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Rutgers Reading Club: An After School Program to Motivate and Enhance Literacy for Struggling Readers

by Lesley Mandel Morrow, Susan M. Dougherty, Kenneth Kunz and Maureen Hall



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We know that children who struggle with the beginning stages of reading often continue to find reading difficult throughout their school years and beyond (Stanovich, 1986). Children struggle to learn to read for a range of reasons. Vision, hearing, or language processing challenges can contribute to difficulties learning to read. Lack of experience with books, limited background knowledge, lack of interest, limited access to literacy materials, frequent moving in the early years, and the effects of trauma, hunger, or lack of safety may all contribute to reading difficulties. When children struggle with learning tasks they will often withdraw, lack self-esteem, and become anxious and passive. We have learned that these children benefit from additional instructional time, particularly when the instruction is more explicit and intense (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998).

One approach to working with children who struggle to learn to read has been to create university-based reading clinics. Traditionally, this model of intervention has meant that parents brought their children to the university campus for reading instruction; however, this arrangement creates new challenges and barriers for some, including transportation, childcare, and financial

issues. With this in mind, we designed a program that incorporated many of the qualities of successful university-based reading clinics but that was housed within an elementary school. We found a range of advantages for moving the clinic to the school, including greater access for all children, more time for teaching, and greater congruence between the tutoring and the school curriculum.

Children enrolled in the Rutgers Reading Club at their elementary school met in small groups with experienced teachers after school several times a week to improve their literacy skills and build their sense of self-efficacy for literacy learning. The Reading Club sessions incorporated opportunities to socialize, instruction tailored to specific learning needs, and relationship building. Teachers were charged with ensuring that each child experienced success, tackled reasonable challenges, was given some choice, and was provided with lots of positive reinforcement.

Project Description

The goal of this project was to establish a university literacy clinic in a public-school district. Housing

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reading clinics in universities can present obstacles to children—the universities are often hard to get to, clinics often charge a fee, and families need to arrange transportation for their children. Those children who most need tutoring often do not have the resources to participate. Tutoring after school at the school site provided children with a familiar environment and eliminated the need for transportation to the university. In order to pay tutors and procure materials, university clinics often must charge fees. Using the school setting allowed us to tap into school funding for afterschool programs and to use teaching materials already available in classrooms. Because the program was held immediately after school, children did not miss class time for this additional instruction. The Reading Club was a new approach to providing support for children in the school. While the district did have an afterschool program that targeted low achieving students, it was designed as a “test prep” and homework help program. In contrast, the Reading Club tutoring was organized in a way that targeted individual literacy learning needs, using authentic reading materials and engaging children in authentic writing tasks, often based on a theme of interest to them. They worked in very small groups for instruction with experienced teachers. The teachers offered lots of positive reinforcement and focused on building self-efficacy while addressing learning needs (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007).

The program took place in a K-4 elementary school serving primarily low-middle working class families. The children invited to attend the Reading Club were reading at least one grade below grade level expectations but were not receiving special education services. Twenty children were selected: four children each from first, second, and third grades, and eight in fourth grade. Teachers within the school were invited to apply as tutors, allowing us to select those teachers with the most expertise in teaching young readers and writers. We also selected a site coordinator to take care of organizational tasks such as providing the snacks and taking attendance. Before the program began, tutors attended a training session during which we introduced the structure of the tutoring sessions, provided and

discussed a range of assessment tools, and modeled the use of teaching tools and strategies. Each tutor received a tool kit that included some assessment and teaching materials. We discussed building self-efficacy and confidence alongside instruction aimed at increasing reading achievement. We expressed our hope that the tutors would build a respectful, caring relationship with each child. The tutor was to aim to become someone the child could count on and feel safe and secure with (Guthrie, 2004).

Procedures. The tutoring took place after school twice a week for one hour for 12 weeks. In the 15 minutes between the end of the school day and the tutoring sessions, the Reading Club students met as a whole group and had a snack. We found that this time, brief as it was, offered students a chance to relax and socialize and contributed to a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

After the whole group meeting, the children moved into small groups of three with their tutors. These groups were established based on reading and grade levels and remained consistent throughout the 12 weeks. Tutoring sessions included instruction aimed at building each child’s word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, and writing abilities. In order to build motivation and to provide a vehicle for relationship building, the tutors also found time to read aloud a book selected by the children; typically, this was a book beyond their current reading level. The tutors worked with the children to select a theme that was used to guide the selection of texts and to frame writing tasks.

Assessment. Prior to tutoring the children were assessed using a running record to determine each child’s reading level and his/her comprehension achievement, a high-frequency word test, and an informal phonics survey. These assessments were administered again in the middle and at the end of the 12-week session. The data was used to tailor instruction for each child and to determine growth (see Table 1). Tutors also kept reflective journals about the students to track qualitative changes. We also solicited feedback from the teachers, children, administrators, and tutors about the program.

Table 1 - Average Assessment Results for All Participating Children Across the 12-Week Program

	January	February	March
High-Frequency Words	128	171	255
Guided Reading Level	E	H	J
Informal Phonics Survey Score	42/74	63/74	68/74

Many children made significant gains in their scores on these assessments by the end of the 12 weeks. Some students were now scoring within grade level expectations and, therefore, did not continue in the next 12-week session. This allowed us to invite new students who teachers believed would benefit from the program. Some of the original cohort of students were invited to continue to participate in the Reading Club for an additional 12 weeks with the goal of furthering the growth demonstrated in the first session. We also identified a few students who were not making much progress and these students were referred for evaluation for special education services.

Tutors and classroom teachers reported that the children improved more than they could have without the tutoring. Classroom teachers and tutors reported a noticeable growth in confidence and a sense of self-efficacy among the children attending the Reading Club. Teachers commented that the children were acting more like successful students, completing homework and engaging in reading and writing more readily. The tutors were also able to build relationships with families that allowed them to influence other aspects of school success as well. For example, one pair of siblings who had been chronically late to school and who rarely completed homework began to consistently arrive on time and proudly submit their homework with their classmates.

The children also provided evidence of the impact of the Reading Club. One child remarked, “I finally have someone who understands me when I read.” Another said, “The only person I can read with is my afterschool teacher. I’m too scared in my classroom.” Early in the

program we took photos of the children and their tutors and gave the children copies. One child told us that he put his teacher’s photo by his bed so he could look at her all the time. A number of children brought small items such as pieces of candy to their tutors each time they met. One child said to his tutor, “You are like family; you have to come to family parties, like Thanksgiving and Christmas.” Teachers and children exchanged email addresses when the tutoring ended so they could keep in touch.

Anecdotes provided by other members of the school community also demonstrate its success. One Mom told us that her child was asking for books to read and never had before. Children who were not in the reading club asked to join since those who participated talked about it in a positive manner.

As we reflected on the Reading Club and the impact that it had on children, we identified a number of factors that we believe contributed to its success. These factors can be used to guide the development and improvement of similar reading clinic initiatives in other communities:

- Experienced teachers provided individualized, targeted instruction.
- Teachers planned activities aimed at engagement.
- There was time for socializing and snacking.
- A strong effort was made to build relationships between the teacher and student.
- Teachers prepared activities for which children could experience some success but also offered some challenge.
- Teachers differentiated instruction to meet individual needs.

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- The program provided the children with instruction that added to the reading instruction provided during the school day.
- Children had time to practice what they learned.
- Themes were selected to create a relevant and purpose for reading and writing.

The Reading Club has continued on in the school where we first launched it. The school staff has taken on the program as we have moved on to new districts to introduce the program. The results in the new sites have been similar, with children building self-esteem and literacy skills, and the schools continuing the program after we leave. We believe this model could be used in a similar manner to support the development and spread of sustainable community literacy initiatives through school partnerships with universities and/or other outside organizations in Michigan and beyond.

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Author Biographies

Lesley Mandel Morrow is a distinguished professor at Rutgers the State University of NJ where she is Director of the Center for Literacy Development. Dr. Morrow was president of IRA (ILA) and President of the Reading Hall of Fame. She has received the Literacy Research Association's Ocar Causey Award the ILAs William S. Gray award for outstanding research that has changed the field of literacy. Dr. Morrow has 300 publications in the form of books, articles and book chapter.
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