About the Author

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In addition to journal articles, she has authored Communicating, one of a series of Cub Scout academic handbooks developed in conjunction with the International Reading Association. Past president of the New Jersey Reading Association, she is presently co-editor of The Newsletter, an NJRA quarterly publication. Jane is an active participator in the Reading Department's Teachers as Readers group and is an avid reader of the latest in children's literature.

Dr. Sullivan also maintains a strong interest in projects that encourage college students' persistence to graduation. She is the coordinator of retention programs at Rowan and has authored several grants to support students' academic progress.


Summer of Literacy: A Collaborative Project

Jane Sullivan

In a recent article, Gordon Donaldson, Jr. (1993) points out that "simply working longer and harder will not significantly change our performance; we must learn to work smarter." One proven way for teacher educators to "work smarter"—to work more productively, that is—is to participate in collaborative projects with school administrators and teachers. Such an arrangement can be beneficial to all parties when it has been undertaken as a community of educators, a partnership in which all the players contribute to the groundwork—goal setting, timelines, strategies—and act collectively to carry out these goals.

The Summer of Literacy (SoL) Project that took place in Salem Schools in summer 1993 was such a collaboration, funded jointly by the Salem Schools and a NJDHE separately budgeted research grant awarded to the investigator. While the primary goal was to provide literacy instruction for entering first graders flagged as "at-risk," it had, as a secondary objective, a collaborative effort that would lead to enhancement of teachers' skills in literacy instruction and, for the college professor, opportunities to observe at close hand and
over a six-week period, teacher/student interaction in an “early intervention” environment.

The Concept of Early Intervention
For decades, the conventional procedure for selecting at-risk students for additional literacy instruction was to wait and see. Most programs were remedial, identifying students who had fallen behind their peers in learning to read and write. These programs began late in the educational experience of the child, often after three years of failure. More recently, school districts have adopted programs to prevent failure rather than to remediate it. The leader in this movement is Marie Clay, a New Zealand educator, whose Reading Recovery program has demonstrated remarkable success both in New Zealand and in the United States. The program identifies students whose lack of “concepts about print” marks them as prime candidates for failure in learning to read and write. These children are selected for special instruction early in first grade, before such failure has a chance to occur—thus the term early intervention. Clay, and others like her (Clay, 1985; Deford, Lyons, Pinnell, 1991; Pinnell, Lyons, Deford, Bryk, Seltzer, 1994), recommend specific techniques to assist children to develop concepts they will need to form strategies for literacy. Clay speaks of “the knots and tangles” beginning readers and writers encounter. Her philosophy is to provide a structure for these children so they develop strategies that will help them untangle the knots. The SoL project was designed to apply such techniques to entering first-graders in a summer program.

The Structure of SoL
All the participants—college professors, school administrators, teachers, parents and children—were subjects for SoL. The child subjects were fifteen kindergarten children who had been identified as candidates for “transitional first grade.” The criterion for such a recommendation is that the children are, academically, in the lowest percentile of their kindergarten class. The teacher subjects filled one of two roles. Five were
assigned to be "early intervention" teachers and two—Fine Arts teachers—scheduled activities to integrate literacy with the arts. The children’s parents or other care-providers were included in the family literacy workshop portion of the project. These workshops, conducted by the school’s vice principal, were held once a week.

The college professor began the program with a two-day workshop for the project’s faculty and staff. In addition, these teacher subjects met in a one-hour seminar following each day’s session during the six-week instructional segment of the project.

For six weeks after the workshop, the fifteen child subjects attended a two-hour, four-day-a-week summer literacy program. During that time, they engaged in half-hour individual instructional sessions in an integrated reading and writing program. The rest of the time, the children engaged in art and music projects, singing songs and painting pictures about the stories they were reading, and participated in creative drama activities, acting out these stories. Thus, all the activities were linked to literacy development in individual sessions.

During this six-week period, the vice principal conducted weekly workshops for the care providers. The workshops stressed ways to promote family literacy.

Thus the project developed as a three-tier program: a staff development program in early intervention techniques; a summer emergent literacy program for pre-first graders; and a program to teach care providers strategies for family literacy.

During the introductory workshop, the college professor discussed topics related to developing literacy, such as (1) the young child as learner; (2) positive signs of emergent literacy skills; (3) recording emerging reading/writing skills; (4) spelling development; (5) strategies used in successful early intervention programs; and (6) developing literacy through the arts. In addition to these training sessions, the professor and the teachers discussed the results of the base line testing of child subjects and planned teaching strategies based on these results. Finally, a framework was developed during the workshop for
the early intervention teachers to follow regularly with three children with whom they would work during the six weeks. In addition, the professor and teachers together planned art, music, and drama activities to enhance literacy learning.

During these six weeks, hour-long seminars followed each day's session. During these seminars, teachers discussed the child subjects' needs and progress with the professor. The group critiqued videotapes of both children in the early intervention session and children engaged in related arts activities. Based on these discussions, the professor and teachers made recommendations for modifications in approaches.

At the end of the six weeks, early intervention teachers were asked to provide a general evaluation of the three children for whom they were responsible. The Arts teachers assisted in these evaluations, contributing their observation of the children during the literacy and Arts sessions.

The fifteen child subjects met four days a week for six weeks. Each two-hour school day was divided into three half-hour segments; the additional thirty minutes served as transitional times between segments. The children were divided into groups of four and rotated between early intervention instruction, group art and music activities, and group drama. The thirty-minute early intervention sessions employed techniques recommended by Marie Clay, such as reading familiar books, letter identification, writing a story, cutting apart and rearranging the story, and reading new books along with the teacher (a technique referred to as shared reading). During art and music time, children worked cooperatively on art and/or music projects related to the reading and writing they were doing. They painted pictures that illustrated the stories they were reading and sang the text of stories like *The Wheels of the Bus* and *Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear*. In the drama period, children acted out some of the stories they shared in their literacy sessions, like *Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *The Three Little Pigs*.

The weekly workshops for care providers focused on subjects related to promoting family literacy. Reading to children, encouraging children to write, discussing stories and relating
them to real life, and encouraging “knowledge of print” skills were some topics covered in these workshops. In addition, parents and other providers were the audience for the dramatic presentation the children gave at the end of the project.

After the second week of the program, a modification was made that addressed a concern of the teachers. During a seminar discussion, teachers agreed that they were having difficulty motivating the children to write independently. The majority of the children preferred to copy text rather than produce it creatively. To stimulate creative writing and to encourage the children to use their own “invented spelling,” the college professor suggested starting a pen pal club between adults and children. Once a week, the children would write letters to their pen pals, who would respond. This project proved to be successful and continued even after the end of the project.

What Took Place in SoL?

The progress of each child was carefully recorded. The investigator collected baseline data in an interview with each child prior to the start of the program. During that twenty-minute interview, children performed tasks that assessed such concepts about print as recognition of title, author, the role of printed text, left-to-right directionality, and recognition of a word and a letter. They also identified upper- and lowercase letters and executed a simple spelling task.

During the project, each child was observed as he or she took part in each of the three instructional settings. Two of these sessions were small group settings; the third was the individual meeting with the early intervention teacher. Teachers in the dramatic play, and in the art and music sessions worked collaboratively with the early intervention teachers to reinforce the learning that took place in individual literacy instruction. For example, early intervention teachers spent five minutes each day on letter names and sounds. The children made alphabet books in the art sessions. On each page, they colored and pasted the target letter and familiar words and pictures that
begin with that letter. Similarly, early intervention teachers read stories aloud to the children each day and talked about meaning. The dramatic play teacher had the children reenact those stories. Through this type of teamwork, constant reinforcement enabled the children to build strong concepts of literacy tasks.

Why Summer?
SoL was designed as a summer program for a number of reasons. Cost, while perhaps not the most important reason, was a critical factor in deciding on a summer session. The training process for teachers in an early intervention program is long and expensive and must be borne by the district. Once trained, the teacher works individually with a maximum of four students. SoL was designed as a summer project, using district teachers and aides who received a stipend. The cost for the seven teachers participating was a fraction of the annual salaries for the same number of teachers. The on-site training, although not as lengthy as training for Reading Recovery, was comprehensive, delivered by a trained and experienced instructor in the area of literacy education, and uniquely tailored to the needs of the children in the program. Time was another variable that dictated the design. The investigator, freed from the teaching responsibilities of a regular semester, had the time needed to spend observing the instructional sessions. The teachers from the school district, also freed from the demanding curriculum of a school year, concentrated on the early intervention procedures and literacy development. In addition, time was a positive factor for the children participating, since the program created a bridge between kindergarten and first grade for them, preventing the regression that frequently occurs in children’s learning over the summer.

How Did the College Professor and the Teachers Collaborate?
Collaboration between college and school personnel was a built-in characteristic of the SoL project. At the beginning of the project, certain principles were agreed upon by all adult
participants. First, the responsibility for carrying out the project was to be shared by all. The college professor developed the project framework, based on studies of other early intervention projects. Necessary tailoring for the unique population in SoL was a collaborative effort. Each participant contributed. A second underlying principle of the project was trust. Every individual—child, teacher, principal, parent, college professor—was a learner as well as a resource for learning. The third principle was dedication. Each participant was a volunteer. The financial compensation alone did not repay participants for the time and effort they invested. They were there primarily as members of a learning community.

As the project progressed, it became apparent that participants were indeed functioning according to these principles. The initial two-day workshop defined the project and set the tone. In the beginning, the relationship between the investigator and the teachers was the traditional one of professor to student. The college professor explained the structure of the sessions, set goals, and provided expertise to insure that necessary concepts were understood. The teachers, on the other hand, were about to venture on uncharted waters. They needed support and reassurance before they would willingly accept the responsibility for a new approach to literacy instruction. However, as participants exchanged ideas, asked questions, and speculated, a shift occurred and the partnership was born. The discussion introduced in the workshop continued over the six weeks during the one-hour seminars at the end of each day's session. In these meetings, and in the informal encounters during spare moments, the spirit of camaraderie grew.

From the start, the college instructor encouraged collaboration. The participants used first names. Whenever possible, a discussion replaced the more formal lecture. The college professor was there to observe, to learn, to support, to step in when needed, and to listen with a sympathetic ear. She respected the knowledge of the teachers—experienced educators whose familiarity with the background experience and
behavior of children would be invaluable in the execution of the program.

As their confidence grew, teachers' ownership of the project became increasingly evident. Was a child absent? Teachers called the child's home. Did someone find a book or technique particularly effective? It was time to share. Did a child make a breakthrough? It was time to acknowledge the teacher's talent. Videotapes of sessions, viewed regularly during daily seminar sessions, served as matter for discussion. The group could learn what took place in other sessions, observe their peers' teaching strategies, watch the children's reactions, pick up ideas for their own sessions, integrate goals more uniformly within the three components, and reinforce one another's efforts.

One illustration of the ownership teachers exhibited was the pen pal project. Once the idea was introduced, teachers took charge. They drafted the adults they needed—secretaries, the principal, and aides. They planned a bulletin board that became the mailbox, created the form the children used for their stationery, and set aside time once a week (during the dramatic play segment) when the children would write their letters. Wednesday, mail day, became the highlight of the week for the children. The letters became precious to them, and they grew eager to respond so they might receive "more mail." Writing had taken on a meaning for them that previously had been absent. True, the suggestion for the project came from the college professor, but it was the teachers who followed through.

And what of the college professor—was there anything new for her? To say that learning took place for her is understatement. She saw the theoretical insights she had developed through reading and listening confirmed over and over. She sought and found answers to questions she had raised about the practicality of early intervention techniques. She gathered hundreds of examples to serve as illustrations in the courses she taught. From observation of the behavior of six-year-olds who exhibited symptoms of such syndromes as "crack baby," "abused child," and "attention-deficit," she restructured and modified
her profile of the “typical at-risk” first grader. But above all, her belief that, given a chance, “at-risk” children could learn—despite obstacles—was confirmed over and over.

What Were the Results of SoL?

Of fifteen children originally selected for the program, twelve reached the criterion for acceptable attendance (no more than five absences, representing an attendance rate of 80% or better). For these subjects, progress was noted in three categories. Did their knowledge of letter names increase? Did they develop a greater understanding of concepts about print? Did they make progress in reading and writing skills? In the pre-assessment, four of the twelve subjects scored low in their understanding of concepts about print, while eight exhibited the beginning of understanding. At the end of the program, five of the children were at the beginning stage, and seven were competent in the concepts. At the end of the program, the children had made advances in literacy skills. Two children had learned all of the alphabet letters, upper- and lowercase. Four knew more than 80% of them; five knew at least 50%; and only one of the children knew fewer than 50% of the letter names. Two had learned to read one to three books independently; eight had read four to six books; and two had read seven to nine books. The children experienced shared reading of a number of books with their instructor. One read three books together with his instructor, four read four to six books, four read seven to nine books, and three read ten or more. Similarly, signs of emerging phonological awareness were present. Nine of the children, at the end of the program, could identify word syllables; eight could match letters with sounds. Five were in the advanced phonetic stage; that is, in spelling words, they understood that each sound in a word should be represented by a letter or combination of letters. Three of the children had a sight vocabulary of more than ten words. Six of the children entered first grade; the remainder were placed in T-1, a transitional first grade. The T-1 children will be re-evaluated
during the year to determine whether their progress indicates placement in regular first grade.

It is more difficult to capture the qualitative results of such a project as SoL. Examining the assessment records of one child in the program, Charmaine, might provide some insight into the progress made by the child subjects. In the original June assessment, Charmaine could write her first name in uppercase and lowercase letters. She was generally familiar with concepts about print, but she could not point to individual words as text was read, indicating that she had not yet formed a clear concept of "word." Additionally, Charmaine knew ten uppercase letters and only a few lowercase letters.

At the end of the six weeks, Charmaine's teachers reported that she was beginning to use phoneme-letter matching in her spelling. They also reported that Charmaine was interested in books, was involved in all the activities of dramatic play, and art and music, and had a good attention span. While Charmaine had a limited understanding of the situations and language encountered in books, her imagination was emerging, and she used it to make meaning of stories.

During the six-week session, Charmaine gained the competency to handle books. She held each book upright and turned the pages, and, although she was still unsure about identifying the illustrator of a story, she could locate the title and title page, and point to the name of the author.

According to her early intervention teacher, Charmaine's understanding of concepts about print was now sound. She understood that print evokes meaning and that pictures enhance the meaning. She had no difficulty with directionality. She had grasped the concept of a letter, a period, a question mark, a sentence, and a word.

At the end of the program, Charmaine had a high interest in books and reading. She demonstrated an interest in listening to stories and reading along when the sentences repeated a pattern, that is, when they were written in predictable text. She saw herself as a reader, selecting her own books, reading independently, and talking about books and stories.
Charmaine was now competent in discussing the meaning of stories, in predicting and confirming her predictions, in recalling the sequence of events in a story, and in understanding the main idea of a book. She could recall details with ease and, with encouragement, supply words in “cloze-type” activities, in which a word has been deliberately omitted from a sentence.

During the course of the summer, Charmaine had many experiences with reading books. She listened to and discussed Flossie and the Fox; Where the Wild Things Are; Clifford, the Big Red Dog; and The Napping House. With her teacher, she also did “shared reading” of books with predictable text, such as I Know an Old Lady, What Can You Do?, Wheels on the Bus, Baby Writer, and Can’t You See We’re Reading. Finally, Charmaine learned to read some books independently. So Can I; Brown Bear, Brown Bear; Looking for Halloween; Snowflakes; and Marching Band were all books she read on her own.

Charmaine’s knowledge of letter names was now 77%. She was in the “early phonetic stage” of invented spelling. That is, she knew that there is a connection between the physical aspects of producing a word and the spelling of the word and tried to use letters of the alphabet to do this. She knew that words have parts or syllables and could segment words into their component sounds. She also matched some letter sounds with letter names and could identify beginning sounds in words. Charmaine had built a small but meaningful sight vocabulary of some thirty words during her reading exercises. Charmaine was one of the subjects who entered first grade. In the words of her early intervention teacher, she “is motivated to learn and has emerged as a reader and writer with skills that will put her in a good position to start in first grade.”

Although not all subjects in the program made the same progress, Charmaine’s gains can be considered typical for many of them. Follow-up visits to the children’s classrooms confirmed that they are, at this point, holding their own. All have maintained enthusiasm for literacy. Whether the momentum continues will depend largely on whether the interest
cultivated during the summer program is fostered at home and at school.

A workshop with the teachers involved in the program is scheduled for early November. It will be an opportunity for the investigator to strengthen the bonds formed in summer 1993 and to rekindle the excitement that permeated the program. Repeating the experience is possible; the request was put to the local board, which is considering it. Should the project be refunded, it will be expanded to include more training, more teachers, and more children. Even if the program is not repeated, the effects of the summer 1993 collaborative experience will linger—for the children, for the teachers, and for the college professor. Good memories do not die easily.

References


Tashawn Frisby, First Grade, John Fenwick School