

How can I mimic a literate home simulation kindergarten in grade 8?

Margaret Mete

Biography



Margaret Mete currently works part time as an Intermediate Special Education teacher at Hagersville Elementary School. She started her career in 1990 after attending Lakehead University. Prior to that, Margaret graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree from McMaster University. Her early teaching experiences were in rotary middle schools in the former Hamilton Board of Education teaching mainly Science and Math. After spending 6 extremely rewarding years at home with her children Megan, born in 1995 and Michael born in 1998, she decided to continue her career in the Grand Erie District School Board as a Special Education

teacher. This is Margaret's first action research project.

Abstract

My action research examines the creation of a learning environment for an intermediate level special education student in which vocabulary instruction takes place both directly and indirectly. In essence, I tried to mimic certain aspects of a literate home simulation kindergarten, but in a "grade 8" kind of way. I would predict that by increasing the quantity of words in a student's "internal dictionary", improved reading comprehension would ultimately be the result.

Background

At Hagersville Elementary School (H.E.S.) we have what we call the "Learning Centre". The students that attend this classroom are of intermediate level age and require some type of Special Education support. They learn math and language skills in this self-contained setting or they are regular classroom special education students that need extra help. Regular students that are struggling can also use this service. On occasion students who need continuous support because they are working on a modified program, come to the Learning Centre daily. Ashley is one of those students.

This was Ashley's first year at H.E.S. as a Grade 8 student. It became evident before the end of first term that Ashley was struggling with the Grade 8 curriculum. After some research, assessment and close observation it was decided that Ashley would benefit from a modified program in Language and Math. We developed an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that would suit her needs and created a program that she could work on in the regular classroom or in the Learning Centre. Initially Ashley tried to work on her modified program within the classroom with her teacher's assistance. Hesitantly she decided to try working in the Learning Centre for extra help. This gave me an opportunity to build a rapport with Ashley because once she started to come for help she did not want to stop! One of the first assignments that we worked on together was a short story about "Rocket Richard". I was able to hear how labourious reading was for her, but what was even more interesting was even when she was able to read the words she didn't always know what they meant. On several occasions she indicated that she had never heard the word before. This surprised me because I would have thought that she would have. After all, she was in Grade 8! Furthermore, she had no idea who Maurice Richard was. I decided to ask a few more questions. I found out that Ashley has had an interesting life in her short thirteen years. In Grade 1 and Grade 4 she had

changed schools three times. Currently she lives with her father, but up until this year she lived with her mother and even spent some time in foster care.

Meanwhile about the same time that I started working with Ashley a memo appeared in my mailbox at school. It was an invitation to be part of an Action Research project team that was exploring “Balanced Literacy” in Special Education. To be very honest, I wasn’t quite sure what I was getting into. I decided to submit my name anyway. I figured that at the very least I would learn something new. I am always on the look out for new perspectives when it comes to teaching. Well here I am writing this report, so obviously I was accepted to be part of the team and I most definitely have learned about a valuable teaching practice.

I started out this adventure with a meeting and a big box of books. The meeting was informative. We listened to Diane Morgan talk about what Action Research was and how we would become action researchers. Then we talked about the books. The books were recommended by Dale Willows. They were books that she felt would give us an overall understanding of Balanced Literacy. There were a lot of books!! It was a relief when we were told to choose one out of two to read to begin with. Then we could look at the rest once we knew what direction our research was heading.

I started reading a book called “Classrooms That Work” by Patricia Cunningham and Richard L. Allington. On page two of this book there is a chart developed by Catherine Snow that describes the effects of high and low home and classroom support for literacy.

Percentage of Children Who Achieve Success with Varying Levels of Home and Classroom Support

	High Home Support	Low Home Support
High Classroom Support	100%	100%
Mixed Classroom Support	100%	25%
Low Classroom Support	60%	0%

At this point in my reading, I immediately thought of Ashley. She is finally in a home situation that is supportive, but for most of her life this has not been the case. Can she be successful? According to this chart she can, as long as she is exposed to consistently high-quality classroom instruction. Wow...we have our work cut out for us!

In “Classrooms that Work” the literate home simulation kindergarten is described. This type of kindergarten classroom would attempt to mimic a literacy rich home environment. There would be many books to read, a place to read, newspapers, magazines, cartoons, pictures, advertisements, announcements and charts with language experience stories. There would also be many writing tools. Finally the teacher would be the model for reading and writing. The teacher’s talk would almost sound like bedtime story talk. These types of kindergarten classrooms attempt to narrow the gap between the children who come to school with or without this type of advantage.

In Ashley’s case, she did not receive the advantages that go along with a literate home environment prior to kindergarten. Even if she was lucky enough to go to a kindergarten, Grade 1, Grade 2 or Grade 3 class that did mimic a literacy-rich home environment, she moved around so much that retention of any learning was probably limited. So, how do I mimic a literate home simulation kindergarten in Grade 8? Obviously it would be impossible to fill in the gaps in Ashley’s learning in just a few months.

I had the opportunity to go see Dr. Dale Willows in Brantford. Dr. Dale Willows is the creator of “The Balanced and Flexible Literacy Diet”. She has come up with a unique way of looking at literacy. She relates literacy instruction to the food groups in nutrition. To be healthy, you would need a certain balance of food groups in your diet. Accordingly, to be literate, you must have a balance of components in your literacy diet. These components include phonemic awareness, systematic sequential phonics, fluent, automatic reading of text, vocabulary development, text comprehension strategies, spelling and handwriting and written composition strategies.

Focusing in on my question

I knew that I had to narrow down my focus. After observing Ashley for a few more days, it became quite evident that language comprehension was a difficulty for her. Her encoding and decoding skills were not up to speed, but she was able to read most of the low-level, high-interest literature that I would give her. She had some phonics ability and certain words she knew by sight, but on many occasions she wouldn’t know what a word meant and this would mean that she wouldn’t know what a sentence meant or she might miss the whole point of the paragraph. One of the underlying causes of difficulties with language comprehension is coming from a linguistically impoverished environment. Bingo! Now, I was getting somewhere. Although Ashley would benefit from instruction in all the components of the “Balanced Literacy Diet”, I decided to focus on vocabulary development for the purposes of my research. I decided that I was going to “feed” Ashley as much vocabulary as I could through discussion and print activities that I could and then I would determine if it would make a difference in her language comprehension.

I “fed” Ashley vocabulary in several different ways. There are numerous ways to do this, but because of time constraints I was able to use fifteen methods which I have organized under the headings described in the chart below.

(A)	(B)	(C)
Reading for pleasure/information	Incidental	Thematic
1. Fiction	8. Conversation	9. Spelling lists
2. Non-fiction		10. Crosswords
3. Recipes		11. Word search
4. Magazines		12. Her own topics
5. Song lyrics		13. Work from other subjects
6. Catalogues		14. Fairytales
7. Short stories		15. Movies

Process

(A) Reading for Pleasure/Information

On most days, Ashley would spend most of the afternoon in the Learning Centre. Sometimes we were lucky enough to spend some one-on-one time together. During these opportunities, I introduced and modelled how to deal with unfamiliar vocabulary that Ashley could discover when reading for pleasure/ information. I gave Ashley a brand new binder that was divided into two sections and some colourful sticky notes that were shaped like arrows. We started by reading a non-fiction book about “Ripley’s Believe it or Not”. It was a high-interest book with fairly low-level vocabulary. It was divided into short sections so that the reading sessions didn’t need to be very long. For her age, Ashley’s attention span was limited, so this gave her the opportunity to complete a short part of the book and still feel like she had accomplished something. The procedure was as follows:

1. As Ashley began to read, I would insert a sticky note arrow on words that she would stumble on pronouncing or words that she would read, but indicate that she didn’t understand.
2. Once I felt that she was at her limit, she would take the new vocabulary and using the website “www.wordattack.com” or the dictionary she would find the definition of the unknown word.
3. She would then write a sentence to convey that she now knew what the word meant.
4. After I would check the sentences, she would put several of her new words into a word search program to gain more exposure to the new vocabulary.

#3 Above It All
Robert Wadlow was an average-sized infant when he was born in 1918. However, by the time he reached age 22, he'd become the tallest person in recorded history, standing eight feet, seven inches tall.

#2 Triple Threat
In the 1930s, Francesco Lentini of Sicily, Italy, was a master musician. He was also a renowned soccer player. Perhaps having three legs helped to his success on the field.

#10 Half-Baked
In the 1940s, John Pedronsky of Iowa liked to do things by halves. He wore clothes of different colors on each side of his body—and a different haircut and shave on each side of his head.

#9 Reel-y Sad
Lucius Crassus (140-91 B.C.), a Roman law authority, was so fond of his trained lamprey eel that he gave it earrings and a pearl necklace. When the fish died, Crassus dressed in mourning clothes for an entire year!

#1 Double Vision
Chi'ung, governor of Shansi, China, was born in c.E. 955 with two pupils in each eye. Chi'ung was one of Ripley's all-time favorite "human oddities" and is one of the most popular wax figures in several Odditoriums.

Over the Top!
In the 18th century, Matthew Bachman of England regularly spent his entire day, including mealtimes, ...
a. submerged up to his neck in the ocean.
b. smeared from head to toe with whale grease.
c. smeared only his underwear.
d. submerged in a vat of honey.

NEVADA

A **STRETCH 11**

B **STRETCH 14**

C

34.99 Each

SKIRTS THAT FLIRT

A-B *A LITTLE STRETCH
• only at Sears • cotton-spandex • machine wash • (shaped fit)
Regular sizes 4XS; Fits 2-4; 85; 6-8; 12K; 10-12; 16L; 14-16.
A. Fuller top • inner tie • wooden bead detail • (10)black, (11)marigold orange, (12)sea blue, (13)white, (14)lemon
190 656 471 A • 19.99

B. SAVE \$5 until July 17 on scoop-neck t-shirt
• lacking detail • (10)white, (11)marigold orange, (12)lemon, (13)black, (14)coral red
After July 17, 2005, 24.99.
190 656 481 A • Until July 17 19.99

C-E THREE CUTE SUMMER SKIRTS
• only at Sears • 100% long
Regular sizes 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16.
C. Lined print skirt • side zipper • piping trim • cotton with polyester lining • machine wash • (loose fit) • scoop print
190 657 081 A • 34.99

D. Stretch skirt • nylon tie detail • back zip • cotton-spandex • machine wash • (loose fit) • no blue print
190 657 029 A • 34.99

E. Striped • front pleat • side button • piping trim • rayon-linen • light wash • (loose fit)
190 657 019 A • 34.99

F *A SKIRT \$5 UNTIL JULY 17 ON SCOP-NECK T-SHIRT
• only at Sears • side shirring with drawstring • belt loops • fly front • cotton • machine wash • (shaped fit) • inseam 2.5" • detail in (10)beach and (11)black, each in (12)light stone and (13)midnight navy • Regular sizes 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16
After July 17, 2005, 24.99.
190 657 181 A • Until July 17 19.99
(Fit information) Details can be found on page 250.

1.25 ML (1/2 CUP) BOILING WATER AND STIR FOR 2 MINUTES. DRAIN. ADD 150 ML (1/2 CUP) WATER. STIR. MICROWAVE ON HIGH (100%) FOR 1 MINUTE, OR UNTIL DESIRED CONSISTENCY IS REACHED AND STIR. SINCE MICROWAVE Ovens VARY, THESE INSTRUCTIONS ARE GUIDELINES ONLY. OATMEAL WILL THICKEN UPON STANDING. FOR SKIER OATMEAL, ADD LESS WATER. FOR THICKER MEAL, ADD MORE WATER.

POUR 125 ML (1/2 CUP) D'EAU BOUILLANTE ET MÊLER PENDANT 2 MINUTES. ÉCARTER L'EAU. AJOUTER 150 ML (1/2 CUP) D'EAU. MÉLANGER. CHAUUFFER AU HAUT (100%) PENDANT 1 MINUTE, OU JUSQU'À LA CONSISTENCE DESIRÉE ET MÉLANGER. ÉCARTER L'EAU. L'AVOINE SE RAFFERMIRA À LA MISE EN BOÛTE. POUR L'AVOINE À LA CONSISTENCE PLUS ÉPAISSE, UTILISER MOINS D'EAU. POUR UN OATMEAL PLUS ÉPAIS, UTILISER PLUS D'EAU. POUR UN OATMEAL PLUS LIQUIDE, UTILISER PLUS D'EAU.

1.25 ML (1/2 CUP) BOILING WATER AND STIR FOR 2 MINUTES. DRAIN. ADD 150 ML (1/2 CUP) WATER. STIR. MICROWAVE ON HIGH (100%) FOR 1 MINUTE, OR UNTIL DESIRED CONSISTENCY IS REACHED AND STIR. SINCE MICROWAVE Ovens VARY, THESE INSTRUCTIONS ARE GUIDELINES ONLY. OATMEAL WILL THICKEN UPON STANDING. FOR THICKER OATMEAL, ADD LESS WATER. FOR THINNER OATMEAL, ADD MORE WATER.

1.25 ML (1/2 CUP) BOILING WATER AND STIR FOR 2 MINUTES. DRAIN. ADD 150 ML (1/2 CUP) WATER. STIR. MICROWAVE ON HIGH (100%) FOR 1 MINUTE, OR UNTIL DESIRED CONSISTENCY IS REACHED AND STIR. SINCE MICROWAVE Ovens VARY, THESE INSTRUCTIONS ARE GUIDELINES ONLY. OATMEAL WILL THICKEN UPON STANDING. FOR THICKER OATMEAL, ADD LESS WATER. FOR THINNER OATMEAL, ADD MORE WATER.

5. The definitions and sentences would be inserted into one section of her binder and the word searches would go into the other section. This way she would keep track of her new words in an organized way. This would also give me the opportunity to review and test the new words with her at a later date.

(B) Incidental

Whenever possible I would try to engage Ashley in conversations about various topics. These topics would include anything from what she did on the weekend to forensic science! I would attempt to casually insert new or interesting vocabulary as we were talking to each other. We would also spend some time talking about what she was reading. This reminded me of something that a “parent” might do with a child when having a casual conversation or when the child was experiencing something for the first time.

(C) Thematic

Under most circumstances other students would also visit the Learning Centre for support in different subject areas. I needed to have some activities for Ashley to do independently. During these times she would work on the “Thematic” type activities that I described in the chart. I encouraged her to use the sticky note system described above, but because this type of activity was done on her own, she would forget on most occasions.

Findings

1. Marks in integrated subjects (Science, Geography, History) did not improve.
2. Marks in Language and Math did improve.
3. Improved attitude displayed in Language and Math only.
4. Comments from Ashley (June, 2005): “I like working here. I get more work done when I am here. It is too noisy in the classroom and I can’t think. I don’t feel like thinking in the classroom or at home. I get help when I am here and I like that. It makes me feel better because I got some things done. It was fun to come here.”
5. Comments from her father: (June, 2005): “Attitude is about the same as always. The work that she brings home, she completes.”
6. Several words were recorded in Ashley’s personal dictionary. On June 13, 2005 I tested her retention of the words by asking her to use them in a sentence. This was done orally. She was able to retain 80 % of them.
7. By June, Ashley still needed to be encouraged to use the sticky note method to mark words or ideas that she didn’t understand. The importance of using this type of a strategy wasn’t second nature to her as I had hoped. She still needed reminders to get her sticky notes out and use them.

8. A measurement of improvement in reading comprehension was not done due to time constraints.

9. As soon as other students came for help Ashley shut down and wouldn't continue with her work. In contrast, when the regular Learning Centre students were present she felt comfortable doing the assigned work.

Conclusion:

I was able to mimic some elements of a literate home simulation kindergarten in Grade 8. Since I was using below grade-level literature and unique methods, I needed to be sensitive to the following things:

1. Instruction needed to take place in a safe environment where the student would feel comfortable learning and wouldn't be concerned about what others thought of her. This is so much more of an issue in intermediate grades than in primary grades where everyone is starting at the same place or if they aren't, it isn't so clearly obvious. Ashley gained more than just some reading success from this type of situation. She was taught how to cope with her reading difficulty in a safe environment where she learned how to take risks, ask questions, make mistakes and recognize and accept her weaknesses. As students get older and continue to find themselves in overwhelming situations at home and at school the knowledge gap continues to broaden and they become less and less apt to share their questions of clarification because of fear of being made fun of. Older students like Ashley need to have a place where they can go and be made to feel comfortable and accepted.

2. Continuous support was necessary in the form of prompts, modelling (explicit instruction) and praise.

3. Literature needed to be of high interest and low vocabulary. It needed to be meaningful, relevant and interesting in order to catch and maintain Ashley's interest. I had to determine what Ashley's passions were and present her with literature that would keep her engaged and provide a good chance of success.

4. Reading activities needed to be short and varied enough to keep her interest.

5. Using the computer for research, definitions, word searches etc. was useful because it was a means of motivation. The computer increased the success factor because she was very confident using it and it gave her a sense of independence and focus.

6. Small groups or individual work if possible.

7. As much oral conversation as possible- casual conversation, reading, discussion of what is read and questioning.

Reflections:

My intention was to take a student like Ashley and “feed” her as much vocabulary as I could in as many meaningful ways that I could in the time that I had. Because improving vocabulary development is directly related to improving reading comprehension, I was hoping to have this clearly displayed during the course of my research. This did not happen, but not all is lost. In the safe environment that was created, Ashley improved her attitude about learning, she had exposure to strategies of coping with new vocabulary that could become more natural with more practice, she liked coming to school, she received the attention that she was seeking, she experienced success and she learned some new words that hopefully will be precursors to improving her reading comprehension in the future. Hopefully through our time together her passions have been awakened and she has been motivated to continue reading for pleasure, necessity and curiousness. The connection between vocabulary and reading comprehension is much more of an ongoing, unpredictable and complicated process than I originally thought. It’s not going to happen overnight! Internalizing thoughts and then using them to understand what you are reading takes much more than just a few months. It would be interesting to see if Ashley could continue with the strategies we worked on together independently in the future and then be assessed to see if her reading comprehension has improved. Hopefully she has the tools to make it happen.

References:

Cunningham, P. M., Allington, R. L., *Classrooms That Work* (1999), Don Mills, ON: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc.

Armbruster, B. B., Lehr, F. Osborn, J., *Put Reading First* (2001) Partnership for Reading. National Institute for Literacy.

Willows, Dale, *The Balanced and Flexible Literacy Diet*

Willows, Dale, *Identifying and Teaching Children with Reading/Writing Difficulties*