading programs can increase student growth and achievement. Not only can using BINGO daubers be engaging and fun for students, it also promotes fine motor development and can build hand-eye coordination (Carson, 2021).

Elkonin Boxes

According to Whitbread et al. (2021), Elkonin boxes, also known as sound boxes, are a hands-on approach that promotes reading achievement by teaching students to segment words by sounds. Segmenting words can be used to help students who struggle with phonemic awareness by improving letter-sound correspondence, segmentation, and spelling skills (Keeseey et al., 2015). To use Elkonin boxes, students are provided with a visual of boxes. For example, if working on words with three to four sounds in the word, students will be provided with three to four boxes or squares to place tokens. The teacher will say a word aloud and the students will listen for the sounds (phonemes) in the word while moving a token into a box for each sound the students hear. Having boxes or squares available for students to place tokens will help visually support students as they segment the word (Whitbread et al., 2021).

Word Swat

Another fun and engaging activity that can be implemented into reading instruction is a word swat game. The game can be played with two to four players. An assortment of cards with 3 to 4 letter words are displayed in front of the students on a table or taped to the wall. Each student gets a fly swatter and is instructed to “swat” a word based on a vowel sound provided by the teacher. For example, the teacher may say “find the word with the long a sound” and the students will have to act quickly to swat the word containing the long a sound. This activity not only is engaging, but it promotes active participation and incorporates gross motor movement. Research suggests that strategies that incorporate movement increase student engagement while in turn increasing student achievement (McGregor et al., 2015). Research also suggests a direct relationship between gross motor skills and cognitive development (Magistro et al., 2015). The letter swat game can be a beneficial, hands-on strategy to implement in primary classrooms.

Conclusion

Research suggests that young children learn in a variety of ways and incorporating multi-sensory, hands-on instruction is not only fun, but promotes the retention of information and academic content. Hands-on instructional strategies can promote movement, help develop fine and gross motor skills, provide visual support, and actively engage students in the learning process. Teachers can implement hands-on strategies to help struggling readers by building words, feeling words, making whole body letters, using five finger retell, playing sight word bingo, using Elkonin boxes, and playing the letter swat game.

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