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# Jumpstarting First Grade: A Unique Literacy Program

BY NANCY L. DOUGLAS  
AND MARTHA ADLER

**I**n today's climate of budget cuts, supplemental literacy programs are becoming a luxury many schools and districts can no longer afford. Therefore, it has become crucial to design literacy programs that are both effective and cost efficient. A university in southwestern Michigan has been successful at sponsoring a summer program that helps children who are about to enter first grade take a giant step toward becoming readers and writers.

Reading provides the foundation upon which school-based learning depends. Children who exit the primary grades are at an increased risk of academic failure if they are unable to achieve grade level reading proficiency. The educational community has recognized this problem and multiple programs have been put in place in schools across this nation to help children learn to read with fluency and comprehension by the time that they exit the primary grades (Adler, 2002; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; US Department of Education, & Policy Studies Associates, 1998). Essential resources at the classroom level include organizational structures and personnel in place to allow for flexible and dynamic student grouping, ongoing student assessment for instruction, and safety nets for struggling readers. At the school level strong leadership, on-going professional development, knowledgeable teachers, a sense of shared goals and responsibilities for student achievement, and collaboration for instructional planning are needed as well (Adler, 2002). In spite of

everyone's best intentions, schools do not always have these resources available to reach all their students considered at risk for academic failure. Consequently, schools have come to rely more and more heavily on a volunteer force. Involving college students in tutoring young children is a long established practice. Many agree that tutoring can be effective (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982; Shanahan, 1998), particularly if tutors are well trained and provided with instructional support (Shanahan, 1998; Wasik, 1997). Tutoring programs that rely on college-age tutors have been shown to be successful in early reading interventions (Juel, 1991, 1994, 1996; Reisner, Petry, & Armitage, 1990; Shanahan, 1998; Wasik, 1998). Reisner and colleagues (1990) cite attributes such as clearly defined time commitments from tutors, a systematic screening of tutors, careful matching of tutors to children, thorough training and monitoring of tutors, and close relationships between sponsoring colleges and local school districts as being present in successful tutoring programs.

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## History of the program

The Early Literacy Program was initiated in the summer of 1987. The program was created to meet the needs of young children in local school districts. The main goals are to engage the children in enjoyable reading and writing experiences, provide support for parents to help their children grow in literacy, and provide books for the children to start a home library.

Funding has been provided by various organizations throughout the years. Among these have been The Detroit Free Press, The Detroit Red Wings, FM radio station WRIF, The Provosts' program for Outreach Projects, The School of Education, Bank One, and gifts from private donors and alumni. Due to the judicious use of college student volunteers and coordinators, the two-week program is able to serve approximately 30 youngsters for under \$2,500.

## Organization of the Program

### Selection of books

Essential to the program's success, is the choice of books. Selected books must have a predictable story line, repetitive language, visual reinforcement of key events and, perhaps most importantly, they should be enjoyable to children. Favorites are the little books by Joy Cowley, such as *Mrs. Wishy Washy* (1998) and *Dishy Washy* (1998). One teacher notes that her second-grade students who participated in the program still run to these books during self-selected reading time. Apparently, the books become old favorites.

### Identification of students

To serve the greatest need, the university targets underachieving schools in the surrounding area. Over the years, various schools have participated, mostly in low-income areas. Many of these schools are diverse in ethnicity, including African American, Arab American, and European American students. Within each school, kindergarten teachers identify children who would benefit from the program. Children who struggle with letter identification and listening comprehension are often targeted; however, all children are welcomed, and

parents or guardians make the ultimate decision to allow a child to participate.

### Duties of coordinators

Each participating school provides two coordinators, who are each given a stipend of \$800. Coordinators are former students of the university who are employed as teachers in the school in which the program will be held. Training of the coordinators is done by university faculty and it typically takes two days. Before the program begins, the coordinators send letters to the parents or guardians of the targeted children, arrange physical space within the school, order books and materials, prepare ID cards for children and guardians, and arrange attendance-keeping procedures.

While the program is under way, coordinators concurrently teach and oversee the instruction provided by the tutors. (The section below titled "A typical session" describes the instructional techniques employed.)

On the last day of the program coordinators host a luncheon for the volunteers and have parents complete an evaluation form (see Figure 1). In addition, children and tutors receive a certificate acknowledg-

Figure 1. EARLY LITERACY PROGRAM PARENT SURVEY

1. My child is a (circle one)	Girl	Boy
2. How many sessions did your child attend? (Circle one)		
1 day	2 days	3 days
4 days	5 days	6 days
3. Did your child read the books again at home? (Circle one)		
Yes, all of them	Some of them	None
4. Did you or someone at home play the word card games with your child? (Circle one)		
Yes—many times	Some of the time	Never
5. Did your child like the books? (Circle one)		
Very much	Somewhat	No
6. Did your child enjoy coming to reading club? (Circle one)		
Yes, all the time	Most of the time	Never
7. Was your child able to read his personal journal after bringing it home? (Circle one)		
Yes, all of it	Some of it	None of it
8. Would you send your child again? (Circle one)		
Yes	No	
9. How many parent sessions did you attend? (Circle one)		
6	5	4
3	2	1
none		
10. Were the sessions helpful and informative? (Circle one)		
Yes	Somewhat	No
11. Do you have any suggestions for the future for us?		

ing their participation. Finally, the coordinators prepare a final report about the program, which may include number of students; information regarding the children's gender, ethnicity and attendance; parent comments, and names of tutors.

### Volunteers

At the end of the university's winter semester, volunteers are recruited from undergraduate education majors who wish to gain experience working with young children. Both elementary and secondary majors are invited to participate. Because the program runs from about 8 to 11 a.m. for a duration of two weeks (usually in early August), it is possible for many busy college students to fit the program into their schedules. As an added incentive, college students may reduce 10 hours from the field experience requirement in some of their methods courses. To date, there has never been a shortage of volunteers; in fact some students volunteer more than once because they enjoy and learn from the experience.

### Pedagogy

The tutoring protocol and training sessions reflect a balanced approach to reading instruction (Adams, 1990; Hiebert & Raphael, 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The program is built upon the premise that reading *is* comprehension, not sounding out words. It is designed to prepare children for the experience of reading and writing. The core of instruction is to get the children to interact with the story.

The program runs for two weeks from 8 to 11 a.m. each day. Efficient use of time is accomplished by preparing the tutors to ask questions that require critical thinking about a new story each day. This is accomplished during the preparation hour before the children arrive. Because the instructional routine is the same each day, and the adult-to-student ratio is usually one-to-four, there is a high comfort level for both the tutors and the children.

### A typical session

A typical session involves the following:

### Read Aloud

1. The book is positioned so that all the children can follow along and enjoy the illustrations.
2. Children are made aware of the book's parts, such as cover, title, author, illustrator, title page, and beginning page.
3. The story is read aloud by the adult, at a comfortable pace and with enthusiasm. As children listen, they are asked to talk about the story at certain predetermined points.
4. The questions are designed to encourage hypothesizing, predicting, justifying answers, identifying characters' motives, evaluating motives or intent, creating alternative solutions to problems or endings of stories, labeling feelings of characters, and relating the story to their own lives. Questions such as, "What do you think will happen next?" "Why did this happen?" "What could have been done differently?" "Why was this the right (or wrong) thing to do?" are typical.
5. Adults occasionally point to an illustration to help children focus on something that might help them remember the story.

The following are questions and prompts used to engage the children in the book *Dishy Washy*:

- Cover: Focus on words "Dishy Washy" – What do you think this story will be about?
- p. 3 What will Mrs. Wishy-Washy wash next?
- p. 5 What do you think the cat will do?
- p. 7 What happened to the cat? Can you tell how the cat feels?
- p. 11 What will come down next?
- p. 13 How does everyone feel? What will they do?
- p. 16 Encourage the children to read the last page with you.

### Choral Reading

After the initial reading, children are given their own individual copy of the book, which is reread in choral fashion with the tutor's support. Children are directed to point to each word as it is read. Repeated words such as "Wishy Washy" are often recognized without support. Phonemic awareness is encouraged by asking children to recognize sounds that are repeated



I stay healthy by taking  
showers. Eating Doing cartwheels.  
Eating Vegetables. Firt.  
I stay healthy  
by taking showers,  
doing cartwheels, eating vegetables, eating fruit.

### 1st Journal Entry

in different words. If the children remain engaged, the story might be read again with less support from the tutor.

*Reader Response Journals* Next, the children are given journals and crayons and asked to make a drawing of something from the story in their journals. The tutor labels the objects in the drawing as the child names them. The tutor names the letters as he or she writes. Then, the child dictates a sentence about the drawing to the tutor. Finally, the child reads what he or she has dictated and with assistance, names the letters.

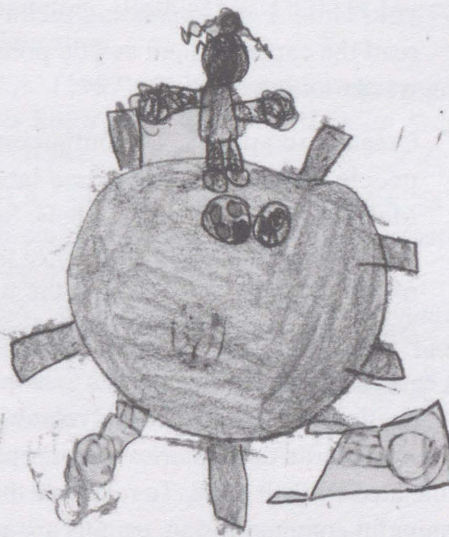
Finally, tutors ask the children to select two words from their journal. These may be their favorite words or words in which they can name all the letters. These are written on index cards and sent home with suggestions on how to use them. Whole word recognition and phonemic awareness are the goals.

### Parent involvement

Parent involvement is encouraged in several ways. Since the child gets to bring home and keep a new book each day, it is easy for parents and children

to engage in meaningful literacy activities at home. On-site training sessions and handouts are provided, giving parents tips on how to read with their children. Parents are urged to make all of the activities enjoyable. Suggestions include the following: "Ask your child to tell about the story he or she read that morning by describing what is happening in the pictures. Read the story to your child and ask your child to join in whenever he or she can. Have your child turn the pages. Do not force the reading of words but praise your child whenever he or she does identify words or joins you in reading. Encourage your child to show the book to others and tell about the pictures. Encourage others to read the story to your child."

Parents are also asked to work with the words selected by the child. Suggestions include making another set of the words on index cards, scramble the cards, and help the child match the two cards that are alike, say the word (with assistance) and say the individual letters in the word.



I am hungry for  
Peanut butter Apples.  
And Strawberries.

I am hungry for peanut butter apples and strawberries.

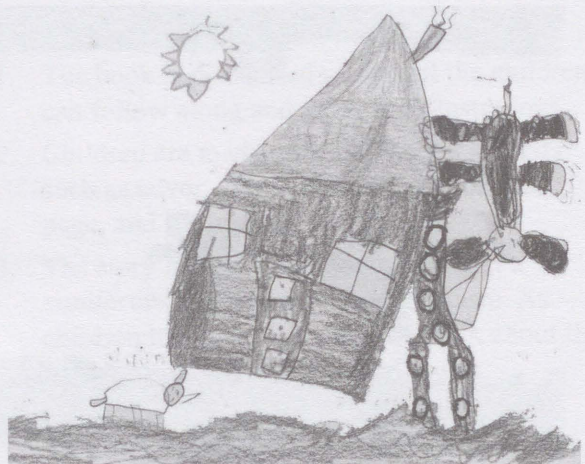
### 2nd Journal Entry

To further develop word recognition, parents are encouraged to engage their children to “play with” words at home. Some suggestions are:

- Label your child’s pictures. For example, if your child draw a picture of a tree, write, “This is a tree.”
- Make word cards for things around the house (such as door, chair, refrigerator) and attach them to the correct objects. Ask your child to read the cards.
- Detach the word cards from the objects. Have your child place the cards on the correct objects.
- Have your child watch when you make a shopping list or “to do” list. Say the words out loud and carefully print each letter. When shopping, let your child help you find items. Read the labels and point to the words.
- Look at magazines and newspapers with your child. Find interesting pictures and read the caption aloud as you point to the words
- Create a scrapbook. Cut out pictures of people, things, and places and label them. Make word cards for the labels. Scramble the word cards. Have your child pick one, match it to the label and say the word. Name the letters in the word.

Writing is encouraged by asking parents to help their child write greeting cards to friends and relatives and by having parents write down stories or descriptions of events as dictated by their child. To reinforce that writing is meaningful communication, parents are advised to write little notes to their children and put them where they can be found, such as on a pillow or in a lunchbox. When the child discovers the note and brings it to his or her parent, the parent can read it with expression.

Parents are advised to extend the home library and to help their child find books in the library or bookstore. Tips on choosing appropriate books for children involve the “rule of thumb.” The child should choose



A cat + Andele + And  
Giraf. W. uode Stae.

A cat, an elephant and giraffe  
would stay over.

### 3rd Journal Entry

a middle page that contains a lot of words; if the child comes to an unknown word, he or she should put down a thumb, if another word is unknown, put down a finger. If the child “runs out” of fingers, the book is probably too hard.

Many parents want to continue reading other books with their children. Parents are urged to say unknown words rather than asking the child to sound them out. This ensures that comprehension is not interrupted and reinforces that reading is a meaning-making activity. To start to build independence, parents are encouraged to have the child use picture cues to figure out the word or to skip the word, read the rest of the sentence and see what makes sense. Children will be taught decoding strategies later in their literacy development.

### Conclusion

First-grade teachers have remarked that students who attended the university’s early literacy program, read for meaning and enjoyment. Over the years, parents, tutors, and children have been enthusiastic about the program. Although the program runs for a short time, the efficient use of tutors, parental support, and sound pedagogical principles maximizes the benefits.

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