

Literacy Stars in the Making: Reading & Writing Fluency Idol

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Literacy Stars in the Making: Reading & Writing Fluency Idol

Fluency (still) Matters

Despite controversies in the field of literacy education today, there is little doubt that fluency matters. In fact, fluency remains an essential bridging process between word recognition and language comprehension (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Accurate word reading, reading at an appropriate rate, and reading with prosody and expression are all important aspects of reading that support a reader's comprehension of text. Teachers use a wide range of fluency-building strategies in elementary schools to support children's fluency development, including repeated readings, readers' theater, timed reading, and fluency idol (Calo, Woolard-Ferguson, & Koitz, 2013; Rasinski et al., 2009; Rasinski, 2014).

Putting the Authenticity in Fluency

With the push in many classrooms to increase the amount of decodable text in classrooms, it remains important that students across the K-5 spectrum receive a rich diet of other authentic literary forms as well. One powerful, yet sometimes neglected, literary form that can develop students' phonological awareness, decoding, word learning, and fluency is poetry (Nichols, Rasinski, Rupley, Kellogg, & Paige, 2018). Not only can the meaning of poetry be accessible to a wide range of learners, but this form of text also can be leveraged to engage and support even beginning readers. In fact, poetry engages English learners (Farzaneh & Farabod, 2020; Marzban & Davaji, 2015) and students who struggle with reading (Faver, 2008). As children listen to and play with language in poems, they attend to syllables, onsets/rimes, and even phonemes. As they read aloud accessible poetry and engage in repeated readings, they become motivated to read with prosody and expression. As Kurkjian et al. (2004) state, poetry is "a feast for the senses... Because poetry is so multisensory and evocative it often lingers with us, eliciting visual images, remembered lines, and powerful emotional responses. It can encourage a love of language in all of its forms" (p. 694).

Fluency--Not Just for Readers Anymore!

Clearly fluency is important to reading, but it also matters in writing. Some educators define *writing* fluency as writing with accuracy and speed, while others also bring in coherence and unity of ideas as well as details in sentences (Fearn & Farnan, 2001). Fluent writing helps elementary students not only form letters and words accurately and with little effort, but it helps them generate interesting even innovative ideas on paper to realize that their voices matter and that what they write

can be read with expression and enthusiasm. Using poems as mentor texts for writing opens possibilities that writers do not get with more structured forms of text. Writers develop their use of language and explore ways to convey messages using rhyme, rhythm, interesting word choices, and vivid phrases. Writers also capitalize on the social aspects of literacy as they share their poems with others.

Cue the Audience: It's Reading & Writing Fluency Idol

The goal of Reading & Writing Fluency Idol (R&W Fluency Idol) was to use poetry to engage children in authentic reading and writing to build fluency in both areas—reading *and* writing. We introduced R&W Fluency Idol in a summer reading clinic with 20 kindergarten-second grade and third-fifth grade students who struggled with reading during the school year, reading at least one grade level below their current grade. R&W Fluency Idol promoted positive experiences with reading and writing to supplement reading interventions. Students attended the reading clinic Monday-Thursday for a half day for six weeks. Students were grouped by grade level into two classrooms, and then placed in flexible small groups based on like needs. R&W Fluency Idol was a 10-minute daily intervention.

R&W Fluency Idol in the Primary Grades

R&W Fluency Idol in the primary grades included stand-alone poems, but also paragraphs from books that read like poetry. To build reading fluency, the process emphasized modeled read alouds, paired reading, choral reading, echo reading, and repeated readings. To build writing fluency, the procedure included using mentor texts, modeled writing, and process writing across writing traits.

When introducing a new poem, the teacher first read the poem aloud to the students, modeling accurate word reading, appropriate pacing, and reading with heightened expression. The poem was read chorally, with the teacher's voice taking the lead. This was followed by teacher-led echo reading. The first readings of the poem focused on foundational skills. The students also illustrated the poem and annotated the poem, focusing on rhyming words and the beat of each line. They practiced repeated reading of the poem on their own as well. At times, they used a plastic microphone to increase their engagement and to have fun with fluency.

Figure 1
Repeated Reading



Note: This child reads an excerpt from *I Saw an Ant on the Railroad Track* by Joshua Prince.

To explicitly make the reading-writing connection, the poem was then used as a mentor text. Together, the teacher and the students annotated the poem, noticing the rhyming words as well as the rhythm and flow of the poem.

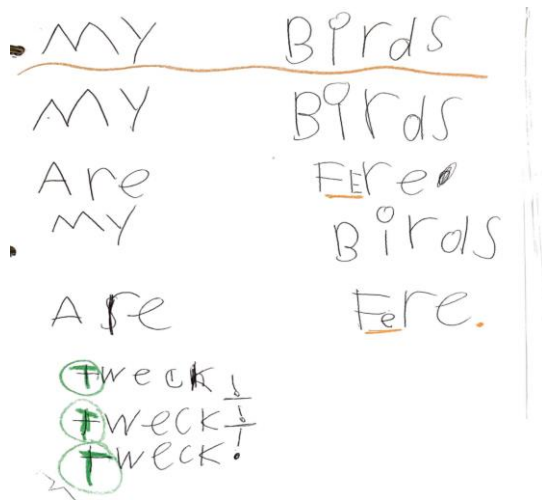
Figure 2
Student Annotations



Again, the teacher and the students used choral reading and echo reading to explore the author's techniques. The teacher used an I do-we do-you do sequence to scaffold the learning. As they moved into writing their own version of a poem using the mentor poem as a model, graphic organizers helped the students focus on rhyming words, sensory words, and the overall organization of their ideas in the poem.

Figure 3

Student Prewriting



Note. A student learns to use describing words and onomatopoeia.

As the students drafted their poems, the teacher provided specific, actionable feedback using a two-glow-and-one-grow model where they highlighted something specific the child was doing well and one idea for how to make the writing of the poem stronger. Students wrote poems in their poetry journals weekly to form a poetry collection that could be shared with families. They were also able to read their poems or the mentor poems to therapy dogs who visited the clinic every week.

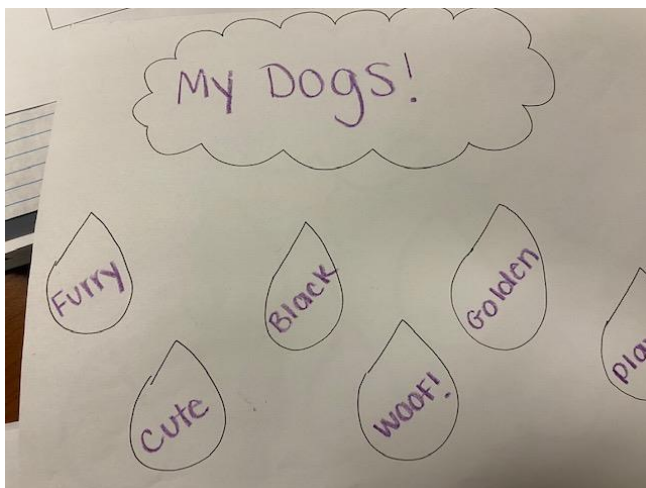
Differentiating for ELs and SWDs

The R&W Fluency Idol strategy is built on the premise that *every* child can be an effective reader and writer. Differentiation is key to this process. To differentiate for English learners, word banks, sentence starters, and graphic organizers were helpful. Scribing for students during brainstorming helped them focus their ideas.

Figure 4
Sensory Word Graphic Organizer



Figure 5
It's Raining Words!

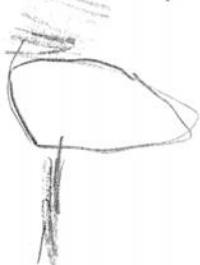


Note. The teacher captures the words a first grader says to describe the child's dogs.

Sentence frames were also a beneficial tool, particularly for children with disabilities. Also, tapping into students' interests was a powerful tool for differentiation. Figure 6 includes an example of a written text by Riley (pseudonym), a young boy with Down Syndrome.

Figure 6
Growing Enthusiastic Writers Over Time

The Jungle Boon
By: [Redacted]
Mo Wap lives in the jungle!
He swings in the tree!
He is really cool to me!



PUPPYS
PUPPS CUT PUPPS
an happy
alwas slepy



I Love
Slime
STRECHY. STRECHY
Oh wat FUN!
STRETCHY
Slime
FUN
gum!

coloring
coloring coloring
Oh So Fun!
Painting
PANTING
Pink PRRle an
Blue
evfeewerc!
a unecorn
unecorn Pateing
to!

R&W Fluency Idol in the Intermediate Grades

Mentor texts in the intermediate grades included mostly Shel Silverstein poems with obvious rhyme patterns. These small groups also used a gradual release of responsibility model with a structure such as this:

- *Monday*: I do & we do
- *Tuesday*: we do & you do
- *Wednesday*: we do & you do
- *Thursday*: you do

Students in these grades harnessed the power of choice. They were to follow the rhyming pattern of the model poem, but the topic was theirs to choose. They also then selected their own rhyming words, again following the pattern of the mentor texts (e.g., AABB, ABAB). Depending on the students' needs, the teacher made a variety of graphic organizers. Some students needed support with finding rhyming words. Others needed support on expanding the ideas in their poems. And still others needed support with choosing interesting vocabulary.

Figure 7

Following Rhyming Patterns of Mentor Poems

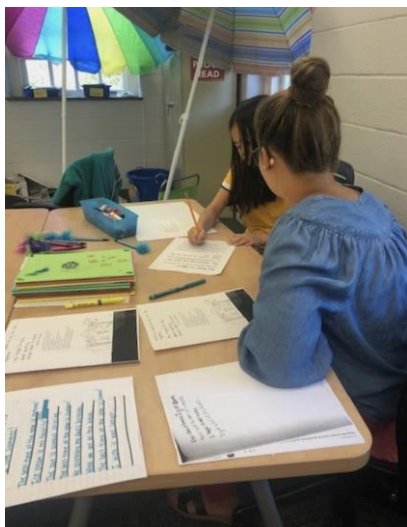
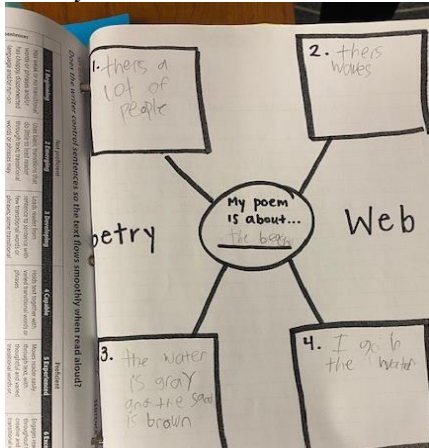


Figure 8
Poetry Idea Web



Bring on the Golden Tickets!

At the end of the six weeks, it was R&W Fluency Idol time. Students spent the last week polishing their favorite poem that they had written in their poetry journal. They practiced the poem at home, reading to family members. They also practiced reading their poems in the reading clinic, reading to the teacher, reading to themselves, and even reading to the therapy dogs.

Figure 9
Repeated Poetry Readings to Therapy Dogs



At the end of the week, they were ready for their R&W Fluency Idol performances. Colorful streamers hung in the classroom door and the excited audience anxiously awaited the first performers. Three “judges” lined the wall in desks while the audience sat on the floor. The first performer stood before the streamers, holding her poem. After she read her poem, the room exploded with clapping and giggles.

Figure 10
Reading & Writing Fluency Idol!



The subsequent poets all read their poems. As each child read their poem, the “judges” all shared something positive with the child and the audience. One “judge” focused on the child’s writing, highlighting something specific from the poem whether it be a memorable line, interesting word choice, visual image or some other aspect of writing. The second “judge” focused on the child’s reading of the poem, emphasizing an aspect of fluent reading whether it be pacing, expression, accuracy of the reading, tone, volume or some other positive aspect of the child’s oral reading. The other “judge” was the child’s teacher who beamed at each child and reinforced the child’s abilities as a reader and a writer. All of the children that day received a “Golden Ticket” celebrating their growth as fluent readers and writers.

When students were interviewed to get their thoughts and feelings about their experiences with Reading and Writing Fluency Idol, their comments reflected the skills they learned during the project including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, spelling and writing. One student shared that they learned “Rhyming words go on the end so you have to take two words that are the same [pattern].” Others talked about learning to write new poems. In looking at how their reading improved, a student talked about the scaffolded approach, “She

read it first and I read it second, then she made me read it by myself and then I got it!” The power of poetry combined with an intentional focus on motivation and engagement was summed up by a child who shared that what they liked best about Reading and Writing Fluency Idol was “Writing and reading! Because I got to read more and write more better!”

Figure 11

And the Winners Are...



Note. Ms. O’Neill’s poets proudly share their golden tickets.

Figure 12

Cheers for Our Fluency Idols!



Note. Ms. Dinterman’s Reading & Writing Fluency Idols

So who won Reading & Writing Fluency Idol? Everyone! (Even the therapy dogs!)

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