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Although reading fluency is a key goal for the elementary school reading curriculum, many teachers are not familiar with effective methods of instruction and ways for integrating reading fluency with the curriculum. Readers Theatre, partner reading, writer's craft passages, and a limited focus on timed readings helped students make substantial gains.

Reading fluency is the ability to read accurately, quickly, effortlessly, and with appropriate expression and meaning (Rasinski, 2003). The National Reading Panel identified it as a key ingredient in successful reading instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Reading fluency is important because it affects students' reading efficiency and comprehension.

The theory of automaticity in reading (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974) provides a theoretical explanation for the importance of reading fluency. According to this theory, readers have a limited amount of attention they can devote to cognitive tasks such as reading. Reading requires readers to accomplish at least two critical tasks—they must decode the words and comprehend the text. Given the limited amount of attentional resources available to any reader, attention that is given to the decoding requirement cannot be used for comprehension. Thus, readers who must spend considerable cognitive effort to decode words, even if they are successful at that task, may compromise their comprehension because they are not able to devote a sufficient amount of their attention to making sense of the text.

One fluency goal for reading instruction then is to develop decoding to the point where it becomes an automatic process that requires a minimum of attention. When decoding and the other surface-level aspects of reading are automatized, readers can devote a maximal amount of attention to the deeper levels of reading—comprehension. A second dimension (theoretical explanation) of reading fluency lies in the role of prosodic or expressive reading (Schreiber, 1980, 1987, 1991; Schreiber & Read, 1980). Fluent readers not only are appropriately fast but also read with good phrasing and expression—they are able to express or embed meaning into the text through their oral interpretation of the passage. In this sense, then, as students learn to read in an expressive and meaningful manner they are also learning to construct meaning or comprehend the text. A recent review of the research related to reading fluency confirms that fluency is indeed a significant factor in reading and is related to comprehension and achievement (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000).

Although fluency has been identified as a key element in successful reading programs, it is often not a significant part of them (Allington, 1983; Rasinski & Zutell, 1996). When I (Timothy, second author) speak about reading fluency to groups of teachers, I usually receive comments from participants that fluency is not something that was taught in their teacher training programs and that it is not part of their implemented reading curriculum—in

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short, they indicate a lack of familiarity with the concept of fluency and how best to teach it.

When I talk with teachers about reading fluency, I often hear later from many of them about what they are trying in the way of fluency instruction. Lorraine Griffith (first author) is one of those teachers. Since her initial contact with me over three years ago, we have often corresponded about reading instruction in general and reading fluency in particular. What she has done to make reading fluency an integral part of her curriculum has been, in my opinion, exceptional and a great example of classroom scholarship. In this article we share how she has transformed her reading program by incorporating fluency instruction into the curriculum.

Year after year, children have streamed into my (Lorraine's) rural fourth-grade classroom reading below grade level. Teaching in North Carolina, USA, a high-stakes assessment state, I felt the increasing pressure to pull them up efficiently and effectively. I used a combination of silent reading, partner reading, and teacher read-alouds in my guided reading instruction. Students discussed their silent, independent reading with me and with their classmates. I included classroom instruction to be sure my kids were prepared with the best comprehension tools—multiple-choice questions at multiple levels of depth and question stems from sample lists provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. I worked hard on having students think about their thinking, learn about inference, and make judgments on text.

From the year before I began embedding a fluency emphasis into my curriculum (1999), I have a vivid memory of a lanky girl named Ally (all names used in this article are pseudonyms). At the beginning of fourth grade she could successfully read a first-grade level word list and comprehend at a 2.5 level while reading silently on an informal reading inventory. Because of an apparent phonics deficit, her Title I teacher (part of a federally funded program intended to help disadvantaged children at risk of school failure) worked with her one-on-one in phonics for 30 minutes a day for the entire school year. To nurture her reading comprehension, I used think-alouds in whole-class instruction on a regular basis.

During test-preparation remediation time, my student teacher, the remediation assistant, or I would take Ally alone and read the test-prep article aloud to save time, due to Ally's slow and labored reading. We would then model critical thinking through thinking aloud the question and finding cues in the text to help answer. Ally seemed to make terrific progress, eventually answering about 80% of questions correctly on grade-level passages. At year's end, Ally had also shown progress in the Title I testing. She was able to successfully read a fourth-grade level word list, a three-year gain. In contrast, she came up only six months, to a third-grade level, in silent reading comprehension. When the state testing rolled around, Ally was unable to pass. Tears rolled down her face as she looked up at me during the first break, unable to finish even the first long article of the test. The state testing required more from the students: to decode longer passages effectively and with automaticity and to answer higher level questions of analysis and synthesis. We had focused on helping her to decode efficiently and to think critically about text we had read aloud to her, but the actual skill of independent reading and comprehending simultaneously was still missing from her set of reading skills and strategies.

As I reflected on my practice, I realized the at-risk readers, children whose silent reading comprehension levels were below fourth grade, were probably more dependent on the teacher read-alouds during guided reading or a picture-enhanced text than on the independently read, grade-level texts themselves. If I didn't read the text aloud, they would depend on the class discussion and summary of the text for basic comprehension before answering the multiple-choice questions. My students were fooling me throughout the school year because they were participating actively in our class discussions. They could develop ideas, extend thoughts, and appear to have fully comprehended the text when they were simply building on other people's reading abilities.

I knew I needed a better strategy for closing the reading gap. To date, my at-risk fourth graders had averaged a 1.2-year gain in silent reading according to the informal reading inventory used in our Title I program. In order for children who are up to three

years below grade level to catch up by middle school, the reading gains needed to increase significantly. The catch-up plan needed to be more than just effective—it needed to be efficient. My instructional day was already full, with use of a balanced literacy model, so I could consider substituting changes in practice only during the existing blocks of time.

In July 2000, I heard Tim Rasinski speak on "Strategies for Struggling Readers" at a local district-supported workshop. I was struck by the data he reported on fluency and especially by one of the studies he discussed from *The Reading Teacher* article "I Never Thought I Could Be a Star: A Readers Theatre Ticket to Reading Fluency" (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999). I was amazed to see the second graders in the study make remarkable progress in their reading comprehension after only a 10-week implementation of an authentic oral reading fluency strategy—Readers Theatre.

I knew that the eventual goal of reading instruction was for children to be able to think critically about text they read silently. I wanted them to be able to read a text independently, comprehending it deeply enough to answer questions requiring judgment and analysis of text. But there was a step missing in my reading instruction between decoding text and being able to critically think about that text. Somehow I had to find a way to bridge the gap between a stumbling grasp of independent reading with most of the child's attention focused on decoding, to a firm grip on the deeper, interpretive skill that accompanies fluent reading with understanding.

I was ready to try a shift in my reading instruction techniques to an emphasis on fluency instruction. I decided to emulate the study I had heard and read about (Martinez et al., 1999) and try Readers Theatre for the first 10 weeks of the 2000–2001 school year.

Because I was not sure this idea warranted radical changes in a fourth-grade classroom, I did not alter my guided reading block. I continued to use a varied combination of novels, short stories, nonfiction, and the basal reader as texts. I continued to teach the same critical thinking techniques in discussion of real text. But I added an emphasis on reading fluency through Readers Theatre using minimal classroom time.

Finding scripts

Before I could begin implementation in my classroom, I had to locate Readers Theatre scripts. At first I wondered how I would find enough scripts to keep my children reading for 10 weeks. I was amazed to find free Readers Theatre scripts on Internet sites, such as Aaron Shepard's ( ). I also found a number of age-appropriate script collections for purchase and especially enjoyed the scripts by Braun and Braun (2000a, 2000b) and Dixon, Davies, and Politano (1996). But I soon discovered that scripts were quite easy to develop on my own, especially when using poetry such as Maya Angelou's poem "Life Doesn't Frighten Me at All" (Angelou & Basquiat, 1998). Moving beyond poetry into content-related topics, I found that scripts I arranged could be integrated quite effectively with language arts, science, or social studies.

One example of a Readers Theatre script I developed is "Magnetism" (Figure 1), to be used in conjunction with an electricity unit. I simply pulled key phrases from a nonfiction text and then added some similes for literary value. My goal was to introduce some of the key vocabulary and concepts in the unit and also have the children think about the deeper meaning of magnetism removed from the context of science.

Weekly procedure

I followed a simple weekly procedure. In the beginning weeks, every child had the same script. I wanted the more accomplished readers to model fluent reading for the others. After copying enough scripts for each child, I highlighted the assigned parts using a variety of colored highlighters. I quickly and randomly handed out the highlighted Readers Theatre scripts on Monday mornings and assigned a nightly 10-minute practice read. The children recorded their practice times in reading logs, usually rehearsing with a parent or sibling. On Fridays, just before lunchtime, the children rehearsed in groups for about 15 minutes. Because each child received a script randomly with only his

FIGURE 1
Magnetism: A Readers Theatre script by Lorraine Griffith

A Readers Theatre script for three voices
Reader 1
Reader 2
Reader 3

R1:	Magnetism, an invisible force,
R2:	like wind.
R3:	An invisible force of attraction,
All:	like staticky socks and love.
R1:	Lodestones are special pieces of iron ore,
R3:	a magnet found in nature.
R2:	Lodestones attract paper clips, iron nails, and staples on the floor.
All:	Magnetic poles:
R1:	where magnetic fields are strongest.
R2:	One north.
R3:	One south.
R1:	Unlike poles attract
R2:	north toward south
R3:	and south toward north,
R2:	but like poles repel.
R1:	Repel means push away.
R3:	North from north
R1:	and south from south.
All:	A magnetic compass,
R1:	north,
R2:	south,
R3:	east,
All:	and west.
R1:	Sailors and hikers navigate through oceans of water or trees.
R1 & 2:	It's not love or wind or staticky socks.
All:	It's magnetism.

or her part actually marked, and then practiced independently during the week, they actually "met" their fellow performers just before lunch on Fridays during rehearsal. The highlighted parts had been color-coded so I could just announce, "Pink group practice by the windows...yellow group near the computers." While they practiced, I coached individuals and small groups of students in reading with expression and meaning.

The nature of Readers Theatre requires interpretation of text with the human voice. There is no memorization of text because the children are asked to creatively interpret the meaning of the passage each time they read. There is no acting; there are no props and no costumes. The drama is communicated by the children, through phrasing, pausing, and expressive reading of text.

Initially, it was effective to have all of the children use the same script. One child would see her or his part interpreted a number of different ways and recognize the potential drama in the written word. As the weeks went on I developed a wider variety of script resources. Eventually I divided the children into different performance troupes each week. Each group of readers had a different script to perform, allowing for a much more interesting Friday production. But I paid no attention to the child's reading level as I assigned parts. It was truly a nonability-grouped activity. Because the text was practiced so often throughout the week and the lines were limited in number, even a low-functioning reader could perform well on Friday. I wanted all of the children to consider themselves as equals during the performances, differing only on the level

of dramatic interpretation of the texts. I found that some of my lower level readers were the most dramatic, in their first opportunity ever to shine as star performers in reading.

Our grade level traditionally had enjoyed a "Fun Friday" reward time on Friday afternoons. All week long I would arrange for the celebration. The students would engage in fun activities such as cooking or watching a movie that correlated with the unit of study. With a new group of students at the beginning of a new school year, I announced that we would have a special celebration of reading every Friday afternoon. To make the performance a special occasion, the children took turns bringing in refreshments. They were thrilled with Fridays and loved to perform in a "dinner theater" atmosphere. I had managed to substitute a meaningful reading intervention for a mishmash of other activities. The time I used to spend on finding varieties of flavored puddings to represent the layers of the earth I now spent finding more Readers Theatre scripts related to our studies.

In only 10 weeks, I saw positive results similar to the second-grade study I had attempted to emulate. But I also saw a deepened interest in reading. I began to see expressiveness emerge from the children's oral reading during the guided reading block. I was actually seeing reading redefined and reading interest renewed by the students in my class. At one point while partner reading "Why Frog and Snake Never Play Together" (Bryan, 1989) during guided reading, one of my English-language learners whispered to another struggling reader, "Let's read that part again, only this time like Readers Theatre." In all of my years teaching fourth grade, I had never heard a child come up with the idea to reread a passage simply for the pleasure of reading it.

Thrilled with the initial 10-week progress, I decided to continue with a fluency emphasis and to keep data for the rest of the school year. Because we were a Title I school and my greatest concern was with the at-risk children who were not learning disabled but were reading significantly below grade level, I was able to take advantage of the Title I testing program for the targeted students. I had not seen a yearlong study of the effect of Readers Theatre on at-risk students in the intermediate grades and wondered if the reading enthusiasm and emphasis on expressive flow would last. I also wondered what kind of impact it would make on testing with the Title I students over a full school year.

After the first year of implementation, my own observations of reading growth were confirmed as my four targeted Title I students experienced a 2.5-year increase in their silent reading comprehension as measured by an informal reading inventory. I was thrilled to find that this relatively brief and simple intervention had more than doubled the gain I might normally have expected students to make in one year of instruction. Even with a lessened stress on phonics instruction during the 30-minute Title I block and a greater stress on reading with meaning and expression, the children's average gain in word-list recognition was 1.25 years, substantively more than in previous years.

Feeling wildly enthusiastic about the improvement of more than a year simply by using Readers Theatre to focus on fluency, I continued my quest for a deepened understanding of fluency development. I had read Timothy Rasinski's (2000) article in *The Reading Teacher* entitled "Speed Does Matter in Reading," and during the 2001–2002 year I decided to investigate the role of reading rate in a child's reading comprehension. I tested my children's reading rate by doing one-minute reading probes. The methodology was simple: I had the children read a grade-level passage and recorded notes on words omitted or pronounced incorrectly and counted the words read correctly. I was surprised to find out that 44% of my children read below the normal reading rate of 99 words correct per minute for the beginning of fourth grade (Rasinski, 2003). Fifteen percent of my children were at risk, reading below 74 words correct per minute.

I decided to keep track of the reading rate of all of my children and the silent reading comprehension of my five Title I students (see Table 1). I also began experimenting with the implementation of two other interventions to increase reading fluency: short-term use of timed reads and selective partner reading.

TABLE 1
Gains in fluency and comprehension for the five at-risk (Title I) students in Lorraine's classroom, 2001-2002 school year

	Reading rate (one-minute probe using a cold 4.0-level passage each time)	Silent reading Comprehension (Qualitative Reading Inventory-II)*
Beginning of fourth grade (August 2001)	62.4 words correct per minute	2.2 grade level
Middle of fourth grade (January 2002)	103.8 words correct per minute (+41.4 words correct per minute)	4.8 grade level (+2.6 years)
End of fourth grade (April 2002)	109.8 words correct per minute (+6.8 words correct per minute)	5.4 grade level (+0.6 years)

*Testing was conducted by a third party.

Timed reads

Having read a book on using "writer's craft passages" as an integral part of the writing block (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998), I selected exemplary passages from children's trade books that were to be used for writing each week. As a fourth-grade teacher in North Carolina, I also felt the pressure to improve writing test scores. I was convinced that using authentic text written by published and award-winning authors as models of writing was the best way to teach narrative writing. So after continuing to study the idea of writer's craft (Ray, 1999), I realized there was a tie-in between the passages for writing and the passages for repeated reading. Having the children practice read the passages taken from trade books would cement the vocabulary and writing techniques with their thinking about writing.

For the first week of using the timed reads, I ran copies from the opening scene of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976). I read the passage aloud to the children with attention to the syntax and expressive nature (see Figure 2).

After doing a minilesson on the characterization of "Little Man," we discussed the author's style of writing and the way the author opened with such a telling statement about Little Man. We talked about how we could use that technique of character description to open our own stories.

The following day the children each read the 120-word passage to a partner for one minute and made a mark in the passage where they ended reading. After each child had read, we discussed the way different children read the passage. I chose students to "model read" for the class to demonstrate expressive and interpretive reading.

We then moved on to using the same passage as a model for writing narrative. Building on this passage from *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, I had the children do webs of descriptive words of a younger child they knew, and then write creative first sentences that might hook a reader. Analyzing a passage and then using an author's technique to write helped the children develop writing fluency and creativity. But because our accompanying goal was rereading for increased reading fluency, we read the same passage daily through the week. The children noted their increasing reading rate each day, and we talked about how important reading with energy and enthusiasm is to understanding what we read.

The children loved competing against themselves each day and recording the number of words they could read expressively in one minute. The children were cautioned not to read as fast as they

FIGURE 2
Excerpt from *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

"Little Man, would you come on? You keep it up and you're gonna make us late."... He lagged several feet behind my other brothers, Stacey and Christopher-John, and me, attempting to keep the rusty Mississippi dust from swelling with each step and drifting back upon his shiny black shoes and the cuffs of his corduroy pants by lifting each foot high before setting it gently down again. Always meticulously neat, six-year-old Little Man never allowed dirt or tears or stains to mar anything he owned. Today was no exception. (Taylor, 1976, pp. 3-4)

could for the sake of reading fast but rather to read with expression and meaning. Students began to internalize the characteristics of the writer's techniques and vocabulary as they practiced reading again and again. There were times when the oral interpretation of an author's passage was so moving I had to hold back tears. I was seeing the benefits of theatrical performance interwoven with this emphasis on reading fluency and writer's craft. As one student commented, "When you write you think of the good words and expression sort of comes to your head. It makes your story better if you have good expression in it."

Partner reading

Children reading at or above grade level read orally with partners during the daily 30-minute Title I block. The Title I teacher sometimes worked with a small group reading novels and encouraged children to read aloud as they desired. But she also covered skills necessary for the understanding of text through programs used in our district. The rest of the children read in pairs or small groups of similar reading levels. The book chosen by each pair would be read together orally at school and then continued silently at home. A few of the children in Title I requested to move into partner reading with their friends, simply reading the whole 30 minutes instead of having the small-group time. This request was usually granted because for the first time these at-risk children desired to participate in a reading culture; they were beginning to realize a social dimension to reading. During this particular block, I conferred with the reading pairs about their selections.

During the 2001–2002 school year, the additional short-term interventions of timed readings, repeated readings, and encouraging reading at a higher rate and with expression seemed to have a direct impact on word recognition and silent reading comprehension. Title I students experienced substantial gains in reading rate and oral interpretation of connected text on the Qualitative Reading Inventory–II (1995). The average gain in word recognition (reading word list) was 2.4 years. Over the same period, students gained 48 words correct per minute in rate, nearly doubling what would normally be expected during the fourth-grade year (see Table 2). An even higher gain was found in silent reading comprehension, which went up to 3.2 years (see Table 2). The two Title I students who requested to move out into the partner reading made the greatest gains of the five Title I students. (This observation led to an overall implementation of partner reading among all Title I students the following year, but during our former self-selected reading block.)

The focus on fluency was moving my class toward a reading-centered culture. Students were increasingly involved in book talk on their own time. Instead of my having to implement strategies for children to share books with one another, such sharing became a part of natural talk. Often I heard comments like "Have you read Lemony Snicket yet? I think you would love that since you like Harry Potter so much!"

Parents were also recognizing the impact of this heightened emphasis, telling me touching stories from home. One January afternoon, a parent of a reluctant reader had been working on a work-related project at the computer all day. She had been amazed to see her daughter Sally curled in a chair reading a book for most of the day. Late in the afternoon, Sally piped up, "Mom! We have to get out of here and do something!" Her mom fully expected a suggestion like going shopping or roller-skating. But instead Sally suggested, "How about if we go to [the bookstore] to have hot chocolate while I read and you work?" Sally had learned there was joy in sustained and extended periods of silent reading.

TABLE 2
Progress in reading for at-risk (Title I) students in Lorraine's fourth-grade classroom

	Fluency-enhanced reading program (2000–2003)	Traditional reading program (1997–2000)
Average instructional reading level at beginning of the year (measured by informal reading inventory)	2.93 grade level	3.00 grade level
Average instructional reading level at end of year (measured by informal reading inventory)	5.80 grade level	4.17 grade level
Percentage of at-risk students exiting fourth grade on or above a fifth-grade level (measured by informal reading inventory)	93%	22%

Note. The silent reading comprehension part of the informal reading inventory was used for the Title I testing. Two different tests were used over the six-year period. An IRI, no longer widely available, was used through May 2001. The Qualitative Reading Inventory-II was used beginning in August 2001. The tests were administered and graded by the Title I staff at our elementary school.

There were nine students in the tested groups during the traditional reading program from 1997 to 2000. These students had a range of second- through fourth-grade silent reading comprehension and were able to read a word list ranging from first- through fourth-grade reading levels.

There were 15 students in the tested groups during the fluency-enhanced reading program from 2000 to 2003. These students had a range of second- through fifth-grade silent-reading comprehension.

After the results of the previous two years of research, I concluded that the three-pronged fluency effort (Readers Theatre, partner reading, and one-minute practice readings) was a worthwhile set of instructional strategies for preparing fourth graders to become lifelong, critically thinking readers (see Figure 3). In 2002–2003, I simply continued the efforts made in the past few years but with some additional modifications.

Readers Theatre

I continued handing out Readers Theatre scripts every Monday morning and having a performance on Friday afternoon. The children continued to love the performances, even though they had begun doing Readers Theatre in earlier grades. The medium did not seem to lose its fascination and challenge.

During 2002–2003 the children wrote and arranged their own scripts more often than before. One of the more intense writing projects was an assignment integrated with North Carolina history. The students were required to create a Readers Theatre script about what really happened to the Lost Colony. The children were assigned to heterogeneous groups and required to write from an assigned point of view: that of John White, the colonists, the Native Americans, or the bears watching behind the trees. This activity probably did more to teach "point of view" than all of the testing strategies upon which I formerly depended. In addition, the activity truly integrated the teaching of communication skills and social studies.

Fridays also found children reading monologues found in first-person text like the first few pages of *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2001) or in speeches from favorite movies such as the Gollum monologue in *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Weinstein, Weinstein, & Zaentz, 2002). Children began to read poetry independently as

FIGURE 3
An outline of fluency implementation

Year 1: Focused only on Readers Theatre implementation
- Handed out scripts on Monday mornings.
- Assigned nightly at-home rehearsals of scripts.
- Performed Readers Theatre on Friday afternoons.

Year 2: Focused on Readers Theatre and timed reads
- Continued the Readers Theatre routine of Friday performances.
- Added timed reads intensely in October and throughout the year in conjunction with writer's craft.
- Implemented partner reading for students not involved in Title I.

Year 3: Focused on Readers Theatre, timed reads, and partner reading
- Continued the Readers Theatre routine of Friday performances, but added student-generated options with monologues and poetry.
- Began a formal partner reading plan with all students during the self-selected reading block, making the transition to independent silent reading during the second semester.
- Used timed reads intensely for one month (January) and throughout the year in conjunction with writer's craft.

performers on a stool. By the end of the third year, they were begging me to allow them to choose their own performance materials. There was no argument from me.

Partner reading

I developed a more organized plan for partner reading with the children. Instead of having the partner reading during the 30-minute Title I block, I scheduled it during self-selected reading. This block in the past had been plagued with "fake readers," students who pretended to read but did not.

I was bothered by the idea that children were wasting this sacred set-aside reading time, so I decided to interview each child in my classroom at the beginning of the school year. I asked a simple question. "In earlier grades, when your teacher gave you self-selected reading time, did you usually read or did you often fake it?" The students' reactions were varied, after they survived the shock of my asking the question. About a third of the class was horrified to even think that anyone would fake read when given the opportunity to read. But these students were the more accomplished readers. The other two thirds were much more verbal about their "faking it" techniques now that they had the permission to share their creative secret practices. And they were indeed very creative. Here are several of their responses.

> I wanted to read as fast as my friend, so I watched her as she read. I only read the bottom line of each page and turned the page when she did. But she made 100% on her Accelerated Reader tests and I only made 20%. Joanne

> I only read the third paragraph of each page. My teacher was always at her desk grading papers, so it didn't really matter. Jackie

> I started at the top, skipped a "hunk," and then read the bottom. Annie

> I lifted up the book in front of my face and looked for "fancy" words. Timothy

> I looked at the pictures and then told the story by the pictures. George

The greatest puzzle of all was the lowest reader in the class who reported, "I never faked it." I was obviously shocked. Then I prodded a bit. "So you actually read the whole time?" Douglass responded with "I didn't have to fake it at all. I just watched for my teacher to look at me and then I looked down at my book really quick!"

These "fake readers" are the students who need the daily practice of authentic reading the most. It seemed to me that partner reading provided a means to require all students to read and the opportunity for me to observe their reading. So I began the year by pairing up my children so that they could cooperatively learn to actually engage in real reading for an extended period of time and to understand what they had read.

Partners are paired according to interests, reading ability, reading rate, and social compatibility. Although the random assignment of Readers

Theatre parts is not connected to a student's reading ability, partner reading is based on reading levels. Because partner reading was substituting for the self-selected reading time, I wanted the children to read on their own with material that challenged them somewhat and required them to collaborate with a partner to negotiate the text and construct meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). I closely supervised the reading time and discussion, and I also acted as a problem solver, but with a twist—the children first had to strive to solve problems with text collaboratively and then call on me only if they needed more aid.

During partner reading, the pairs of children choose reading materials that interest them. They read aloud together for 30 minutes, usually taking turns—one reads and the other follows along tracking the words. They have the choice of how they want to read, whether chorally, taking turns, or reading dialogue in parts. Because I have spent time modeling how to discuss books, the children have learned to monitor and extend their own reading comprehension. When they do not understand a passage, they stop and work as a team to determine what it means. Or they might choose to simply go back to reread. Sometimes, if they are really stumped, they call for me.

One morning during partner reading, two girls called me over. They were reading a nonfiction text they had chosen about sharks. One of the girls reported, "Mrs. Griffith, we have read this sentence over and over again and can't figure out what it means. 'Sharks have long fascinated people.'" I started laughing, immediately imagining a shark with tall people hanging off of its fins who looked fascinated by the experience. We discussed sentence structure and the word *fascinated* being used as a verb in the sentence instead of an adjective to describe the people. Another time, two boys had reread several times a passage in the book *Wringer* (Spinelli, 1998). There was a paragraph followed by numerous lines of unidentified dialogue. They could not tell who was talking. This was a question that I was sure would have been forgotten had they conferred a day or two later on the book. But at the point of confusion I was able to go back into the text with them and help to decipher the two characters who were talking from the preceding paragraph.

In the meantime, I rotated throughout the classroom and conferred with various partners. This has become a wonderful opportunity to eavesdrop on oral reading and ask truly meaningful questions based on the texts students are reading. Here I have a chance to interject those critical thinking questions necessary for test preparation but within the context of their own choice of text. I take notes on children's reading progress and comprehension, noting minilessons that may be needed for a small group or strategies that may need to be retaught.

At the close of the partner reading time, the children make commitments to each other about how many pages they will read in the evening. All of my children are required to read 20 minutes every night. Because the pairs of children have similar reading rates, they come up with an appropriate number of pages to read. Parents have affirmed this accountability system. Children seem to be more serious about reading commitments to a friend than they are to the teacher or a parent. There has been an issue with wanting to read more, and I have a simple solution to that desire—go ahead. But the child has to understand that the partner will be rereading that section the next day during their time together. Rereading is a very profitable activity for children, and I try to always emphasize its value.

One afternoon I asked the children to write some comments about the partner reading plan I had implemented. A number of them commented on friendships that were developing through the pairings. "It shows you how to read whith another kid and it gifs you findes [friends]," wrote one of my lower level readers. "You get to experience other people's expressions and thoughts," wrote one reader. Another student wrote, "It makes you get to know your friends better."

Other children seemed impressed with the value of book discussions for comprehension. "I understand it a lot better because we talk about the book after every chapter." A lower level reader wrote, "It's fun when you read with people because you can talk to your partner if you don't think that a senises or word dose not make sences." They wrote about learning comprehension techniques from friends: "I learned that if you don't understand it you should read it again. You should talk more about what you're reading." A few of the children wrote that partner reading was distracting to them and that they preferred silent reading.

Those students were encouraged to move into silent reading with regular conferences to monitor their comprehension.

Because partner reading is simply a bridge between guided reading and independent silent reading, I encourage children who are reading on grade level to begin silent reading during the partner reading/self-selected reading block in January. All of the children participate in an hour long "silent reading marathon" once a week to develop their ability to read silently for an uninterrupted and sustained period of time.

Writer's craft/timed reads

I continued the use of exemplary passages from award-winning trade books for writer's craft lessons. But I did not time the readings at first. Despite the results from the previous year's exercise in using timed reads to improve reading rate, I consciously decided to downplay reading rate this year, hoping to see the same results using the other methods. I was uncomfortable with some of the techniques I was hearing about from other schools where students were beginning to feel that reading was a race or a hurtful time of comparison to others. Although I had not seen adverse effects in my own classroom, I shied away from the timed reads. I did continue to do one-minute probes each month, and I was surprised this year to see that the progress in reading rate was not happening as steadily as it did the previous year. I have concluded that the ones who are really struggling simply need the push provided by timed reads.

In January, I inserted a month-long emphasis on timed reads again to provide the attention to reading with more energy. Student achievement in this third year has continued the trend that began when I introduced fluency into my reading curriculum.

The integration of reading fluency with my reading curriculum has had a dramatic impact on the reading performance of my struggling readers. Gains in fluency and overall reading proficiency were detected among those students (see Table 2). And, although the primary focus of my three-year study has been on those students who qualify for the Title I reading program, I have seen encouraging changes in all of my readers' comprehension as I have focused on fluency. What began as an intervention for at-risk readers has enhanced the performance of all of my children. There are more students at the top end of reading ability interested in dramatic reading and poetry performance. Each year children of all levels in my classroom have become more involved with community theater and church plays. With the shift of focus in fluency from an intervention technique for some to an integral and mediating strategy for all, children seem to be climbing the independent reading levels at breakneck speed. One child at the high end of my 2002–2003 class began the school year at an 8th-grade reading level and finished at a 12th-grade level. The most important change is that our class is passionate about reading, and, because of that, we have come full circle. As children of all reading levels have increased in fluency, their attention to the structure of the text, the development of story, and the deeper meaning of text is made possible. My fourth graders are reading fluently and consequently are thinking meaningfully and critically about text.

Over the course of the past three years I have come to see that reading fluency is indeed an important part of the reading curriculum for all students and especially for those who experience difficulty in reading. I have also learned that reading fluency can be taught in a variety of ways. Teachers interested in making fluency an integral part of their instructional curriculum for reading should rely on certain key principles in designing such instruction: Fluency requires opportunities for students to hear fluent, expressive, and meaningful reading from their teacher, their parents, and their classmates; fluency requires opportunities for students to practice reading texts multiple times; fluency requires opportunities for students to be coached in fluent, expressive, and meaningful reading by their teacher and their classmates; and fluency requires opportunities for students to engage in meaningful and critical discussions of the texts they read and meaningful performances of the texts they practice. How these principles are turned into actual practice depends on the individual teacher. In my own classroom, I found that these principles came to life in Readers Theatre, timed reading, and partner reading and that they had a positive impact on my students' reading development.

Each year there seems to be a miracle story—a child climbs from the bottom to the top rungs of the reading ladder in record time. Taylor was labeled an at-risk student when he entered fourth grade. Still in the lower reading group in April, he had shown only shaky progress from August through November. I hadn't wanted to move him to the higher groups because I felt he still needed the remedial support. But then all of a sudden, as his fluency improved, he jumped to more challenging personal book choices and found he could read much higher leveled books. In April, still in the same lower group of readers, he looked up at me during his Title I group time, and said with a certain level of impertinence, "What am I still doing in *this* reading group, Mrs. Griffith?" He had noticed that he was reading more like the top reading group members. And I wondered how he could have moved up so quickly. It seemed like the skills and the reading fluency had meshed, and he was way above his former peers. While I was working myself into a frenzy teaching these kids to read fluently, he had woken up in the fifth chapter of *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 1973).

When Taylor was tested, he had moved up to the highest quartile on the state reading test. He had moved from the third-grade silent-reading comprehension level to a junior high level. And his math scores, as measured in word problems, had also risen at a similar rate.

Taylor's goals for the summer? To read The Lord of the Rings trilogy—all three books.

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