READING INTERVENTIONS
Yesterday’s Theories, Today’s Pedagogy, and Tomorrow’s Teachers

KATHERINE K. FRANKEL  P. DAVID PEARSON
It is common practice to talk about struggling readers—students in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms who have difficulty with one or more aspects of the reading process—and how best to serve them in the classroom. Too often these discussions assume that all students who struggle with reading in school do so for the same reason. However, all readers are not the same, and recent research has shown that students who struggle with reading do so for many reasons.

For example, through an in-depth analysis of the reading profiles of fourth graders who scored below the proficient level on the Washington state test of reading achievement, Valencia and Buly (2004) found that this group of students exhibited a range of difficulties when it came to reading: some students had difficulty with both decoding and comprehension (these students were referred to as “struggling word callers”), some students could decode with ease but had difficulty with comprehension (“automatic word callers”), and some students struggled with decoding but not with comprehension (“word stumblers”). Valencia and Buly (2004) identified other students who struggled with fluency and decoding (“slow comprehenders”) or fluency and comprehension (“slow word callers”), and still other students who had extreme difficulty with decoding, comprehension, and fluency (“disabled readers”). The argument then follows that these students would benefit from different types of reading instruction to become better readers.

Because students who struggle with reading do so for different reasons, reading interventions must be tailored to meet the specific, but always complex, needs of individual students. In this article, we make the case for the importance of considering the theories of reading—what we call the “theories of action”—that underlie different approaches to reading intervention while also acknowledging the critical role that teachers play in this endeavor. By doing so, we hope to demonstrate the ways in which these approaches target different aspects of the reading process and, in turn, serve students in different ways so that teachers have the knowledge necessary to meet the diverse reading needs of their students.

First, we take a close look at two approaches to reading intervention—one that focuses on a thorough treatment of the phonological bases of reading and another that focuses on reading comprehension strategies—and unpack the theories of action that underlie them. To ground these theories in practice, we provide snapshots of adolescent readers enrolled in ninth-grade reading intervention classes. We use their experiences to reveal both the complexities of reading in secondary school and the potential consequences of taking too narrow a view of reading for students whose reading difficulties appear to fit a particular theory.

Then, we discuss a third approach to reading intervention—one that focuses on the process of the intervention as well as its content and, therefore, has the potential to allow for greater flexibility and more attention to the specific needs of individual students. Finally, we affirm the critical role that teachers play in their students’ reading growth and suggest a series of principles to assist them in crafting approaches to reading instruction and intervention that serve their students by acknowledging the complexities of reading. In so doing, our intent is not to suggest that successful instruction is simply a matter of finding the right type of program for the right type of student. Rather, our intention is to provide teachers, as the foremost experts on their students, with guidelines for making informed decisions regarding the types of individualized instruction that are most appropriate for their particular students.

The topic of reading instruction and intervention is crucial at this particular moment in time when 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the
Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The Standards aim to maximize student learning by clearly articulating rigorous literacy standards and by highlighting the need for students to encounter increasingly complex texts in their classrooms across grade levels and content areas. To make it more likely that all students attain these standards, we argue that it is more important than ever that teachers have the professional prerogative, along with the knowledge needed to exercise it, to tailor reading instruction to the particular needs of individual students.

This article is based in part on a longer chapter on reading comprehension and reading disability that appeared in the *Handbook of Reading Disability Research* (Frankel, Pearson, & Nair, 2011) in which we discussed four theoretical perspectives on the comprehension-disability relationship and juxtaposed these perspectives with three approaches to improving comprehension for students with and without disabilities. Readers desiring a more detailed analysis would benefit from consulting that original source.

**Examining Theories of Action**

In this section, we highlight three approaches to reading intervention—two that focus on instructional content and one that focuses on the intervention process as well as its content. These approaches vary in their diagnostic and instructional foci:

1. Emphasis on the phonological bases of reading
2. Emphasis on reading comprehension strategies
3. Emphasis on the process of individualized instruction

We include these three approaches because each provides a clear example of the important connections that exist between theory and practice and the implications of these connections for students. In so doing, we do not mean to suggest that they are the only approaches worth mentioning. Moreover, we want to be clear that focusing on one aspect of reading does not—indeed, should not—preclude the incorporation of other aspects into instruction. So, for example, just because an approach focuses first and foremost on phonological concerns does not mean that it should not also take into account other considerations such as fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, motivation, and engagement.

**Emphasis on the Phonological Bases of Reading**

The first approach we highlight addresses phonological difficulties in students’ cognitive processing abilities. For example, some students cannot segment a spoken word like *dog* into its component sounds (/d/ /ɒ/ /g/), or when they hear the phonemes /d/ /ɒ/ /g/, they cannot blend them into the spoken word *dog*. Students who are thought to possess phonological difficulties such as these are almost universally offered intensive decoding support as a first step to improving their reading.

**Theory of Action**

The theory of action that underlies the phonological approach is that, for some students, the source of—and potentially the sole reason for—their reading difficulties lies at the phonological level. This theory is consistent with Stanovich’s (1988) phonological-core variable-difference model. According to this model, there are two types of poor readers: what Stanovich calls “garden-variety poor readers” (p. 590), who have difficulty across many aspects of the reading process, and “reading disabled” or “dyslexic” readers, who have a specific difficulty with the phonological aspects of reading. Students who have difficulty segmenting spoken words into sounds or blending sounds into

![Image](Fuse/Thinkstock.com)
words usually have difficulty making the connection between letters and the sounds they represent. If one subscribes to this model, then it follows that students with dyslexia would benefit from an approach that provides them with intensive instruction in phonological awareness and ample opportunities for decoding practice.

**Program Snapshot: A Code-Oriented Approach**

One approach that is consistent with this underlying theory of action is Lindamood-Bell (2013); it focuses on phonemic awareness, one component of the phonological bases of reading. Two of its programs—Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing Program (LiPS) and Seeing Stars—use explicit and systematic instruction with an emphasis on repetition and reinforcement to build phonemic awareness.

LiPS aims to improve phonemic awareness by drawing explicit attention to how sounds are made by the mouth. Students are encouraged to see, hear, and even feel speech sounds so that, ultimately, they have the necessary tools to begin to monitor and self-correct their own reading.

Seeing Stars supplements LiPS and is geared toward students who continue to struggle with fluent decoding of basic or multisyllabic words. Students learn visualization techniques and language awareness through symbol imagery to become better readers. Whereas LiPS focuses instruction directly on the alleged deficit in phonological processing, Seeing Stars uses a compensatory strategy by emphasizing other cognitive systems, such as vision and language.

**Student Profile: Radi**

Radi (all student names are pseudonyms) is a 16-year-old ninth grader who is enrolled in a reading intervention class at his public high school. He came to the United States from Palestine as a young child, and his first language is Arabic. Radi has had an Individualized Education Plan since elementary school, but his high school case manager encouraged him to enroll in the school’s ninth-grade reading intervention class instead of the special education reading class specifically so that he would have daily opportunities to read extended, high-interest texts.

In the reading intervention class, students read both individually and as a group every day. Radi often struggles to decode multisyllabic words and has difficulty making meaning from the texts he encounters in class. Despite these difficulties, Radi is determined to become a better reader and is eager to learn new strategies that will help him to achieve this goal. For example, at his teacher’s suggestion, he often previews texts to clarify unknown or difficult words. He also follows along carefully when his teacher or peers read aloud from their group reading texts, and he is eager to answer questions and engage in conversations about these texts to comprehend them better. In addition, Radi sometimes chooses to reread a group reading text as part of the independent reading requirement, a practice that his teacher allows and even encourages. Indeed, his teacher finds that Radi comprehends texts much better when he has the opportunity to revisit them multiple times.

Radi struggles with decoding and comprehending tasks he encounters as part of his daily reading, but he goes out of his way to employ strategies like the ones described above to mitigate these difficulties. Therefore, although Radi is an example of a student who might benefit from reading instruction with a phonological focus, exclusively emphasizing this aspect of the reading process at the expense of other reading processes and activities might very well have deprived him of the engaging, strategy-driven activities in which he participated as a part of his reading intervention class. For Radi, opportunities to engage in repeated readings and multiple encounters with texts played a key role in his development as a reader. Therefore, code-based instruction that was decontextualized from the high-interest, meaning-oriented activities offered through his reading intervention class would not have supported him as thoroughly as a reader during his ninth-grade year.
Emphasis on Reading Comprehension Strategies

The second approach we highlight focuses on students’ comprehension difficulties by providing them with reading strategies that will assist them as they make sense of text.

Theory of Action

The theory of action that underlies this approach is that some students have trouble with comprehension because they have difficulty connecting what they read with what they already know. This theory is consistent with Kintsch’s (1998) construction-integration model of text comprehension. According to this model, at the same time that readers are making sense of the text itself, by constructing what Kintsch calls the “textbase,” they are also—and simultaneously—integrating that information with the interests, purposes, and prior knowledge and experiences they bring to the reading task to form the “situation model.” If the textbase indicates what the text “says,” then the situation model indicates what it “means.” It follows that students who have trouble making these kinds of connections between a text and their existing knowledge would benefit from an approach that provides them with explicit instruction in how to construct meaning and monitor their comprehension, just as expert readers do with such ease and automaticity.

Program Snapshots: Comprehension-Oriented Approaches

Two approaches that are consistent with this theory of action are Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) and Reading Apprenticeship (WestEd, 2013). In Reciprocal Teaching, teachers and students work together to develop a set of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring strategies—questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting—that they can then apply to all kinds of texts to comprehend them better.

Reading Apprenticeship builds on these strategies—and adds others such as note taking, paraphrasing, and text mapping—in an effort to demystify reading by apprenticing students to the unique discourses (e.g., historical, scientific, mathematical, literary) that they will encounter as they read and compose texts in their various academic disciplines. The goal is for students to learn and use reading comprehension strategies in collaboration with their teachers and peers as they become expert readers of discipline-specific texts.

Student Profile: Nathan

Nathan is a 15-year-old ninth grader who is enrolled in the same reading intervention class as Radi. Nathan’s family is from Nepal, and his first language is Nepalese. Nathan’s teachers report that he is a serious and diligent student; however, at the same time that he excels in his reading intervention class, Nathan is in danger of failing biology.

Nathan enjoys the books he reads in his reading intervention class and demonstrates that he comprehends these high-interest texts when called on by his teacher to answer questions in this context. However, Nathan rarely contributes to discussions or asks questions in any of his other classes. This is particularly evident in his biology class, where he rarely says a word despite frequent confusion about the scientific content and related classroom activities. Indeed, Nathan confesses during an interview that he does not understand most of the long words he comes across in his biology textbook and corresponding labs and worksheets and that he has a hard time understanding and remembering what he reads for biology class.

Nathan demonstrated that he is a capable reader and student in his reading intervention class, where he read a range of literary and other high-interest texts. In contrast, he struggled to make sense of the reading that was required of him in his biology class, which ultimately led to a failing science grade at the
end of his ninth-grade year. Nathan is an example of a student who might benefit from reading instruction that focuses on teaching discipline-specific reading comprehension strategies that encourage him to make connections between the text and his prior knowledge and experiences. If this type of targeted instruction were embedded into the structure of his content area classes, Nathan might have found greater success—and learned and retained more content—in his biology class. For Nathan, an emphasis on comprehension strategy instruction that was specific to and contextualized in the reading he encountered in biology (and, ideally, his other content area courses, as well) would likely have benefited him as a reader and a student during his ninth-grade year.

**Emphasis on the Process of Individualized Instruction**

The third approach we highlight focuses on the intervention process by attending to the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of students’ reading difficulties and the need for a flexible, tiered, and individualized instructional model that meets the needs of a variety of readers. Because this approach emphasizes the process as well as the content of the intervention, it has the potential to embed the two previous approaches in ways that meet the evolving and diverse needs of individual readers.

**Theory of Action**

The theory of action that underlies this approach is the principle that reading difficulties do not stem from one source for all students and that the very nature of an individual’s reading ability is variable and depends on a constellation of factors related to a specific reading task. This theory is consistent with Lipson and Wixson’s (1986) interactive model of reading disability. According to this model, reading ability (or disability) is dependent on interactions between multiple factors, including the text, the reader, and the context. In other words, a reader’s ability to construct meaning depends on the juxtaposition of many factors in a given situation, for a given reader, and with a given text. This means that all readers have the potential to be disabled in some reading scenarios (perhaps when the text is obscure or knowledge is weak or interest is low) and enabled in others (when motivation is high and knowledge is strong, for example). It follows that students who appear to struggle with reading would benefit from an approach that provides flexible and dynamic support for a range of readers in a range of contexts.

**Program Snapshot: A Process-Oriented Approach**

One approach that is consistent with this theory of action is the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning’s (2013) Strategic Instruction Model (SIM). The goal of SIM is to create independent and strategic learners and improve content literacy for students at a variety of reading levels by offering a multitiered instructional model. At the general classroom level, teachers across the disciplines teach content-specific reading and writing strategies and use Content Enhancement Routines, which are instructional strategies (e.g., course, unit, and lesson organizer routines; clarifying, framing, and survey routines) designed to help all students access the curriculum across disciplines. For students who might benefit from more targeted strategy instruction, SIM includes a Learning Strategies Curriculum comprised of a series of strategies (e.g., prediction, vocabulary, bridging, and summarization strategies) to which some students are introduced as part of a separate reading intervention class.

The teacher routines and student strategies are part of a more comprehensive, schoolwide program called the Content Literacy Continuum, which consists of five levels of sequential support that begin in content area classrooms with enhanced content and embedded strategy instruction (Levels 1 and 2); moves to a separate small-group or classroom
setting for students who require additional, more intensive strategy instruction (Level 3); and ends with increasingly individualized and intensive basic skill instruction and therapeutic language intervention for students who require these levels of support (Levels 4 and 5). The five levels are sequenced in this way to provide all students with the individualized instruction most appropriate to their specific needs.

**Student Profile: Tiffany**

Tiffany is a 14-year-old ninth grader who is enrolled in a reading intervention class at a public high school different from the one that Radi and Nathan attended. Tiffany’s first language is English.

At the beginning of the year, Tiffany confessed that she loves to read but that she had almost failed English as an eighth grader, which is what she believes led to her placement in her school’s reading intervention class. In ninth grade, as part of a schoolwide effort to embed discipline-specific reading and writing strategies into the curriculum to facilitate students’ access to content area curricula, Tiffany’s English teacher consistently builds strategy instruction, modeling, and scaffolding into her instruction. At the same time, Tiffany receives additional strategy instruction in her reading intervention class. After an academically successful first few months of school, Tiffany and her teachers find that she no longer needs the extra support provided by the intervention class. With the full support of her English and reading teachers, Tiffany petitions to transfer out of the intervention class because that component of the schoolwide intervention sequence is no longer necessary for her.

Tiffany is an example of a student who might—and indeed did—benefit from a flexible and individualized approach to reading instruction across the content areas. Tiffany’s ninth-grade English and reading teachers provided her with the support she needed to excel in those subjects during her first year of high school. Moreover, the intervention process at her school was flexible enough to allow Tiffany to transfer out of the supplemental reading class when it proved no longer useful to her. For Tiffany, an emphasis on strategy instruction that was specific to and contextualized in the reading she encountered in English (as well as her other content area courses) benefitted her as a reader and a student during her ninth-grade year.

Tiffany’s experience contrasts with Nathan’s year-long struggle to access the biology curriculum at his school. It highlights the importance of attending to the process as well as the content of any reading intervention to ensure that students receive thoughtful support in appropriate contexts and for clearly articulated reasons.

**Key Questions for Teachers to Consider**

As we have attempted to demonstrate, every approach to reading instruction and intervention has an underlying theory of action that informs it and shapes its focus. For students whose reading difficulties are entirely consistent with a particular theory of action, an approach that corresponds with that theory has the potential to be effective; however, it is not simply a matter of picking a particular program or series of programs, nor is it a matter of drilling students on particular aspects of the reading process at the expense of others.

To increase the likelihood that our actions and interventions will be theoretically consistent with students’ actual reading difficulties, we highlight a series of questions that will help teachers and administrators as they consider how to best meet the needs of their students. A common thread that runs through these questions is the foundational understanding that teachers know more about their
**Individualized Instruction and Response to Intervention (RTI)**

The Content Literacy Continuum of which SIM is a part bears a striking resemblance to some of the recent RTI initiatives that have arisen in the wake of the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. In fact, Ehren, Deshler, and Graner (2010) argue that the Content Literacy Continuum is a useful and appropriate framework for implementing RTI in secondary schools. RTI is an alternative to the long-standing IQ-achievement discrepancy model of disability, which defines a reading disability as a discrepancy between a student’s actual reading performance and his or her reading potential, as determined by an IQ-based prediction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). In contrast, RTI defines reading disability as determined by a student’s response to ever-more-intense interventions.

In other words, RTI’s definition targets the instruction and adjusts it to meet the needs of the student. In addition, under this law, districts may spend up to 15% of their special education budgets on early intervention for children without IEPs. This means that intervention can occur much sooner than was possible under the IQ-achievement discrepancy model. In RTI, just as soon as evidence emerges that a student is not responding well to his or her classroom instruction, that student is eligible for additional resources and a more individualized instructional approach.

In its most basic form, RTI conceptualizes intervention in terms of three tiers, what Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton (2012) call primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. The first tier is the assumed-to-be-high-quality instruction that all students receive in their regular education classrooms. The second tier is a more tailored classroom or small-group intervention, and the third tier is an even more intensive and individualized intervention. In RTI, the instruction or intervention itself is the assessment because movement from one tier to the next is based on how well a student performs at a particular tier.

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students and their academic needs than anyone else and are, therefore, well positioned to make informed decisions about the instructional approaches that are most likely to succeed.

**In What Ways Do My Students Struggle With Reading?**

Although the three students profiled here—Radi, Nathan, and Tiffany—struggled with reading in different ways, their ninth-grade reading intervention classes were largely the same. For this reason, it is not at all certain that these intervention classes appropriately met their individual needs as readers. Therefore, rather than assuming that one approach will address the needs of all students, it is important that teachers recognize and take advantage of the many informal opportunities to learn about their students as individuals and the areas in which they would benefit from more targeted instruction.

For example, teachers who closely listen to and observe their students as they read and ask frequent questions about their students’ reading processes (e.g., What did you do when you first encountered this word/sentence/question/text?) gain important insights into their students’ individual strengths and weaknesses as readers. It is also important that course curricula are flexible enough to accommodate teachers’ professional judgments about the various needs of the diverse readers and learners in their classrooms.

**How Can I Best Assess My Students’ Reading Needs?**

Reading interventions are only as effective as the assessments used to identify and monitor students’ areas of reading difficulty, making sound assessment a critical first step in determining which instructional approach or approaches are best for individual students. The basic logic is that assessments be matched with purpose. Most assessments are neither good nor bad in general; their quality is related to how well they achieve a certain purpose.

For example, if you want to know what letter-sound correspondences a student knows, a phonics test of her knowledge of specific letter-sound correspondences makes sense. But, if you want to
know if she can use letter-sound knowledge to unlock unknown words, then you might have her read challenging passages to observe what she does when she comes across an unknown word. And, if you want to know if she can assemble all the skills she has honed and the strategies she has at her disposal to make sense of novel and challenging texts, then nothing short of a rigorous comprehension measure will do.

For measuring a student’s ability to orchestrate these components, we need assessments that help answer at least three questions related to the most crucial aspects of reading:

1. Does the student have the skills and strategies necessary to read complex texts?
2. Does she apply those skills and strategies to solve problems while reading?
3. Does she put all of the pieces together to make sense of texts?

Generally speaking, there are two types of assessments—specific skill assessments and global reading measures—and both have benefits as well as limitations. Specific skill assessments tell us whether students have learned what we taught them in that day’s lesson. However, if you teach and reteach to these assessments, students can become mired in the finite aspects of the reading process, such as decoding and fluency, at the expense of recognizing the larger goal of reading, which is to make meaning from text.

In contrast, global reading measures, such as performance assessments of reading, tell us whether readers can “put it all together” and turn print into meaning, or better yet, use the meaning they derive from a text or texts to engage in complex writing or problem-solving activities. However, these types of assessments may not give us a clue about the specific areas in which a student needs further instruction or where to target an intervention. For example, Radi, Nathan, and Tiffany received similar scores on the English Language Arts portion of the state standards test; however, as we have shown, their individual reading needs were very different.

Similarly, as Valencia and Buly’s (2004) study demonstrated, a single standardized reading test score tells us only that a particular student struggled with the testing task in some way. That score does not tell us with any specificity how to tailor instruction to best meet the needs of that student. Therefore, it is up to teachers to get to know the needs of their specific students through a combination of formal and informal reading assessments and close observation and questioning in the everyday contexts of their classrooms.

Does My Instructional Approach Match the Reading Profiles of My Students?

As we have demonstrated, different approaches to reading intervention have different theories of action, so it is important to consider these theories in the context of what teachers know about their students’ needs, both generally and specifically. It is not advisable to offer only a heavy dose of code-based instruction to a student who not only demonstrates decoding difficulties but also fails to monitor for comprehension. Similarly, it would be insufficient to offer only a set of meaning-based strategies to a student who struggles to comprehend and also guesses at the pronunciation of every other word.

Therefore, reading instruction should be based on a student’s full reading profile in the context of authentic reading tasks that demand the full range of skills and strategies that readers draw on to make sense of text. Most often, full and detailed reading profiles are developed through both formal and informal reading assessments and as well as observations drawn from everyday teaching and learning interactions.
What About Student Motivation, Engagement, and Autonomy?

It is essential that any approach to reading intervention consider the importance of student motivation and engagement, as well as the longer term outcomes of the intervention, which, ultimately, are to ensure that students become competent, confident, and independent readers of a variety of texts. When determining an approach for any student—and especially for an older reader—autonomy combined with a diversity of reading options is critical.

In Radi and Nathan’s reading intervention classroom, for example, their teacher encouraged independence and autonomy in their selection of independent reading books while at the same time introducing them to new topics and genres through weekly book talks and a selection of diverse and engaging group reading texts. Their teacher also provided them with a literacy-rich environment: The classroom walls were literally lined from floor to ceiling with high-interest texts in a multitude of genres.

How Do I Accommodate My Students’ Varied and Rapidly Changing Needs?

At the core of a differentiated approach to reading instruction is an understanding that readers’ needs change rapidly in response to different texts, tasks, and contexts. This means that instruction should look different for different readers, but it also should look different for the same reader under different reading conditions.

As we have noted throughout, teachers are the foremost experts on their own students and are uniquely positioned to individualize instruction. Reading programs like the ones profiled above provide valuable support for teachers, particularly in areas with which a classroom teacher might not be entirely familiar. However, they should not be implemented at the expense of a teacher’s own knowledge of his or her students, especially when that knowledge has been accumulated over time through interactions with students as they navigate the everyday texts of school.

This principle has institutional as well as pedagogical implications. At an institutional level, reading interventions must attend to the process of individualized instruction as well as to the content of the intervention. In other words, they must be flexible enough to accommodate students’ changing needs. For example, when it became clear that Tiffany’s reading intervention class was no longer meeting her needs as a reader, there were mechanisms in place that allowed her teacher to facilitate her transfer out of the class.

At a pedagogical level, teachers must have the flexibility within their own classrooms to differentiate instruction based on what they know about their students and their students’ needs. Tiffany’s ninth-grade English teacher, for example, provided Tiffany and her classmates with an array of content-specific reading strategies that they could draw on as necessary to make meaning from their English texts. By providing her students with the tools necessary to tackle difficult texts, the teacher’s instructional approach was flexible enough to accommodate the diverse and constantly evolving needs of her students.

Next Steps for Tomorrow’s Teachers

Our hope is that this analysis of the theories of action that underlie various approaches to reading diagnosis and intervention will prompt teachers and administrators alike to think long and hard about how we approach reading instruction and intervention in our schools. Students who get the very same score on a standardized reading test might be radically different in terms of the specific strengths, weaknesses, interests, and motivations they bring with them to the classroom. Therefore, it is essential that we view students as individuals and provide them with instruction that will help them to grow into well-rounded readers capable of tackling the complex texts that they will inevitably encounter in school and beyond. It is equally essential that this instruction is flexible enough to adapt to individual students, as their reading needs change over time and across contexts.

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Suggested Resources

For readers interested in learning more about the wide array of reading assessment and intervention options available, we recommend the following resources:


References


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