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# Success for an At-Risk Child Without a Traditional Curriculum



ARTICLE BY JULIE FREDRICK

I attend many meetings, go to numerous conferences, read professional publications and talk for endless hours with teachers. I have invested hours and hours of time over many years seeking knowledge. I have heard numerous leaders in the field of language arts speak on areas of their expertise and I have also read their work. I guess you can say I am obsessed with learning and I love teaching.

My family doesn't understand. Teachers do. During the past three years I have been reading, talking, sharing and discovering ways to meet the needs of Waterford's primary students who are not yet on grade level with a group of teachers who like me are seeking ways to improve. So when fall came this past year, I was ready to put everything into practice. Therefore, I was delighted when invited to work in the Title I program where I could apply what I had learned with a large number of students, as opposed to addressing the needs of a few at risk students who would have been included in my primary grade classroom.

One group I worked with was composed of third grade boys who all were considerably behind in reading and were continually apologizing for their predicament. Jason had been retained the previous year so was repeating third grade and announced with puzzlement one day, "I used to be too young for third grade last year and now I think I'm too old for third grade this year!" When I was trying to assess David's instructional level in the fall, he exclaimed when spying a copy of *Henry and Mudge* by Cynthia Rylant, "Oh no, not a chapter book!" Sometimes Wade and James just explained to me that they were not very good at reading. All had given up on reading.

Tony was one of this group. He was a very quiet child who usually just sat without interacting with the other boys. He frequently would not answer my questions and never would he engage in informal conversations. He appeared to be a selective mute. One day while assessing his reading, I discovered that when he was sitting and appeared to be staring he was really thinking; his eyes rapidly moved about.

As long as I could detect rapid eye movement, I would sit quietly and wait, sometimes as long as two entire minutes. Then he would respond to questions in a quiet little voice or simply read the unknown word aloud. I would intervene only when I had noticed the eyes were still. What a revelation! He needed exceptionally long wait time! I was able to discover that his reading performance was like a beginning first grader; he took a *very* long time to process information and his past reading assessment records did not show progress over an entire year. His writing too, was like that of a first grader. He lacked the ability to appropriately represent the sounds in the words he wished to express. The entire reading/writing process was very laborious for him.

After gathering all this information about Tony and the other boys, I knew they needed to be immersed in a balanced quality literacy program with a heavy focus on the MELAF Content Standards: "Meaning and Communication" and "Skills and Processes". These two standards involve constructing knowledge about reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing in various contexts while utilizing grammar, punctuation, spelling, phonics, language structure and meaning. These elements would provide the core of the



boys' learning program. The time constraints of the Title I program prohibited addressing the other Content Standards in depth. In addition, lessons needed to be in the zone of proximal development for each student, which falls in between what the student can do independently and what he can do with teacher guidance. This presented a problem because Tony was functioning considerably below the others who were clustered fairly well together. Surely, he would be uncomfortable grouped with beginning first graders who shared the same zone, but I was sure he could not handle the reading materials appropriate for the other third graders. Since his interest level was closer to the third grade group than first grade, I arranged to work with Tony one-on-one, two days a week and tried to support him enough to hold his own with the third grade group two different times a week. In this way I felt I was making an attempt to address the needs of Tony the person and not just Tony the reader.

I began one-on-one instruction with Tony using Reading Recovery level four reading materials such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* by Bill Martin, Jr., to build his confidence and then on to levels five and six which were appropriate for his level. Here was something missed in the past. He had been failing with text that was age appropriate with the expectation that if he learned all the unknown words he would succeed. His only observable strategy was "sounding out" which frequently failed because he focused only on beginning sounds and did not attend to syntax or semantics. So he miscalled words ignoring language structure and meaning, but there would be some phonemic resemblance. By backing Tony down to text levels matching his instructional level, he could address the challenges of solving unknown vocabulary because the text and illustrations provided the necessary support to obtain meaning. Then he began learning to employ other strategies such as read on, reread, using picture clues, looking at whole words and striving for meaning, rather than just focusing on initial consonants. My goal for Tony was "Integrate The Three Cueing Systems" which means he would consistently utilize

semantics, syntax and graphophonics when reading. Fluent readers use all three systems. Tony's strength was a beginning level of phonemic awareness.

At the same time Tony was also working with the small group of third graders who were functioning at a higher level but who shared some of the same needs. I frequently conducted guided reading lessons by beginning with a discussion of a high-interest appropriately leveled text, and then followed with the expectation that each could read the text independently utilizing the supports I gave in the discussion. While group members read independently, Tony and I usually chorally read the text quietly off to the side. Then Tony was ready to participate in group discussions and written literature responses. At first and for a long time, Tony chose to listen but did not share his own thoughts and ideas. Slowly over time, he reached the point of responding to direct questions, but did not spontaneously enter in to discussions.

In addition, I read aloud books so the boys could enjoy quality literature and I could model fluent reading. Plus we all participated in shared reading lessons which involved choral reading of texts in order to facilitate fluency development. This pulled all of them along — particularly Tony. We kept logs of words containing short vowels and did word block activities such as Word Wall and Making Words, which were developed by Patricia Cunningham and facilitate the development of spelling and phonics. I even introduced Elkonin Boxes, described in *Linking* by Stephanie Brinkerhoff, which is a strategy for teaching phonemic awareness to first graders. This proved very effective in this case to teach consonant blends. They all were misreading "cra" as "car".

As time went on, we tackled informational text; a designated need for our district based on MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) scores and certainly a need for the group. We began studying an informational book, *A First Look At Whales* by Millicent E. Selsam and Joyce Hunt, using Reciprocal Teaching, developed by Annemarie Palinczar and Ann Brown, which is composed of four strategies: prediction, clarification, generation



of questions and summarization. As the boys read the book page by page they participated in rich discussions formatted by the four strategies. First they predicted what the page would be about, next they read the page independently to confirm their predictions and then chorally to support Tony. After having read the page of text, we discussed the "tricky parts" to clarify unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar ideas. The boys then generated questions to be answered by the group. These questions could be any of the three MEAP types: answer right there, think and search, and author and me. Finally the group summarized what was read. Reciprocal Teaching proved to be an effective strategy to improve their comprehension. All of the boys enjoyed leading discussions with my prompts; even Tony took a turn.

After reading one text about whales, the boys requested to read more about the topic and contributed materials from home. They initiated a mini-inquiry project and discovered that people actually killed whales. They were well informed about the issue of endangered species and were indignant when reading about whaling. "Whales have a right to live just like we do," exclaimed James. Information in the back of *The Blue Whale* by Melissa Kim prompted the boys to write letters to various embassies protesting the killing of whales. In my opinion, Tony's letter turned out to be the strongest. The boys also created posters presenting facts and information about whales to share their learnings with schoolmates. They then presented their posters and read their letters at a school-wide assembly. Tony, who frequently chose not to speak in the fall, read his letter into a microphone in front of 350 or so students and adults. He brought tears to my eyes.

Royal Norwegian Embassy  
2720 34th street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20008

Dear Ambassador,

Please stop killing whales with clubs because it is cruel. They are pretty and intelligent and nice. It will be sad if there are no more whales. I am studying whales in school and I would be sad if you kept killing whales.

Sincerely,

Following our whale project, I gave the boys a choice of texts for another Reciprocal Teaching activity. They chose *The Panda* by Brian and Jillian Cutting. This time I added recording on "key fact" pages to the process, after the oral summarization step. It proved to be very effective. When key fact pages were compiled for the entire book, the boys used them as resources to write summaries. Each of the boys chose two pages for which to be responsible, with the intent of creating a book to read to first graders. Voice was a major hurdle here because initially they copied text from the book. I constantly reminded them to write what they themselves would say. Finally, I resorted to saying "talk it to me" and then I helped them remember what they said while they wrote. We even tackled the concept of topic sentences. The end result was a nicely written summary which they illustrated and shared with their own classes and first graders.

Pandas	
0	a Nellie's
Enemies	
1.	(afraid) (wild) Pandas are afraid of big old dogs
2.	(afraid) (leopards) Pandas are afraid of leopards
3.	(hunting) People are afraid of pandas

Tony was an integral part of the group at this point in time. He needed less support and participated in the Reciprocal Teaching process with prompts from me and members of the group. He wrote key facts, "talked" and wrote his summaries and illustrated his own written text. He read his pages of the group produced book to numerous classrooms and appeared to gain confidence with every reading.

As the group reflected back on their progress over this past year, I was overjoyed to read Tony's remarks, "I know how to read. When I am stuck I skip and go on. I take out



part of the word. I sound the word out. I feel better since I can read better. I know more words. Talking about tricky stuff helps me." Although he is not quite where we want him to be, he has come a long way. He sees himself as a reader and shares his thoughts when asked. I desperately do not want him to lose these gains because I really care about him.

I KNOW how to read  
 Whaniamsta Kiska Dand  
 goon, I te kout Pat of  
 the wad, I can the  
 wad out.  
 I fel Badter Sa KSI can  
 read Badter  
 I know more words.  
 taking about the sta  
 haps me

Now it is summer. I am still working with Tony. He is reading level nineteen books such as *Frog and Toad* by Arnold Lobel which is just about where second graders should be in January. Once a week I gather a selection of books appropriate for his level and go to his house or his mother brings him to mine. He reads to me, I read to him and sometimes we chorally read together. Then he and members of his family read together daily, using the books I gathered and favorites from their family library. This is going so well Tony wrote me this thank you note.

Dear Mrs  
 Fredricks, Thank you very  
 much for taking the  
 time to help me with  
 my reading

I believe with all my heart that Tony's gains are the direct result of teaching that reflected his needs, not the needs of the collective whole. The traditional curriculum of the past failed him. It assumed that Tony and all others were ready for page 81 on Wednesday because page 80 was completed on Tuesday. I know this way of thinking is flawed and through my numerous hours of reading, talking and reflecting about teaching with others who feel the same, I found a way to reach Tony. I am still obsessed. There is so much to learn. My family doesn't understand. Teachers do.

Julie Fredrick is currently teaching first grade at Riverside Elementary in the Waterford Schools and was a reading specialist in the Title I Program when working with Tony.

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