

Co-Teaching to Close the Literacy Gap

by Lisa Kean

With fewer financial and human resources at our disposal, how do we close the literacy gap for those students who are most vulnerable?

By providing students with a double dose of reading instruction, the gap can be narrowed! Students who were “at-risk” became “at-promise,” by healing their reading gap. Read on to learn how one school put its collective responsibility to work and used all of the human resources at its disposal to create a culture of students who viewed themselves “at-promise” and ready for learning rather than “at-risk” and ready for remediation.

A student who is “at-risk” in reading is a student who is not meeting expectations for his grade level (Cunningham and Richard 1999). That is, they struggle with one or more of the fundamental pillars of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, or comprehension. The term “at-promise” is used because it shifts the mindsets

of the students and teachers from one of deficit into one determined to succeed.

This success, however, cannot occur in pockets. According to the tenets in *Response to Intervention* (RTI), it must be a school-wide, collective effort. The on-site human resources must believe that, “the combined knowledge and skills of an entire staff can meet the learning needs of every child.” (Bufum, Mattos and Weber, 2012)

Co-Teaching can uniquely meet the goals of RTI because through co-teaching:

- Lessons are research based;
- We are able to address the wide variety of needs in the classroom;
- We can ensure access to the general curriculum for diverse learners;

- We use on-going data collection and progress monitoring; and,
- Students are able to receive specialized and more individualized instruction in small groups.

According to Murawski and Hughes (2009) in Lodato Wilson & Blednick 2011, “Co-taught settings can uniquely meet the goals of RTI because through co-teaching, lessons are research based ... address the wide variety of needs in the general education classroom ... ensure access to the general education curriculum for diverse learners ... use ongoing data collection and progress monitoring ... and students ... are able to receive specialized more individualized instruction in small groups” (p.269)

When 28% of our Grade 3 students presented “at-risk” during our first-term assessments, we knew as a school that we had to band together and do something different from that we had always done. (In our district, “at risk” at the end of Term 1 for Grade 3 would be students who are reading at a PM Benchmark level of less than 18 in November). These students had great teachers in their early primary years and yet for some reason, the pieces of the reading puzzle were not coming together for them. Instead of blaming previous teachers, their home environment, or their financial circumstances, we wanted to focus in on what we had control over during the six hours that these students were in our care. We did something that, up until this point, was not considered at this school – we set aside time during our school day to collaborate and problem-solve ways to support these students so they grew from “at risk” readers to “at promise” readers. Our initial team consisted of

Co-Teaching ...

- involves two or more professionals who share instructional responsibility for a single group of students with mutual ownership, pooled resources, and joint accountability;
- is designed to meet the educational needs of students with diverse learning options;
- allows for more intense and individualized instruction;
- distributes responsibility for planning, instruction, and evaluation of students;
- provides planned, thoughtful, and purposeful support for students that is connected to assessment; and,
- fosters a collaborative mindset around problem-solving and collective responsibility; and
- builds a repertoire for both people based on student needs (e.g. lesson plans, instructional strategies, centers).

(Thanks to Faye Brownlie)

the three Grade three teachers and two administrators (one of whom was also the learning support teacher). The classroom teachers came to the meeting with assessment data in hand so that we could analyze where the students needed support. What we found was most of the students were struggling with their reading comprehension. They were not using cues to support them in making meaning from the text. To add another layer to their struggles, the majority of these students did not see themselves as readers. When asked during a reading survey if they liked reading, most students responded by saying that reading was hard, they did not enjoy it, and they only did it because they had to. A sad commentary for a group of 8-year-olds who have their whole lives ahead of them to enjoy reading.

Mavis* was one of those students. On her initial reading assessment, she presented at a Grade 1 level in

*All names have been changed.

fluency and comprehension. It was little wonder that she felt reading was hard and that she didn’t enjoy it. Using our research on Response to Intervention (RTI), and best practices in reading instruction based on Marie Clay, Lori Rog, Katie Keier and Pat Johnson, we developed a targeted intervention plan. Our plan was to provide daily, small group, supplemental reading support (what we call the “double dose”) that was streamlined with what the classroom teacher was providing within the classroom. This point cannot be overemphasized. For this intervention to be successful, the learning support teacher providing the intervention needed to be in constant communication and collaboration with the classroom teacher so that the language and strategies used were complementary to one another instead of working in direct opposition to each other. For those students who need to improve their reading skills, researchers have suggested that struggling students

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should be given double the amount of teaching they would normally be receiving within their classroom (Allington and Walmsey 2007; Velutino and Scanlon 2002).

To put things in perspective, our students are expected to leave Grade 3 reading at level 23 to be considered fully meeting expectations. In terms of reading growth that occurs between each level, if a student is moving between a level 18 and 21, they will need to know an additional 150 words from what they originally could recognize. When they move from a level 21 to 23, they are expected to recognize an additional 400 words on top of that. As the levels increase so does the complexity of the sentence structure and the plot predictability.

When Mavis’ teacher was using fiction text and using the phrase, “Does that make sense?” to prompt her comprehension of the text, the learning support teacher needed to be using the same genre of text and using the same phrasing in her questioning. When the teacher moved on to non-fiction text, it was time to collaborate and plan the approach that would best work with Mavis. Mavis was considered an early reader. “Early readers begin to attend to print and apply the phonetic value of letters in order to read. They

commonly look at beginning and ending letters in order to decode unfamiliar words. Children in this early reading period also begin to attend to more than one source for cues while reading. Attention is paid to meaning cues, grammatical cues, and prior knowledge on a limited basis” (Johnson, 1999). We needed

to be sure that when we moved from fiction to non-fiction text, she understood the basics of non-fiction text features that could support her comprehension (tables, charts, glossary, headings, captions, etc.).

For 16 weeks, Mavis received the double dose of reading instruction (classroom teacher and learning support teacher). Predictably, her reading level increased. But perhaps an even more important spin-off was the fact that she started to see herself as a reader and she began to enjoy reading. She would come to school early so that she could read for twenty minutes in the library before school started. When she finished a book she would proudly walk into my office and show me the book, excitedly give me a re-telling of the story and then decide which text she would devour next. Mavis

Table 1
Grade 3 Double Dose of Reading Intervention

Name	Sept 2014	April 2015	June 2015
Marcie	17	22	released
Maryanne	15	21	23
Michael	17	22	23
Max	17	19	23
Marilyn	16	21	23
Maddison	16	22	23
Matthew	15	21	22
Marcus	13	21	22
Mable	16	23	released
Martha	16	20	24
Millie	16	20	24
Melanie	15	20	24
Mavis	10	17	19

Nelson PM Benchmark books were used for the Running Record Data throughout the school year

had moved from an early reader, to a transitional reader. “Transitional readers use meaning, grammatical, and letter cues more fully. They recognize a large number of frequently used words on sight and use pictures in a limited way while reading (Johnson, 1999).


All of this was possible because our school shifted our thinking from that of, “What is wrong with this student?” to that of, “How can we help this student learn?” We started to look at what the student needed and how we could provide the support. Their reading struggles were no longer looked at as deficits but as difficulties that we believed could be overcome. The time it took to change learning support and administrator schedules was far outweighed by the impact we saw this double dose having on student reading and self esteem. Their positive reading attitudes were contagious amongst the group. Students started finding se-

ries of books that they enjoyed reading and the infectious joy of reading spread throughout the group.

Slavin, Lake, Davis and Madden (2011) found that incorporating personalized learning into small group instruction was an effective form of intervention for at-risk learners. This research confirms what we saw in action, by taking collective responsibility for all students, problem solving for their needs and providing them with the support they needed, they began to grow and reach their potential.

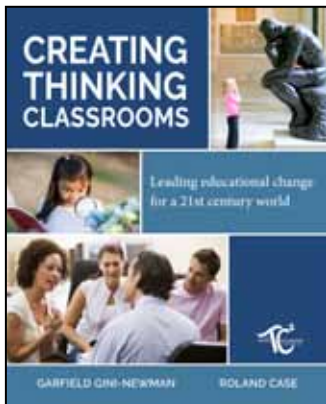
Of all the Grade 3 students, Mavis’ “cure” came in the form of a triple dose of reading instruction. At one point, she was receiving a reading block before school with the Learning Support Teacher/VP, a reading block during the school day with the learning support teacher,

and a reading block with her classroom teacher at another point during the school day. Not all students require the same “dosage” to cure the illiteracy disease but with careful monitoring, the prognosis is one of continual improvement.

At the time I write this article, Mavis continues to develop her skills as a transitional reader moving towards becoming a fluent reader – one who is able to, “read for meaning with less attention to decoding and can independently solve problems encountered in the text” (Johnson, 1999). She continues to be “at promise” and is approaching expectations for her grade level. As for the rest of the Grade 3 students who were initially identified “at risk,” they are now meeting expectations for their grade level.  ^{bcp} _{vp} a

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