The Use of a Small Group Workshop to Raise Literacy Skills of At-Risk Youth

By

Dayna Edwards

A thesis submitted to the School of Community Services in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Applied Arts in Behavioural Psychology

St. Lawrence College

Kingston, Ontario

Canada

March, 2011

The procedures in this staff training manual/workshop are meant to be used by agency staff, as part of the broader services they provide, or under supervision of agency staff.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to increase the literacy skills of at risk youth using techniques such as “think-alouds”, modeling proper reading skills, and providing a small classroom environment. Seven students (five males and two females) participated in the workshop by doing pre and post tests involving vocabulary skills and reading and responding to a short story. Simpler concepts were covered first, then more difficult material was done in the latter portion of the workshop. No statistical significance was found in the results of the workshop most likely due to time constraints as well as fluctuating mental states of the students. In the future, it is recommended to do a comparison study between a regular classroom setting and a small classroom setting to determine which is more effective in terms of increasing literacy skills. Another recommendation would be to provide a longer amount of time to go through the material in more detail with the students to ensure a fuller understanding of certain concepts.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my supervisor Dave Villeneuve for being a great source of guidance throughout the writing and application of my research. This was a very new and exciting experience for me, and for him as well, so I’m very grateful for all of the time he has taken to give me his support. I’d like to also extend a thank you to Sheelagh Jamieson who is also giving her time to read this thesis and provide extra feedback.

The ACE program has provided me with many amazing learning experiences that I know I will use in the future. Every student I worked with gave me new perspectives on learning and how to push forward to earn an education no matter how difficult it may be sometimes. A special thank you to all of my students who participated in this new workshop that was made, and for helping me recognize what methods could be used for teaching, as well as what can be done in the future to help others learn. I’ve received great support from my on-site supervisor, Marcus Niemann, who was the one who put forth the idea of helping the students with their literacy skills. I’m very grateful to have received this opportunity to research and write on something about which I’m so passionate.

I would also like to thank one of my best friends and roommate, Jennifer Bethley, who was around for every step of the way during the thesis process. Even though she was working extremely hard on her own research, she still gave her time to help lend ideas and proof read some of my work during the process of creating my program. I’d also like to extend a sincere thank you to another amazing friend, as well as co-worker, Jennifer Kelly. Even through the most stressful times, she shone her admirable positive attitude into my life and supported me in through thick and thin. I’d also like to thank her for inviting me over to eat when I realized too late that I hadn’t made myself dinner! Another thank you to Eric Brohman who, even though he wasn’t physically in the same city, provided amazing support even when I thought I’d almost lost my wits! Also, to all of my other friends not mentioned, you have all played a part in helping me get through this incredible time in my life. Furthermore, I want to thank my family, who even from a great distance, sent their unwavering love and support my way.

Last, but certainly not least, I’d like to dedicate this research to anyone who has struggled throughout their lives with reading and writing. To be able to read, write, and create is a true gift with which you can do many things! In the immortal words of Dr. Seuss: “The more you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.”
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract........................................................................................................................................ii
Acknowledgements................................................................................................................iii
Table of Contents.......................................................................................................................v
Chapter I – Introduction ...........................................................................................................1
  Rationale......................................................................................................................................1
Chapter II: Literature Review....................................................................................................1
Chapter III: Methodology ...........................................................................................................6
  General Information ..................................................................................................................6
  Purpose ......................................................................................................................................7
  Participants ................................................................................................................................7
  Design .......................................................................................................................................7
  Setting and Apparatus ...............................................................................................................8
  Measures ...................................................................................................................................8
  Procedures ...............................................................................................................................8
Chapter IV: Results ....................................................................................................................9
Chapter V: Discussion ...............................................................................................................10
  Summary ...................................................................................................................................10
  Strengths and Limitations .........................................................................................................10
  Multi-level Systems Perspective ............................................................................................11
  Recommendations for Further Research ..............................................................................12
Appendices ...............................................................................................................................15
  Appendix A ...............................................................................................................................15
  Appendix B ...............................................................................................................................16
  Appendix C ...............................................................................................................................20
  Appendix D ...............................................................................................................................22
  Appendix E ...............................................................................................................................23
  Appendix F ...............................................................................................................................24
  Appendix G ...............................................................................................................................25
  Appendix H ...............................................................................................................................30
Appendix I .......................................................................................................................... 32
Chapter I – Introduction

When a student has the ability to read and think critically about their reading material, they can become even more successful in school. Quite often other subjects become negatively affected when adolescent students are struggling with their reading skills, in turn, causing the student to become at risk for failing multiple classes in school. This can contribute to high school dropout rates, which can then result in lack of job opportunities, further increasing the likelihood of a life of crime, and finally leading to incarceration.

Ensuring students can understand and apply skills taught in the classroom can be very difficult, especially when it comes to literacy. Knowing how to create a proper sentence, as well as communicating a theme or main idea in the text, is a crucial skill in which many adolescents may be underdeveloped. Many students struggle with either a learning disability or an anxiety disorder which may inhibit their ability to learn and perform on exams. This can become an issue when the adolescent needs to take the Literacy Exam in order to graduate from high school.

For the purpose of this study, “literacy” is defined as skills in reading comprehension, vocabulary skills, as well as being able to properly communicate ideas and think critically about a piece of writing. Being able to improve adolescents’ literacy skills is crucial because it can be generalized to other facets of learning, as well as all other subject areas in school.

Rationale
The rationale for conducting an intensive literacy program is to provide adolescents with the skills needed to succeed not only in English, but also in other subject areas. As stated previously, when a student has a proper understanding of literacy, most other academic areas will be positively affected. If the student can comprehend what a question or assignment is asking of them, they are most likely to be able to complete it correctly and efficiently. It is the goal of this program to provide at-risk adolescent students with proper reading and writing skills in order to succeed and continue on with their schooling.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Low literacy levels can have devastating effects, not only in an adolescent’s life, but in terms of their academic skills, social and emotional consequences, as well as societal impact (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2008). In the United States about 27% of eighth-grade students scored below the basic level of literary proficiency, which shows they had immense trouble with understanding what was being read, identifying specific details of the text, and drawing conclusions (Grigg et al., 2007; Perie et al., 2005 as cited in National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities [NJCLD], 2008). In addition to the statistics for eighth-graders, at grade 12 level, 26% of the adolescents at age 17 could not demonstrate the proper skills necessary to communicate with writing. Similarly, Canadian statistics have shown an estimated 10-15% of Canadians require extra assistance for their learning disabilities. This, in
turn, has resulted in over 10 million Canadians writing at modest and low level of literacy (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2000). It is further literacy has proven to be such a fundamental skill, that all other school subjects such as science, math, and social studies, rely on strong reading and writing skills (Wise, 2009).

The difference in performance between the female and male genders has been widely discussed since it seems that boys generally have more trouble in terms of standardized testing than girls do (Kehler et al., 2010). Brozo (2002) states that a possible explanation for the significantly lower reading scores for boys is that reading is not considered masculine, and that young boys often succumb to peer pressure and avoid reading of any sort. Brozo goes on to say that pre-teen and teenage boys will miss out on important self-identifying experiences they could have with books. However, he also said that the use of gender specific reading materials to improve boys’ literacy levels, risks the fostering of a gender based stereotype (Brozo, 2005).

In the reading guide by Brozo (To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader) the novels which are mentioned have positive male archetypes, and are also designed to benefit girls by presenting them with positive male images (2002). Brozo goes on further to mention the amounting evidence that teachers are more likely to choose narrative fiction which is less likely to engage boys. It’s quite simple to make an interest inventory for boys (this can be used for girls as well), to find out what specific reading material they would be willing to read. These scales can be created by presenting a subject and asking the student to rank it from 1-4 on how interested they are in that particular topic. The next strategy presented is asking the students to complete certain sentences such as “After school I like to ______” or “My favourite think to do on a weekend is ______” (Brozo, 2002). This gives teachers the chance to examine the students’ interests and choose reading material based on their answers. Also, students’ interests change over time, so it is important to keep up to date on what modern youth would deem an interesting read.

Biancarosa & Snow (2004, as cited in NJCLD, 2008) state that there is overwhelming evidence that intensive and high-quality literacy lessons can aid the students who are struggling with building the skills necessary to be successful in high school and beyond. It’s also reported that students with learning disabilities have major deficits with reading and math comprehension when compared to classmates of the same grade (NJCLD, 2008). It was estimated that 21% of those students were five or more grade levels below the standards for reading; those with lower literacy levels also showed to have higher dropout rates than the general population. The rate of dropout was estimated at 31.6% for students with learning disabilities as opposed to 9.4% for students without learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007c, as cited in NJCLD, 2008). The data further suggest that only 11% of students with learning disabilities will go onto post-secondary education when compared to 53% of students from the general population.

Intensive literacy instruction, however, has proven to be a very valuable asset to raising reading and writing skills with adolescents who have learning disabilities. Further supported in Blair et al., (2009), explicit instruction is highly effective when students require sustained attention from the classroom instructor, especially for students with learning disabilities. Accommodations are given that provide individualized learning strategies in combination with explicit learning instructions that are systematic and relevant to the instructions being given (NJCLD, 2008).
An effective way of engaging struggling readers in literacy is to bring them through guided practices of the materials being taught in the classroom (Blair et al., 2009). Since students do not typically mature into more independent reading styles on their own, teachers are encouraged to provide struggling readers with direct/explicit instruction to those who need further support. The Carnegie Corporation (2003) went on to say “The way in which students are taught to read, comprehend and write about subject matter has not kept pace with the [new] demands of schooling” (p.2). This shows how proper instruction has not been provided within the schools to give students the skills they need to properly read and write in modern day society. Direct/explicit instruction is, however, highly recommended throughout multiple literature sources to help struggling students with their reading skills. The core recommendations for these instructions include reviewing and checking previous works, presenting new material, guided practices, feedback and corrections, independent practice, and most importantly, weekly and monthly progress reviews (Rosenshine and Stevens, 1995). Explaining why certain materials and cognitive strategies such as modeling and guided practice are useful to students (Blair et al., 2009). Giving the students the opportunity to observe certain skills as well as be directed during activities pertaining to the most recent lesson is of great importance.

The “thinking aloud” technique is further supported by Beers (2003) who used this strategy in order for students to have a chance to hear the thought process a skilled reader used to comprehend reading material. Beers (2003) says “When possible, I like for students to have a copy of the text I’m reading. They have the bonus of reading along while I’m reading to them” (pg. 43). The book goes on to further support direct instruction as previously discussed in the article by Blair et al., (2009). It states how direct instruction gives the teacher the opportunity to evaluate the student’s needs in order to help determine what needs to be learned and then respond to it. Beers (2003) also provides the reader with a comparison between the terms “direct instruction” and “scripted instruction”, which are terms that are quite often confused with each other. Scripted instruction leaves no room for the teacher to provide their own pacing for the students as they see fit, and does not allow the teacher to respond to the students’ specific needs.

In a research study conducted by Juel and Minden-Cupp (2000), students with low reading skills were able to achieve greater success when four particular practices were implemented into the classroom. These techniques included breaking up larger words into smaller, more manageable syllables. This helps students observe a word, and recognize parts of the word that make certain sounds, then piece it together into its actual form. Next, students were told to use their finger to point to the text in order to keep their place whilst reading aloud. Teachers also gave students the opportunity to compare and contrast certain words in order to differentiate the meaning. And finally, a key technique which should be used within the classroom is using small instructional groups in order to have the ability to give each student the proper attention that they need. Also, it gives teachers the opportunity to look at the specific needs of each individual student, discover learning strategies that best suit them and then implement them. Cognitive techniques that can be used along with Juel and Minden-Cupp’s (2000) techniques include “talk-alouds” and “think-alouds” (Blair et al., 2009). These strategies allow opportunities for student-teacher interaction, and more importantly, the “think-aloud” helps students “get inside the teacher’s mind” when discussing steps in a newly taught strategy, as well as describing the reasoning behind performing certain tasks.
When helping students with new vocabulary, it’s important to stress the significance of learning new words through the context in which they are used. “Context clue” exercises are very helpful for students learning new words, as well as following up with using the dictionary to check if their guesses were right (Fukkink & de Glopper, 1998). The “context clue” exercises have the students read a sentence with an unfamiliar word, and have them guess the meaning of that word according to the context of the sentence. In order to assess how well the students have learned the meaning of certain words, sentences should be created using the new vocabulary.

In the study entitled “A Lesson Cycle for Teaching Expository Reading and Writing”, a four-part lesson cycle was created to help raise a grade six class’s literacy skills (Ansaldo et al., 2010). The cycle’s four parts consisted of lessons entitled: Vocabulary Words, Text Structures, Modified Sentence Completion Activity, and Rewriting Text. The students were given “words-in-context” exercises as opposed to the traditional method of looking up words in a dictionary if they were unsure of their meaning. Next, five different types of paragraph structures were introduced. These included generalization (a general statement about a topic), sequences (a step-by-step sequence of an event), compare and contrast (comparing two topics and contrasting their differences), cause and effect (how a certain event affected a topic), and problem and solution (stating a problem at the beginning of the paragraph, eventually leading to a solution of the problem). The Modified sentence completion activity used exercises which combined the students’ learning of vocabulary along with introducing the different structures of texts. Finally, the students learned how to summarize paragraphs into their own words. The class was allowed to do this by replacing some of the author’s original words with synonyms or antonyms they found on their own. Examples of students’ summary writing allowed the teachers the ability to evaluate their comprehension of the text and knowledge of the content. Even though the lesson cycles only spanned over five weeks, there was statistically significant data to suggest that students’ reading and writing comprehension had increased. They were able to identify main ideas from paragraphs with significantly greater accuracy on the post test than the pre-test. The mean percentage of correctly identified main ideas changed from 59.32% to 77.86% from pre- to post-test. This showed an increase of over 30% after the completion of the five-week lesson cycle when applied to sixth grade students. This program was generalized to seventh grade students, who showed a 20.1% increase in their ability to locate the main idea when it was presented. This study, however, did not mention any significance pertaining to instructing smaller group sizes. It would be interesting to observe the results if the same four-part lesson cycle was applied to a smaller group of students.

In terms of aiding students in the understanding of what information the text is giving, Functional Language Analysis can prove to be a useful tool (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010). FLA offers practical strategies for discussing the text through the analysis of the language being used, and is followed by discussion of the meaning of language patterns. For example, when looking at the style/voice of the text and the reader asks how the author is attempting to interact with the audience, the functional language analysis strategy recommended would be to analyse the mood, modality, and word choices used. This way, the reader can understand what feeling the author is intending for his/her audience, as well as interpreting the main characters thoughts and emotions. Teachers and students are able to enjoy this approach when exploring the world which the author has creating by analysing the language and grammatical patterns being used. Secondary school students often have issues with more abstract and complex language, which is why functional language analysis can prove to be beneficial. It offers an approach to reading that acknowledges
and recognizes language roles in constructing knowledge and aids teachers in helping students identify patterns of languages in books and other texts they read.

In contrast to the earlier mentioned studies involving sit-down lessons and activities, the next reviewed article by Ryan (2008), encourages a more active approach to literacy. The approach used was based on a multiliteracies pedagogic framework (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005; The New London Group, 2000, as cited in Ryan, 2008) which gave attention to authentic projects, which are assignments directly connecting to the students’ complex lives, as techniques to learn new skills with thought and knowledge processes. Kist (2003) further argued that students must actively participate in order to achieve success. Ryan (2003) created a three-step planning model which was based around the idea that students need to put their skills to work in order to solve a problem presented to them. The three steps included: Conceptualize (ideas for the project outcome), Unpack (how to determine the literacy skills and knowledge the students require to be explicitly taught in order to achieve outcomes), and Strategize (strategizing how to use newly found skills in authentic ways). The “Unpacking” stage is consistent with Juel and Minden-Cupp (2000) in their strategies of using smaller groups in order to focus on their particular needs in the learning process. It is noted in Ryan (2008) that not every student needs explicit instructions, but certain groups within the class may need the extra attention. It is also said that teacher “silence”, being defined as “not putting teacher knowledge up front as a model to follow”, gives the students the opportunity take risks and guess the answers, as well as being more innovative with their responses. At the end of the study, somewhat unexpectedly, the entire class demonstrated an increase in marks. The students were able to stay on-task for longer periods of time when they were engaged in literacy tasks. In addition, once the skills and engagement were improved, behaviour improved as well. Lloyd and Watts also found that students can become very quick learners when they are given the opportunity to be active, self-directive, and exploratory with a subject (2002).

Having students share their own experiences can also help in terms of actively relating to the literature (Boreen and Gruber, 2003). In this study, a story entitled “The Witches” was used to demonstrate how both middle school and college students related to the characters as well as discussed and challenged particular ideas the story brought forth, such as stereotyping and gender issues. This creative approach sparked intense discussions, mostly pertaining to the idea of how women were always the ones persecuted for being witches. Boreen and Gruber noted that teachers have discovered that the best way to challenge popular cultures and their misconceptions is to use a class discussion to analyse them (2003). This gives the class the opportunity to become actively engaged and interested in the topic, while also being given the opportunity to listen to one another’s points of view. Doing this expands students’ opinions and can further develop skills to explain their reasoning behind their opinion when actively engaged in discussion.

As stated before in many of the aforementioned literature, it is of utmost importance to create a positive learning environment as well as using proper instructional techniques. There are many examples of what to do for struggling readers in Beer’s (2003) *When Kids Can’t Read, What Teachers Can Do*. Modeling the proper skills has been said to be one of the best ways to teach most sets of skills, however, when a student is at an exceptionally low level of reading and writing, the most basic techniques must be broken down further. Beers mentions a specific student from her experience in the classroom which represents many students in today’s
classrooms (2003). This particular student had trouble with multisyllable words, recalling specific information given in the text, couldn’t make generalizations, and couldn’t connect the text with other books or to situations from his own life. For multisyllable words, it was recommended to teach the student “chunking” in order to aid in the recognition of word parts. When the student can’t properly make generalizations, the “think aloud” strategy can be used. This gives the students a chance to listen to what it’s like for a good reader to make inferences about the text as well as understand how they are formed. Also, it’s important to instruct where it is necessary to make inferences or generalizations and understand if pronoun referents, connectors (such as “therefore”), or any other types of inferences are causing trouble.

When it comes to measuring literacy skills, it can sometimes be very difficult to gather reliable data on reading comprehension (Braze et al., 2007). In a recently published article by Collishaw et al. (2009), a longitudinal study was conducted on the persistency of literacy problems from adolescence to mid-life. A group of poor readers and a separate group of normally developed readers were assessed at age 14 and 15 years, then were contacted again at ages 44 and 45. The experimenters had the participants complete a reading, verbal and non-verbal IQ tests when they were adolescents. When the individuals reached their middle ages, they completed a spelling test, had them report about their educational qualifications, as well as problems that they had on daily literacy tasks. The results showed that the group of poor readers’ literacy skills were quite impaired at mid-life with evidence which showed that their skills may have fallen even further. The conclusions that were made by the researches stated that by adolescence, reading and literacy skills were very stable. In the long run, it may be to the individual’s benefit that they continue exposing themselves to reading material, especially those with learning disabilities. This way, they can maintain a stable level of literacy or even be able to build up to higher reading and writing skills.

In sum, the relevant literature reveals several supported techniques and conceptual frameworks that can potentially assist in teaching at-risk adolescent students literacy skills. The “think-aloud” technique has proven to be very useful and is supported, or mentioned, by more than two articles and in one of the reviewed books. Having students become actively engaged in the material is also a very effective method to use, along with ensuring the students are interested in the subject being read about, or even just with general research into a topic. In the end, it is of utmost importance that the technique which works best for the student(s) is used in order for them to understand their reading and writing material, as well as to achieve the skills necessary to succeed in all areas of school.

Chapter III: Methodology

General Information

The participants of this study attend the ACE (Alternative Continuing Education) program, which is an alternative setting run by the students’ original high school. This allows any students who are struggling in school to earn any missed credits, or credits they were unable to attain due to poor marks. Being at the ACE program allows the youth to complete their work at their own pace as well as receive individual instruction from on-site teachers. Some of the
students are also attending the ACE program due to charges laid against them including truancy and assault.

Since most of the students are at different grade levels, they are given different material to read and booklets to complete in order to earn certain credits. This program is run in the same building as other educational programs and occupies two classrooms on the second floor of the building.

Since these students are expected to complete high school credits, another expectation is for them to be able to pass the grade ten high school literacy exam. This exam has students read a story specific to the grade ten level and answer a combination of multiple choice, opinion questions, and general questions about the story. This allows anyone assessing the exam to determine if the individual meets provincial expectations of reading and writing comprehension. Passing the literacy exam is required to graduate from high school.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to increase the literacy skills of at risk youth using techniques mentioned in the literature such as “think-alouds”, modeling proper reading skills, and providing a small classroom environment. In improving the participants’ literacy skills, it was expected that the students would be able to perform better on their literacy exam in order to pass and graduate high school.

Participants

There are two female students and five male students for a total of seven participants in the literacy workshop. The students’ ages range from 16-17 years old. Criteria for inclusion are that the student had to have previously shown difficulty with English, to have been lacking one or more high school English credits, and to have been required to take or re-take the high school literacy test. The criteria for exclusion is that the student has already passed their high school literacy exam and does not need to earn their English credit. The rationale for this workshop was to help at-risk students with their reading and writing skills in order to not only pass their upcoming high school literacy exam, but also be able to succeed in other areas of school.

Some of the participants had been enrolled in the ACE program due to truancy charges, learning disabilities, and other related circumstances. To select the participants for the literacy program, the facilitator of the ACE program suggested certain individuals based on the fact that they were taking (or retaking) their high school literacy exam, as well as needing to improve their reading and writing skills in English. The instructor spoke to the students in pairs or by themselves to explain the program in depth along with its possible benefits. This was when the informed consent form (Appendix B) was given to the students to take home to their parents/guardians to sign and return as soon as possible.

Design
The students were given both a pre and post-test in order to assess the effectiveness of the literacy workshop. The small class size and intensive teaching methods can be seen as independent variables and the literacy measures employed can be seen as dependent variables. The literacy skills were the dependant variables because the goal of the study is to effect a change in the measured literacy skills.

**Setting and Apparatus**

The study was conducted inside the same building through which the ACE program ran. A small office was used as a classroom within a larger classroom to conduct the literacy sessions. Since the ACE program only was allowed two rooms in the building to use for the students, it allowed the class to be run within the given space, along with having the privacy to conduct the lessons. The equipment used included a chalkboard, duotangs with lessons to follow inside, as well as visual cues decorating the classroom. The visual cues included components of basic grammar, as well as the thought process one should take when reading a story.

**Measures**

In order to assess the level of the students’ literacy skills, two separate scores were taken. The first score was attained by the distribution of a previous literacy exam, which consisted of a short story, along with multiple choice questions and written answers. Both of the short stories were a page in length and were determined to be the same level in difficulty. They also had approximately the same amount of multiple choice and short answer questions for the students to answer. This gave the instructor a view on the students’ reading and comprehension skills. Another one of equal difficulty was given as part of the post-test. The second score was attained by distributing the Shipley Institute of Living Scale to assess the vocabulary skills of the students. Since the scale consisted of 40 questions, the test was split in half in order to be able to use it as both a pre and post-test. The odd numbers were distributed first, and then the even numbers were distributed for the post test. The split half reliability for the Shipley Scale is .87 (Shipley, W. C.). Due to copyright, both the short stories and Shipley Institute of Living Scale are not shown in the appendices.

A T-test for repeated measures will be used to assess the effectiveness of the literacy workshop. This will evaluate if the teaching techniques suggested in the literature were effective for a small class size.

**Procedures**

Informed consent was obtained about a week before the pre-test was to be conducted. Before distributing the test, the instructor gave participants instructions on how to complete each separate test. The instructor further informed them that she could not answer any questions as the test was a way of seeing where the students’ were in terms of their literacy skills. After the tests were completed, each student was assigned a random number following the confidentiality procedure guidelines.
The classes were conducted 2-3 times a week with a 1-2 hour time length for five weeks. This gave the students the opportunity to finish any previous or continuing work they had been doing before the commencement of the workshop. If three or more of the participants were absent on a day of the workshop, the lesson would be postponed until the next day. Each student was given a duotang which contained lessons and activities created by the instructor, as well as blank paper to allow the students to write notes and new definitions in order to expand their vocabulary. A lesson was presented first, followed by having the class participate in answering questions themselves, then they were allowed work time to complete the activities provided. After answering a question correctly, or participating in a conversation about the present topic, students were given reinforcement in the form of verbal praise. Also, when duotang work was completed correctly, stickers were distributed on the worksheets so the students could see how well they had done.

Once the short story unit began, the “think-aloud” technique was conducted in order for the students to understand how a skilled reader would read and interpret a piece of writing. There were three short stories in the workshop to give the students time to practice how to identify ideas and themes within a story. Finally, heavier focus was put on how the literacy exam will be asking questions, as well as how to give an ideal answer. Worksheets used are shown in the appendices.

Unfortunately, a portion of the earlier material had to be omitted from the literacy workshop in order to adhere to time constraints. This material included the grammar unit, as well as another short story that was to be added to the short story unit.

Chapter IV: Results

Although attendance was generally consistent throughout the duration of the workshop, most of the students did not present a positive attitude towards literacy until the latter units. The most engagement that was shown was during the paragraph and short story units. These parts of the workshop seemed to inspire more activity and discussions between the students, and also got them to work together on the material.

There were, however, students who consistently had poor attitudes throughout the workshop and showed little motivation to improve, even with one-on-one attention. Another fact to take into consideration was the fluctuating moods of the students. Some of the youths were facing difficult life situations which most likely affected their attitudes, not only in the workshop, but with the rest of their schoolwork as well. This is likely a major factor in why there was no statistical significance for both the short story and vocabulary scores. Another reason for lack of statistical significance could have been the difficulty in attempting to accommodate multiple types of learning disabilities. For example, one student who had ADHD often distracted another student who needed to be in a quieter learning environment with one-on-one instruction. Collectively, all of these factors could have played a role in why the results from the workshop did not show statistical significance.

The following charts display the means and standard deviations of the scores from both the short story tests as well as the vocabulary. The results show a 3.41% mean increase from the
pre to post test for the students’ short story results. However, there was a 7.72% decrease in the vocabulary score results. The raw score data can be found in Appendix I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Short Story</th>
<th></th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>39.29</td>
<td>20.29</td>
<td>60.57</td>
<td>17.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>42.43</td>
<td>20.59</td>
<td>52.85</td>
<td>12.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter V: Discussion

Summary

The purpose of this thesis was to gather different methods, which included psychological and behavioural, to help at-risk youth improve their literacy skills. The main methods that were used to help the students understand the material were, as previously mentioned, a smaller group size, positive reinforcement (in the form of positive praise for participation, along with stickers being placed on completed work) and the “think alouds” as described by Beers (2003), which was a form of modeling the proper type of thinking when one is reading a piece of writing. Other literature aided in the formation of the workshop layout to ensure simpler concepts were reviewed first, then slowly fading into more detailed and difficult work. All of these pieces fit together in such a way to create a unique literacy workshop.

This research has the potential greatly contribute to the behavioural psychology field since it can be implemented in any school setting, and possibly generalized to any age group who are struggling with their literacy skills.

Strengths and Limitations

A strength of the program was in how the facilitator used progressively difficult levels to ensure all of the students understood the simpler concepts before moving onto more advanced topics. Also, in reviewing the participants’ work folders, if any student was seen to be having
difficulty with their worksheets, extra one-on-one time would be given to ensure their understanding. Improvised examples and questions would be given to help the student practice the skills until they fully understood the material. Another placement student also was able to assist the participants with the more difficult assignments which included creating paragraphs from facts given on a single topic.

Another strength was the small group size format. This made it so discussions could be carried out in a more organized format, especially when the short story unit was done. The students were able to sit at a large table so that they could all see each other and carry out conversations about their reading and work material.

A limitation which arose was the inability to perform a comparative study. Unfortunately, the instructor was not provided with the means to do a comparison to evaluate the effectiveness of the techniques for a large classroom size versus the smaller classroom size. This could have provided valuable information on which teaching format proved to be the most beneficial to the students, and could have continued to be used to further their education.

An anticipated challenge which proved to be a limitation was the attitudes of a few of the students. There were some who truly desired to understand the material, actively participated, and asked appropriate questions related to the topics. Others proved to be not as ambitious about the concept of literacy; these students often didn’t attend regularly, actively participate, and would sometimes become distracted and ask questions unrelated to the material. The participants’ moods also appeared to have a great influence on how well they completed their work, and may have become a factor in their pre and post-test performances. This could have played a role in why there wasn’t a statistically significant effect in the results of the literacy workshop.

Another challenge which presented itself was the students’ attendance. While some of the participants were court-ordered to attend ACE every week day, others would not attend due to family situations which took precedence over going to school. If there were three or more participants missing on the day of the workshop, the lesson would be postponed until later that week. If there was only one student absent, a short catch-up session would be done one-on-one with to help them see where their classmates were in the workshop.

Multi-level Systems Perspective

Client Level

At the client level, lack of motivation proved to be quite an obstacle with one individual in particular. Even as one-on-on instruction was given and the benefits of the literacy program were explained, he still didn’t appear highly motivated. Although the concepts were explained in the best detail possible, the individual could not be forced to do his work if he found it undesirable to complete.

Program Level

The students participating in the literacy workshop all had different levels of understanding of reading and writing. A couple of the more advanced students sometimes found
themselves bored, whereas other students participated actively with a willingness to learn, and other who struggled immensely. It was very difficult to try and accommodate to everyone’s different learning levels and making sure they all understood the meaning of the material. Also, implementing stickers on well done paragraphs and pieces of writing proved to be an effective reinforcer, as well as positive praise during one-on-one sessions. Some minor material needed to be cut from the program as well due to time constraints, but the essential information was kept for the students’ benefits.

Organisation Level

Along with the workshop, students also needed time to complete any other work which was previously assigned to them. It needed to be ensured they had time to finish their other assignments as well. Also, there was another placement student who needed to do workshops with the students as well, so both schedules needed to work around that accordingly. If she needed to do her workshop the same day as the literacy workshop did, dates would be adjusted accordingly and done the next day.

Societal Level

When working with struggling teenagers, it’s difficult to help them get past the notion that they are not good enough, as well as society labeling them as “bad kids”. This greatly affects the students’ attitudes in the classroom, and ultimately, their schoolwork. The ACE program tries to help them through some of the societal prejudices against them, along with validating their self-worth and their future contributions to society.

Recommendations for Further Research

In the future it would be informative to do a comparative study between how the same material and behavioural methods would affect the smaller groups size versus a regular classroom size. Any data that would be gathered from this study could help identify students’ preferred learning environments in order to provide the best possible quality of education.

In addition to an alternate classroom setting, it would be helpful to have a longer amount of time to teach and practice the material with the students. Since this study had time restraints, it was sometimes difficult to fit all of the lessons needed into the time given. This unfortunately caused minor material to be cut in favour of having the core material kept in the workshop. It would be beneficial to see if the longer workshop timeline, along with including the cut material, would have a greater effect on the students’ literacy skills.

Another useful approach would be to run a small group for youth with the same, or similar, learning disabilities. Since this particular study was done with students who had an array of disabilities as well as domestic situations, it would be very interesting to have participants who were similar in these ways. Some of the same techniques can be used as in the literacy workshop, while adding specific techniques geared towards a certain learning delay or disorder. This could also help in discovering any new methods that works best to help youth with their literacy skills.
References


Brozo, W. G. (2002). To be a Boy, to be a Reader: Engaging Teen and Preteen Boys in Active Literacy. International Reading Association


Manual for the Shipley Institute of Living Scale (Revised), Robert Zachary, Ph.D., seventh Printing 1994, Published by Western Psychological Services.


Appendices

Appendix A

Confidentiality of Agency Name

If the student wishes to identify in the thesis the name of the agency in which the thesis project took place, the student and an agency representative (staff or manager) should complete the “Consent for Use of Agency Name” form. The form should be submitted to the faculty supervisor and should be kept in the student’s placement file at St. Lawrence College.

Consent for Use of Agency Name Template

St. Lawrence College

www.sl.on.ca

Date: March 4, 20

CONSENT FOR USE OF AGENCY NAME

I, [Name], consent to the use of the name of [Agency Name] in [Student Name]'s applied thesis for the Bachelor of Applied Arts in Behavioural Psychology program at St. Lawrence College.

[Signature]
Agency Staff Signature

[Signature]
Student Signature

[Printed Name]
Printed Name

[Printed Name]
Printed Name

19
Appendix B

Consent Form

Title: The Design and Implementation of an Intensive Workshop to Enhance Literacy Skills Among At-Risk Adolescents

Student: Dayna Edwards

College Supervisor: Dave Villeneuve

Invitation

I am a student in my 4th year in the Behavioural Psychology at St. Lawrence College and I am currently on placement at the ACE program. As a part of this placement, I am completing a special project called an applied thesis and am asking for your assistance to complete this project. The information in this form is intended to help you understand my project so that you can decide whether or not you want to participate. Please read the information below carefully and ask all the questions you might have before deciding whether or not to participate.

What is the purpose of the study?

My project involves creating a program to help at-risk students gain a more in-depth understanding of literacy. A small group format and intensive teaching methods will be used to teach new literacy skills. The lessons I am putting together will include: English grammar, paragraph and sentence structure, and identifying and communicating the main ideas in a short story. Students will also be provided some assistance in preparing for their upcoming high school literacy exam.
What will you need to do if you take part?

If you agree to participate in the program, you will be asked to attend a 1-2 hour literacy class which will run 2-3 times a week. It will take place in one of the classrooms in the same building as the ACE program. You will be asked to attend the classes, actively participate, complete and hand in the assigned work. Two assessments will be done to evaluate the effectiveness of the program; one before the classes start, and one after they have finished.

What are the potential benefits to me of taking part?

The potential benefits of participating in this class is reviewing/gaining more knowledge of English grammar, as well as improving your ability to critically read a piece of work and identify main ideas and themes. At the end of the program, sample questions from a previous literacy exam will be used to help improve the students’ understanding of what the question is asking of them, as well as how to give an ideal answer.

What are the potential benefits to others of taking part? (If applicable)

Depending on the success of the program, it may be used again to help teach other at-risk students the same skills. You may also give suggestions on what to add to the program, or how to possibly improve it.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The risks of participating in this program are minimal, but may include becoming tired or bored with the material.

What happens if something goes wrong?

If any of the materials we read causes an emotional reaction, you are very welcome to talk to me about it, or the ACE program director Marcus Niemann.

Will my taking part in this project be kept private?

We will make every attempt to ensure that any information that may identify you will be kept strictly confidential unless required by law. All documents such as activities and worksheets will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the ACE program for seven years, and will be destroyed thereafter. Besides myself, Marcus Niemann will also have access to the students’ data. Information kept on computer will be password protected. You will not be identified by name in any reports, publications, or presentations resulting from this project.
**Do you have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign this consent form. I will be asking your parent or guardian to sign the consent form as well. If you do decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without incurring any penalty.

**Contact for further information.**

This project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at St. Lawrence College. The project will be developed under the supervision of Dave Villeneuve, my supervisor from St. Lawrence College. I really appreciate your cooperation. If you have any additional questions or concerns, feel free to ask me, Dayna Edwards at dayna.edwards.26@gmail.com, or you can contact my College Supervisor, Dave Villeneuve at Villeneuve.Dave@csc-scc.gc.ca. You may also contact the Research Ethics Board at appliedresearch@sl.on.ca.

**Consent**

If you agree to participate in the project, please complete the following form and return it to me as soon as possible. A copy of this signed document will be given to you for your own records. An additional copy of your consent will be retained at the agency and in a secure location with the Research Ethics Board at St. Lawrence College.

**Parent or Guardian Consent**

I have placed two lines where both the student and the guardian may sign on the attached sheet so I know both of you have read and understood the requirements for the classes. As the student’s guardian, you ultimately have the right to allow or refuse your son/daughter’s participation. You are under no obligation to have your child participate in these classes.
Consent

By signing this form, I agree that:

- The study has been explained to me.
- All my questions were answered.
- Possible harm and discomforts and possible benefits (if any) of this study have been explained to me.
- I understand that I have the right not to participate and the right to stop at any time.
- I am free now, and in the future, to ask any questions about the study.
- I have been told that my personal information will be kept confidential.
- I understand that no information that would identify me will be released or printed without asking me first.
- I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

I hereby consent to participate.

Parent/Guardian Printed Name: ____________________________

Participant Printed Name: _________________________________

Age of Participant (If Under 18):______________

Parent/Guardian Signature: _______________________________  Date: __________

Participant Signature: ____________________________________ Date:___________

SLC Student Signature: __________________________________  Date: __________

Printed Name: ____________________________
Appendix C

Two is a number.

She counted, "One, two, three."

Too is an adverb that can mean also.

He wanted to go too.

Too is an adverb that can mean more than enough.

This is too much for me!

To plus a noun or noun phrase is a preposition.

Take me to the ball game.

I went to bed early that night.

To plus a verb is an infinitive.

She wanted to go.

He decided to run away.

Choose the correct two, too, or to for each of the blanks below:

1. Many students read _____ quickly and _____ carelessly.
2. I was _____ scared _____ say a word to her!
3. I am going _____ the store now.
4. They are building _____ new houses on our block.
5. May I go _____?
6. Do you think it is _____ late _____ to do that now?
7. I have _____ new shirts that I can't wait _____ wear.
8. My dental appointment lasted _____ hours and that was _____ long!
9. This room is _____ cold _____ stay in very much longer.
10. After I played raquetball for _____ hours, I was _____ tired _____ walk home.
11. It is not good _____ put _____ much salt on your food.
12. My next dental appointment is for tomorrow at _____ o’clock.
13. I am not _____ excited about going _____ the dentist again.
14. My brother flew _____ Alabama earlier this week.
15. We have planted _____ rose bushes in pots on the patio.
Appendix D
Your and You’re

Your is possessive, meaning “to belong to you”.

Example:
These are your glasses.

You’re is an abbreviation for “you are”.

Example:
You’re going to be late if you don’t hurry up.

Fill in the blank with your or you’re.
Can I borrow ______ movie?
For this activity, ______ going to need to fill in the blanks.
You need to finish ______ work.
______ car needs to be brought in for repairs.
If ______ not going, then I won’t either.
______ face is looking pale today.
For this project, ______ going to get into groups of three.
The time on ______ watch is wrong.
______ going to need a pen and paper for this exercise.
If ______ not feeling well, you should lay down.
Appendix E
There, They’re, and Their

**There** is used when you are referring to a place.

**Example:** The book is over *there* on the desk.

**They’re** is an abbreviation of “they are”.

**Example:** *They’re* not going to be able to hear you unless you use a microphone.

**Their** is possessive; meaning to belong to them (more than one person).

**Example:** A movie was *their* reward for doing such hard work.

---

**Fill in the blanks with there, they’re, or their.**

You can put the lamp over ______.

______ going to the movies tonight.

The class sat quietly and did ______ work.

My keys were right ______ on my desk.

Next week, the class will be going on ______ yearly field trip.

They need to finish ______ work if ______ going to have free time.

______ going to have to walk over ______ across the street if they want ______ snacks.

______ in ______ final year of high school.
Appendix F
Affect and Effect

**Effect**

“Effect” is defined as:

- Something brought about by a cause or agent; a **result**.
- The power to produce an outcome or achieve a result; influence:

**Examples:**

The drug had an immediate **effect** on the pain.

The government's action had no **effect** on the trade imbalance.

**Affect**

“Affect” is defined as

- To have an **influence** on or effect a change in.
- To act on the emotions of; touch or move.

**Examples:**

How does the crime rate **affect** hiring levels by local police officers?

The weather conditions will **affect** the number of people who come to the county fair this year.

**Circle the correct answer for the sentences below:**

The Tylenol had no affect/effect on my headache, whatsoever.

The weather will affect/effect whether or not we have gym class outside.

The mass protest had no affect/effect on the government’s decision.

Inflation affects/effects the buying power of the dollar.

The way you eat can affect/effect how you feel during the day.

The drowsiness was the affect/effect of the cold medicine.
Appendix G
Paragrams

What is a paragraph?
A paragraph is a portion of organized writing dealing with a specific idea, beginning with an indentation on a new line or having a full line or space in between paragraphs.

Examples:

**Indentation**

The general American practice is to indicate all paragraphs including the first, by indenting the first line (three to five spaces), whereas business letters generally use blank lines and no indent (these are sometimes known as "block paragraphs").

Or

The general American practice is to indicate all paragraphs including the first, by indenting the first line (three to five spaces), whereas business letters generally use blank lines and no indent (these are sometimes known as "block paragraphs").

When writing a proper paragraph…

**Signal words**

Signal words help the reader see the sequence in the paragraph (first, second, and then, etc.) as well as help with the flow of writing.

There are three reasons why....
First...
Second...
Third....
For instance....
Similarly....
Also....
Further....
In order to...
Because...
So...
Therefore....
In conclusion....
As a result....
Finally....
In summary....
From this we see....

Class Activity

As a class, organize the following facts into a proper paragraph using the appropriate signal words. Another good strategy to use is to put these facts into “idea groups”. This can help with the flow of your writing and ensure you don’t jump back and forth between ideas. You may write your paragraph in the space given, or use the lines paper provided in your duo tangs.

New York City is in the United States.
New York City is located in New York State.
It borders on the Atlantic Ocean.
It was founded in 1625 as "New Amsterdam".
It was first settled by the Dutch.
It is important for commerce.
Wall Street is located in New York City.
It has many national and international banks.
It has many important skyscrapers.
The World Trade Center is located in New York City.
The Empire State Building is in New York City.
New York City is an important city for immigration.
Ellis Island used to be the entry point for many immigrants at the turn of the century.
There is an interesting immigration museum on Ellis Island.

Group Activity

In groups, organize the following facts into a proper paragraph using the appropriate signal words and idea groups. You may write your paragraph in the space given, or use the lines paper provided in your duo tangs.
Elvis Presley was an American. He was a singer and actor. He was famous for rock-and-roll. He was born in Tupelo, Mississippi. He was born on January 8, 1935. He started singing in church. He taught himself to play the guitar. He first became popular on the local touring circuit for country-and-western music. He sang romantic songs. He danced erotically. Teens loved him for his new style. He had many hits. He sang "Love Me Tender", "All Shook Up", and "Don't Be Cruel". He died on August 16, 1977. He died in Memphis, Tennessee. He might have died of drug and alcohol abuse.

Creative Writing Activity

Individually, choose a famous person or place and write down important facts about them. Create a proper paragraph using signal words to help your writing flow.

Creative thinking usually involves five stages (classification). First (sequence), the problem is defined. Second (sequence), creative thinkers saturate themselves with as much information as they can find. Then (sequence) come the incubation stage. Next (sequence) problem solving moves to an unconscious level as the mind ponders different possible, or even impossible, solutions. The incubation stage (classification) is followed by (sequence) illumination. By illumination, we refer to (definition) a period of sudden understanding or insight. Finally (sequence), there is the verification stage, when solutions or answers are critically
New York

New York, New York is located on the Atlantic Coast of the United States of America. It was first settled as "New Amsterdam" in 1625 by the Dutch. Today, New York City is an important commercial and banking center which includes Wall Street. Among its many important skyscrapers are the World Trade Center and The Empire State Building. One of the most interesting museums is on Ellis Island which served as the entry point for many immigrants who passed through New York City at the turn of the century.

MAIN IDEA SIGNAL WORDS
There are three reasons why....
First...
Second...
Third....
And most importantly....

SUPPORT IDEAS SIGNAL WORDS

SIGNAL: SIGNIFICANCE:
On the other hand....
On the contrary....
In contrast....
For example....
As an example....
For instance....
Similarly....
Also....
Further....
Furthermore....
Likewise...
In addition to...
Furthermore...
In order to...
Because...
So...
CONCLUSION or SUMMARY SIGNAL WORDS:
Therefore....
In conclusion....
As a result....
Finally....
In summary....
From this we see....
Appendix H
Practice Run-on Sentences

Remember: You can fix run-on sentences by creating two or more sentences, adding commas, or adding conjunctions such as “and” and “but”.

1. Nicole did very well in English it was her favourite subject.

2. Tabitha did not like working in groups she was very particular with how the information was organized this bothered her team members.

3. The movie starts at 7:30 so you want to be there for 7:00 since it’ll be busy since it’s opening night.

4. The doctor gave me medicine and told me to take it every day and it will make me feel better and will bring down my fever.

5. The teacher, Ms. White, gave a lot of homework, it was very difficult I didn’t want to do it all.

6. The internet and cell phones have made communication easier and we can stay in touch better but it’s still difficult for some people to understand how to work their computers properly.

7. It can be difficult to talk on your cell phone while driving and it causes car accidents but now it’s the law that you can’t talk on your phone and drive and that’s very good.

8. When it’s daylight’s savings time and we lose an hour I get very tired and I can’t focus so it’s difficult to get my work done.
9. I have to do a presentation tomorrow and I’m very nervous and think I’ll mess up and my class will laugh at me.

10. We have to do a book report for school but I don’t like the book very much but I have to do the assignment and it’s due in two weeks.
Appendix I

Raw Data

Results for the Short Story (Percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Code</th>
<th>Pre Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41152</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13422</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23315</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51224</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35521</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>+29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11543</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>+22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32551</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>+19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ t(6) = 0.43, > .05, \text{two tailed} \]

Results for Vocabulary Test (Percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Code</th>
<th>Pre Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41152</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13422</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23315</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51224</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>+26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35521</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11543</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32551</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>-25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ t(6) = -1.07, > .05, \text{two tailed} \]