One-on-One Tutoring Works

By Sheryl Lain

I was on a short-term leave from my classroom to serve as instructional leader at the State

Department of Education. That's why I took a phone call from an irate instructional facilitator at

Arapaho School. "What are you going to do to help us?" Randy challenged. He told the

disheartening story about his school's performance on the state reading assessment. "We came in

dead last of all the schools in the state," he said. "Only 18 percent of third graders were

proficient. It isn't fair to the great kids I see in the halls every day." He was so angry his voice

shook.

He explained that he'd taken a look at the state assessment. "It's a comprehension test,"

he said, "but our kids use a highly-scripted, phonics-based program, light on comprehension.

"Plus," he went on, "our district assesses fluency, not comprehension at all. Couldn't be a worse

mismatch!"

At the district's urging, the Department of Education partnered with Arapaho School for

the ensuing school year. We enriched the school's reading program using a research-based

tutorial incorporating meta-cognition strategies within a student-selected text. Approximately

half of Arapaho's 300 first through eighth graders participated, sitting side by side with adult

tutors for about fifty daily lessons. After one school year, Arapaho's scores rose significantly

(Connor, 2012). According to the state assessment, third graders who scored 18 percent

proficient in 2011 improved to 58 percent proficient as fourth graders in 2012. Other grade

levels improved also (see Table 1 for a comparison of scores).

A Brief Review of the Literature Supports Tutoring

Since the district could not purchase a brand new reading curriculum--a choice that Slavin's review of the literature (2008) demonstrates has little positive effect--we decided to rely on the research of Cohen and others and tutor students one-on-one. Cohen's study shows that tutoring has a definite and positive effect on those tutored. A meta-analysis of 65 independent evaluations of school tutoring programs reveals that working one-on-one has a positive effect on readers' performance and attitudes (1982). Vadasy's study (1997) corroborates these results revealing that students with below average reading ability who work one-on-one daily show significant gains when compared to a control group. Students' self-confidence and motivation also improves. Richard Allington makes a strong case that struggling readers should read with a tutor one-on-one for thirty minutes a day (2012).

Research tells us that 70 percent of struggling upper grade readers have difficulty comprehending text (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Working on skills in isolation does not promote comprehension, the ultimate goal of reading. Fountas and Pinnell find that "fragmenting complex literacy processes interferes with the greatest goal of literacy education— the construction of meaning from and through text" (2001, p. vi). Based on these findings, Arapaho students sat side by side with their tutors, each holding a book of the student's choice. During the tutorial, the student read aloud, and both enjoy thinking their way through the pages.

Juel's research (1988) reveals that reading tutors, such as older students, para-professionals, and college students, successfully improve readers. Another study shows that students tutored by non-professionals from the community show significant improvement over their peers who were not tutored (Vadasy, 1997). Arapaho tutors included several recently graduated college students who had experience coaching kids in summer sports, several would-

be teachers who already lived in the area waiting for job openings, and retired teachers. These people were hired by the district after interviews and background checks.

The literature also shows that students' reading competence is accelerated when tutors receive support, including modeling and observation. At Arapaho, two retired reading teachers, experienced tutors, modeled for tutors and observed them, offering positive reinforcement and suggestions. Tutors also followed a protocol, one with flexible components named by the National Reading Panel (2000) including word work, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing. These components were practiced while reading meaning-rich texts.

A Peek at the Tutorial Protocol

In this real-life scenario, Mrs. Brummond, a retired first grade teacher, reading specialist and Reading Recovery (Clay, 1985) teacher, works with Matt, a struggling eighth grader who finds school work so frustrating that he alternately daydreams and creates havoc in class.

Before beginning the tutoring sessions, Brummond secures a private space in the school. She locates a small, unused table and two chairs so she and the student can sit side by side. She gathers a few tools to support their work: a timer, post it notes, small white board, marker and eraser, and two spiral notebooks.

Brummond and Matt spend the first several sessions getting acquainted. Evidence abounds that building a relationship with students pays off (Smith &Wilhelm, 2002). Allington claims that teachers need to observe students so they can start with what kids actually know, not what they should know (2012). To learn about Matt, Brummond pre-tests him using an informal reading inventory, Jerry Johns' *Basic Reading Inventory* (2007). This is a collection of graded word lists and leveled passages complete with comprehension questions. To track his growth,

Brummond finds Matt's frustrational, instructional and independent reading levels and records his baseline scores. The data helps her find an interesting book for Matt at his instructional level.

At the end of their time together she reassess Matt to see how much he has grown. At the outset, Matt's instructional level looks like a fourth grader's. Based on her prior experience tutoring adolescents using this approach, Brummond anticipates Matt will grow three or four years according to the Jerry Johns assessment tool.

During these first few days, Matt writes a short, small-moment narrative (Calkins, 2010). Brummond reads a picture book or some other short, powerful text to him, asks Matt to write about a time when he experienced something similar, and tells him they will write for five minutes. When the timer goes off, each reads their narrative to the other. Later, Brummond scores Matt's writing holistically by comparing his writing to grade level samples. His writing looks like a fourth grader's. Brummond keeps tracks of this score, too. At the end of their tutoring sessions, Brumond might have Matt revisit this narrative, adding details, description and dialogue. She sometimes word processes this piece and gives it to him for a memento.

Brummond interviews Matt to learn his interests. Brummond wants to find a just-right book, one the student wants and can read with teacher support. She discovers that Matt loves basketball, so she locates from the library three or four books with basketball-playing protagonists, books written at about the fourth-grade level but with content suiting older kids. From her collection, Matt selects Walter Dean Myer's book, *Hoops* (1981).

Alfie Kohn says it is important for a student to pick his own book. "Nothing contributes to a student's interest more than the opportunity to read books that he or she has chosen," he says (2010, p. 1). Reading growth depends on a book the student wants to read and can read with

accuracy, fluency and comprehension. Student choice is supported by a variety of researchers including Harmon, et.al. (2015) and Stover (2012).

After the first few days of assessing and discussing interests, the daily lessons begin. Matt starts to read *Hoops* from the beginning. Every day he continues where he left off in the lesson before. To advance the skills of fluency and prosody, Brummond follows Tim Rasinski's advice, employing repeated rereading (2003). She has Matt read a few sentences, after which she reads the same passage with exaggerated expressiveness while Matt pencils a slash mark (/) in the text indicating where her voice pauses. Finally, Matt rereads the same passage, pausing at his slash marks. He reads much more smoothly his second time around. This technique helps him learn how to read like he talks. The fluency portion of the lesson takes a couple of minutes, time well spent, for as Rasinski claims, rereading contributes to expressiveness and expressiveness contributes to comprehension.

Another skill Brummond practices is word-structure analysis. Often, older students need help decoding multi-syllabic words, compound and hyphenated words, and words with prefixes and suffixes. One pattern for this word work is to pull out a word from today's text which she prints on a small white board. She prints several more words with the same pattern. For example, if the word *execution* appears in the text, Brummond prints it on the white board and circles the suffix. She adds several other words—*calculation*, *rumination*, *explanation*—and Matt circles the suffix in each of those. Gradually over time, Matt notices patterns and understands better how words work.

To improve vocabulary, Brummond locates a word in the text whose definitions Matt may not know. She turns to the page containing the word and asks Matt to scan the paragraph containing the word. When Matt finds it, Brummond reads the sentence and offers a quick,

common-sense definition. This pattern helps Matt learn to scan, develop vocabulary, and advance his comprehension.

Every day, Brummond attends to meta-cognition strategies to enhance comprehension. "This paragraph is full of description," she says, "so today let's make mental pictures of what you read. Scholars call this visualizing." According to Kylene Beers in her book, *When Kids Can't Read What Teachers Can Do* (2003), teachers spend very little time teaching comprehension strategies. "We sometimes confuse explaining to students what is happening in a text with teaching students how to comprehend," she says (p. 41). So Brummond pauses Matt once or twice as he reads and says, "Here's what I'm picturing here...." She reveals her thinking and asks Matt what he visualizes. In this way, Brummond teaches Matt how to visualize, make connections with the text, and infer meaning based on the way the characters speak and act.

Up-front skill work takes maybe ten minutes. Most of the rest of the time, the student reads aloud. A skilled tutor might take a running record now and then. In the book, *Where's the Glitch*, Mary Shea adapts the running record to older readers (2006). The running record reveals what kinds of word patterns trip up Matt, helping Brummond better understand him so she can focus her instruction.

During their last five minutes of the lesson, Brummond and Matt each write in their spiral notebooks. The prompt is usually a narrative, writing about something in the text that reminds them of a similar incident in their own lives, for as Donald Graves says, students must bring their lives to school (1983). They finish the tutorial sharing their pieces aloud. Writing together deepens the tutor-student relationship, which, in turn, accelerates learning. Table 2 shows a review of the components of a tutorial session, along with Brummond's teacher talk.

Conclusion: Arapahoe Story Has a Happy Ending

At Arapahoe School, students could decode, but they didn't comprehend what they read; they could read difficult words but were blank-faced when asked what the sentences meant. This changed. Content teachers said they experienced collateral effects in their classes, and preschool teachers claimed their children were being read to by their older siblings. Parents noticed their children reading at home. One parent told about how much his daughter's reading changed: "Last year, she'd ask me, 'Daddy, can you tell me what this word means? Can you tell me what this sentence means?' Now she reads *Hunger Games* without asking a single question."

Arapaho School's loosely-structured tutorial provides a variety of benefits: tutees choose a book; they work on vocabulary and word-structure analysis encountered within the text rather than words isolated from context; they read more fluently and expressively; they use meta-cognition strategies, promoting comprehension; and they share with their tutors both in conversation and in writing which encourages bonding and literacy development.

I believe in the magic that happens between a caring adult and a student. This one-on-one tutorial condenses the magic into a powerful elixir that can save students' reading lives.

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Table 1: Results of state test in 2011 and 2012.

Grade	2011 Percent Proficient and Advanced	2012 Percent Proficient and Advanced	% Change
03	18.4	34.2	15.7
04	47.2	58.5	11.3
05	33.3	60.5	27.2
06	64.0	64.3	0.3
07	46.7	59.3	12.6
08	47.4	62.1	14.7

Table 2: Review of flexible tutorial components.

Build context 1 minute	"What do you think will happen to Mila today?"
Fluency 1 minute (Rasinski, 2003)	"We left off right here. Read these next two sentences, please." Student reads. "Now, listen to me read the same thing and you mark a slash (/) in the text when you hear me pause." Teacher rereads with expressiveness. "OK. Now will you reread noticing your slash marks?" Student reads. Teacher says, "Wow, you used a meaningful pause right here…"
Word work 2 minutes examining 2-3 words	"I found this word in today's reading." The teacher prints the word *regurgitation* on a white board. "It's called a multisyllabic word and has a suffix *–tion."* Teacher circles the suffix. "Here are a couple more words that fit the pattern." Teacher prints *simulation* and *aggravation* on the white board and the student circles the suffix. "You'll run into lots of *–tion* words today."
Vocabulary 2 minutes examining 2-4 words	"Have you ever heard the word *preposterous*? It's in the text today. Can you find the word *preposterous* in this paragraph?" Student scans and locates the word. Teacher reads the sentences containing the word and offers an informal definition. Teacher finds 2-4 vocabulary words in today's reading (Common Core Standard CC #4)
Thinking strategy .5 minute (Beers, 2003 and Harvey, 2000)	"The chapters today have lots of mental images. Let's work on visualizing today, you know, making a picture in the mind. We'll stop a few times to see what we are visualizing." Other strategies might include: hearing tone (CC#6), summarizing (CC#2), questioning, predicting, connecting (CC#7), inferring (CC #1, 2), evaluating (CC#8).
Reading 17 minutes	"OK, let's read on from where we left off. I'll be doing a running record as we go." Tutor assesses with running record, noting miscues and aiming for 95% accuracy. Tutor interrupts twice to practice visualizing. Tutor corrects at the word level only when meaning is disrupted.
Writing 5 minutes	"Have you ever felt so misunderstood like Mila?" Teacher and student write on this or another related personal prompt in their spiral notebooks. Share.