

# How can I effectively implement “Making Words” into my practice to increase the literacy level of my Special Education students?

Colleen Mazzocato

## Biography



Colleen Mazzocato is currently a Learning Resource Teacher at Hagersville Elementary School in Hagersville. She has taught Family Studies at the secondary level (Gr. 9-13) for eight years, night school sewing—beginning and advanced for two years, Geography and English at Caledonia High School, Family Studies at Parkview Public School, and now Learning Resource Teacher at Hagersville Elementary School.

She firmly believes that all children can learn to read, we just need to find the individual strategies to assist them. As a Learning Resource Teacher she is used to working with the students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and realizes that it is necessary to work with the specific strengths of each student to facilitate improvement. In this way, the students should be able to reach his/her individual goal.

## Abstract

*Colleen was looking for a way to provide her special education students with a more balanced literacy diet and therefore improve their decoding skills and ultimately their fluency. These students have a great deal of difficulty with their daily spelling. Since their decoding skills and fluency are so low, their comprehension also suffers.*

## Philosophy

As a Learning Resource Teacher, I am constantly asking myself how I can improve the literacy level of my students. I have read many books on the topic and a few strategies have caught my attention. I am very happy to know that other people besides myself feel as (schools) that “ as long as we believe that some children will never be readers and writers, we will fail to create schools that fulfill the potential of all our children to become readers and writers” (Allington & Cunningham pg. 64). In my particular situation, we have a great many of special education students in our school. We have two multiple exceptionality classes, a class for the deaf and hard of hearing, a developmental delayed class and the identified students in the regular student body. Margaret Mete (a colleague and fellow action researcher) and I have discussed our readings and both of us agree that one strategy doesn’t seem to be the overall cure. She quoted that whole language used to be the main focus for a while; she felt that this too was not the solution. (February 1, 2005)

I liked the frog model where heterogeneous groups of students were placed together. This along with more parents coming on board seems to be a valuable asset. Most of the authors that we studied agreed that schools tend to group “the lowest-achieving children for the smallest amount of reading and writing instruction and opportunity” (Allington & Cunningham, pg 60). The rich will continue to

get richer and the poor will get poorer. This belief that some students will never become readers and writers is a hard obstacle to overcome. With retention you “only get older underachievers.”(Allington & Cunningham, pg.64)

I also did preparation time for the teacher of the Developmentally Delayed class. During this time I took those students to the library. I usually tried to find interesting books that would catch the students’ attention and make them want to read more. This idea was supported time and time again, by the teacher reading five to ten books thereby giving them her blessing. The students were anxious to take the books out again and re-read them. Personally I have found that the students wanted to take the book out that I have read to them and read it again for themselves. They seemed to enjoy it over and over again. I have also noted that the more excited I am about the book the more excited they get.

Since my time with my students was very limited and subject to many things, I found it very hard to keep some kind of continuity. Various activities such as; Valentine’s Day, Christmas concert practice, play day , early closing, etc. send disrupted my schedule . Of course there are IPRCs, Resource team meetings and last minute supply coverage which also contribute to the added frustration. A classroom teacher was far more capable of this than I was. I was also totally frustrated by the fact that background information was vitally important. Again, my time with the student was so limited that I could not possibly make up for the severe lacking in background information. (Cunningham & Allington, pg. 50) As a Resource Teacher, I am continually reminded that “one size does not fit all.”(Cunningham & Allington, pg.79)

## Purpose

My purpose was very simple. I had several students who were below grade level in reading and comprehension. These students had basically given up and believed that they were going to fail. I was hoping to boost their self-confidence and start them on the level where they could achieve some success. They could not think as they read. I felt that the reason for this was that they were exerting so much energy trying to decode and read the words that they lost all the comprehension in the story. This was supported in by the ideas in Making Words. I had one particular student, Student #1 who had a speech problem. I believe that this contributed to her difficulty in reading since she did not seem to hear the sounds in words. The problem was that this student wanted to appear as normal as possible and did not want me to give her any more attention than the rest since it would draw attention to her. These students were in Grade 5 but working at a Grade 3 level and had a number of social issues. Another student in the group, Student #2 welcomed any added attention and tried very hard. Student #3 also had an attention deficit difficulty and had not been taking her medication .She found it very difficult to stay in her seat for two minutes and remain quiet during instruction time. Student #4 was also attention deficit but only needed cueing to get back into focus. Student # 5 was attention deficit and also had a problem with written work. It was a constant struggle to get her to focus



and write something down or have it scribed for her. I realized that in my short time span of five months, I could not expect perfection. I would be looking for improvement and growth as mentioned in Cunningham & Allington, pg. 238. The mastery model is wrong. I need to look for some improvement during my time with them.

## Plan of Action

While I was reading Making Words by Patricia Cunningham and Dorothy P. Hall, I got the feeling that this strategy might be the clue to help these students. In making words, children are individually given some letters and use these letters to make words. During a fifteen-minute time span, the children make approximately fifteen words. They begin with two letter words and continue adding letters to make three, four and five and bigger letter words until they find the “mystery” word to know. This is a hands-on, active manipulative which seems to help the attention deficit children focus. These lessons provide practice for the slower learner and yet still challenge the others. Making words helps children develop phonemic awareness as they listen in order to make words. I felt that this would be very beneficial for my student who had the speech problem. As I was doing my research, I also ran across the idea of shadow boxing. In this procedure the student is given the appropriate number of boxes and asked what sound they hear at the beginning, end and middle. I felt that this would really help my students since many times they started a word with something totally unrelated. These students seemed to have a broad phonological awareness. They could make oral rhymes, work with syllables but had more difficulty with phonemes. In Putting Reading First, the authors state that “children need to notice, think about, and work with (manipulate) sounds in spoken language.” (Armbruster, Lehr, Osborn, pg. 5). Their phonological awareness needs to be narrowed into working with individual phonemes. The shadow box seems to help this a great deal. By using making words, the children can learn that by knowing certain words they are able to make more words and thus their confidence increases. These words that they learn will be stored in their filing cabinet” for future use. At the end of each session, students sort words for various sounds and letter combinations. Children are given letters and a sheet to complete at home with their parents of another adult and return to class the next time.

Since I was trying to get these students to the point where they could think as they read, I also planned to play the “Wheel of Fortune” with them for a change of pace. The meaning of the word is provided by the category to which the word belongs. Each student in turn asks if there is a letter. If there is one turned over,

We sorted by soft "A"  
We sorted by plural words  
We sorted by "sh" sound.

Dear Family,

Making Words is an important activity we work on in our class. Making Words is an active, hands-on activity that children learn by doing. Each day as we “make words” your child learns more about letters and letter sounds (phonics). As children manipulate the letters they are given, they have an opportunity to discover more about letter-sound relationships, and as they look for patterns in words, they have an opportunity to see how these letter-sound relationships work in words. These two activities help children both to read and spell even more words! The children enjoy these lessons, but more importantly, these skills increase their word knowledge.

Please work with the letters your child will be bringing home. Let them cut the letter strips apart into the individual letters. Then work together and see how many words you can make. As you make the words write them in the blanks. Finally, cut the words apart and group them (your child knows what to do). Have fun working together and good luck!

Sincerely,

### Take-Home Sheet for Making Words

Your child's teacher

A	Q	S	P	L(i)	S	H	d
Splash.		dish.		Slap.		Zat Slash	
Ash.		lash.		dash.		Sash.	
Pass.		ass (Donkey)		Sad.		is.	
Ship.		Ships		had		lad.	

The letters you need to “Make Words” tonight are at the top of the page. First, cut the letters apart; then work together to see how many words you can make. Next, let your child write the words in the blanks. Finally, cut the words apart and sort or group them by beginning (ending) sounds or spelling patterns.

The letters could easily be mistaken for another letter. ES P = d L = i  
So we used them accordingly. We didn't notice until we took out the sorting words.  
Maybe the letters could be underlined or something so she knows for sure.  
Kait had fun making words.

they receive a paper clip. The person with the most paper clips wins. The student cannot guess the word until all the letters have been turned over. If someone says the answer out of turn, bonus paper clips are given to the person whose turn it was. In this way the students learn that many words may be figured out as long as we think about what makes sense and the portions that they know are in the right places. The accumulation of paper clips is used as the reward. This is just another way of building the student's "filing cabinet" of words.

My students seemed to enjoy acting out their stories. However they tended to get carried away at times and had to be restrained. Most of them had learning disabilities with written language and had difficulty expressing them on paper. Acting out gave them a chance to display their knowledge and also gave them an outlet for pent up energy.

I have tried Reader's Theater with this group and they really enjoyed it. A few will probably be in our little theater groups in the future. I have tried to get them involved in shared reading where they read and re-read books. The Reader's Theater helped here since they read and re-read their parts to their peers.

They continually made up words and inserted them in places where they made no sense at all and did not realize it. They seemed to do it this every time. Working on Reader's Theater seemed to help and the students were really getting more fluent with it. In Putting Reading First, the writers state that "usually, having students read a text four times is sufficient to improve fluency." (Armbruster, Lehr,

Osborn, pg. 26.) I noticed that their fluency did increase and the repetition definitely helped.

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**I have had the opportunity on many occasions to observe Mrs. Mazzocato's Action Research Group during their reading resource time. I have noticed an improvement in all of the students' language skills to varying degrees. Mrs. Mazzocato's use of drama through Reader's Theatre and Puppetry has assisted the students in strengthening their oral expression, fluency and confidence in their abilities. They're having fun as well!**

**Heather Jackson-Davies  
Special Education Teacher  
Hagersville Elementary School**

All of the books that I have read seem to indicate that a combination of strategies is the best solution for each student. As a Resource teacher, this fact is reinforced daily. I wish I had a

magic wand to uncover the solution. I realize that I must have multi-level books available for the students. In this way, all of the reading groups will all be able to read the subject matter at their own level and feel comfortable with it. Even though I will intersperse other strategies to keep up the interest level of the students, my main point of focus remains "Making Words".

## The Question

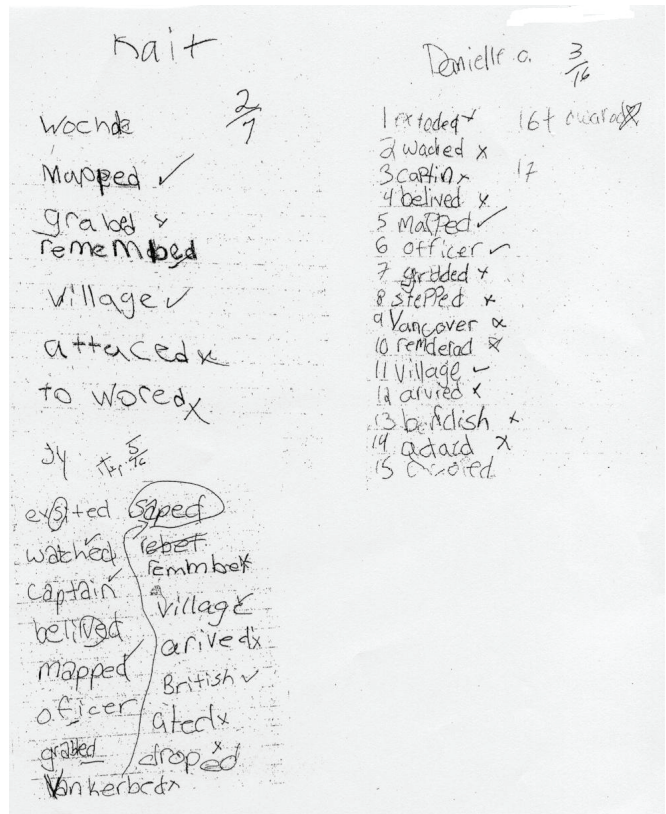
How can I effectively implement "Making Words" into my practice to increase the level of literacy of my Special Education students?

## The Process

I began Making Words with my students on March 10, 2005. My student with the speech impediment (Student #1) had difficulty with some sounds. She tended to rush things and make a wild guess rather than taking the time to figure it out. This I think was due to the fact that she wanted to appear

as normal as possible. I tried to get her to look at me as I said the word and listen to the sound. I wish that I had more time to work with this student. Student # 3 did fairly well in the introduction to Making Words. She had difficulty with some sounds and became extremely frustrated.

After I worked with her a little longer, she realized that it wasn't so hard and that she could actually do it. When I asked her about her frustrations she said: "I just don't recognize the letter." She does recognize letters. I believe that she meant to say that she did not recognize the sounds. I remembered the shadow boxes. Student # 1 had a lot of difficulty sorting words. She said: "There are too many words and I get confused." I believe that it was the sounds that were confusing her, again going back to the speech impediment. This convinced me even more that shadow boxing would be of benefit to these students. I have collected spelling tests taken before I was working with these students.



By April 8, 2005, I was still Working With Words.

Student #3 said: " This is getting easy!" I attributed this to the fact that I began working with shadow boxes and working with words. Student #1 said that she was finding it easy now. Keep in mind that we were still only in the beginning phases of "Making Words". I also tried this with some Grade 2 students. The shadow boxes worked wonders. They started paying attention to sounds. This was probably due to the fact that they have had a lot of training in Jolly Phonics. The Grade 2 students could sort words better than the Grade 5 students but they had more difficulty making the words. In Putting Reading First, the writers stress that "the students need many opportunities to read the same passage several times." (Armbuster, Lehr, Osborn, pg. 26). Poetry seems to be well suited for this purpose. Poems for children are usually short and contain rhythm and rhyme-meaning making practice easy, fun, and rewarding. The students would be willing to re-read this poetry and develop more fluency. In the Reader's Theater that we were presenting, there was a rap poem. The students really loved this and

Donkey MC: Okay, home animals, let's rap on three, and real loud. One . . . two . . . three.

Donkey MC: Fun-Luv'in' Dawg, Kitty-O, Da Roosta (loudly):

Yo, yo, we come from da farm  
And it's cause for alarm  
We're the animal crew  
And we're here to tell you

If you're a robber or crook  
You're just no good in our book  
You best run home to your mamas  
And put on your pajamas

Donkey MC: Fun-Luv'in' Dawg, Kitty-O, Da Roosta:

Who let the Donkey out?  
Bray, bray, bray!  
Who let the Hound out?  
Bark, bark, bark!  
Who let the Cat out?  
Purr, purr, purr!  
Who let the Rooster out?  
Crow, crow, crow!

really got into it.

I decided that I would tape record my group during their “Reader’s Theater” to give them an idea of how they sounded and enable them to make any improvements. Since my students liked to play games, I decided to play games, like “Be a Mind Reader”. In this game I gave the students five clues about a word that I had chosen and written on a scratch piece of paper. I then had the students number the paper 1-5 and told them that I was going to see who could read my mind and come up with the word that I had written on the paper. I told them that I would give them five clues. The first clue was always the same, “It’s one of the words on your word wall.” The students then wrote the word that they thought it was next to #1. As I continued to give clues, the students wrote down the words that they thought it was next to the corresponding number. After clue five, I showed the students the word that I had written on the paper.

I also liked to play “Guess the Covered Word”. Struggling readers often prefer to think about what would make sense, or think about letters and sounds. (Cunningham, Allington, pg.141) Before class began, I wrote four to five sentences on the board that started with the student’s names, followed a similar pattern, and ended with words that varied in their initial sounds and length. I covered the last word in each sentence with sticky notes. Then I read the first sentence and asked the students to guess the covered word. I wrote three to four guesses on the board and then uncovered the first letter. The guesses that did not begin with that letter were erased. I kept the students focused on the meaning and beginning letters. This got progressively more difficult as the students understood how “Guess the Covered Words” works and digraphs, such as sh, ch, th, and wh. This could also be used in

conjunction with their science classes, among others.

### The Feedback

In the beginning, Student #3 found the “Making Words” difficult. At times she really became frustrated.

After a little practice, she began to realize that it was not as hard as she had originally thought and that she could actually do it. Student #3 said “I just don’t recognize the letter!” She does recognize letters but I believe that she meant that she didn’t recognize the sound that the letters made. This was where I was determined to try some shadow boxing with her. The results were very good. She began to listen to sounds and tried to put them into words correctly. This was evident in the other student’s work as well.

Student #2 especially benefited from this strategy. She actually got perfect on her last spelling test and



was extremely proud of herself.

By April 8, 2005, Student #3 said: "This is getting easy!" The classroom teacher has noted an improvement in the spelling tests also.

Unfortunately, I did not receive much feedback from the parents. These students tended to lose papers that I gave them and either did the work alone or with a parent and forgot to get them to write some feedback on it.

The students appreciated the break in routine and loved playing "Be a Mind Reader". It helped them to listen to sounds and gave them practice in "Does it make sense?"

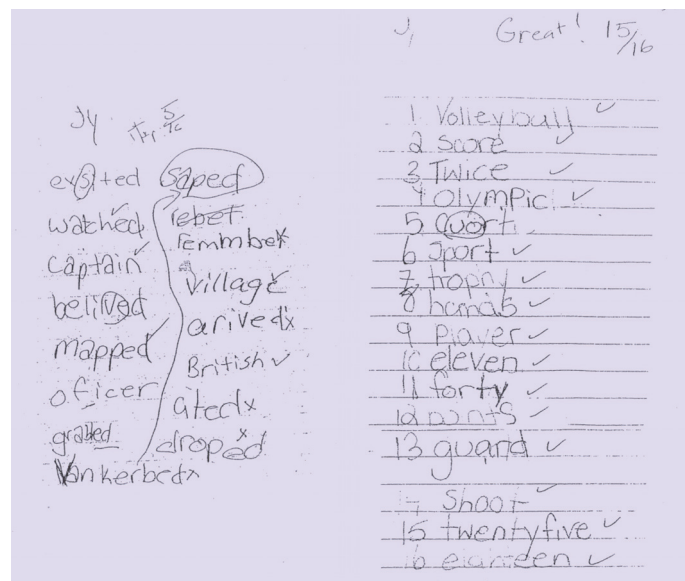
The students also loved "Guess the Covered Word". They were learning to ask "Does it make sense?" and also to pay attention to the sounds that the letters made.

### What's Next?

I plan to continue working with these students next year and implement as many of these strategies as possible to help them to continue to improve their fluency.

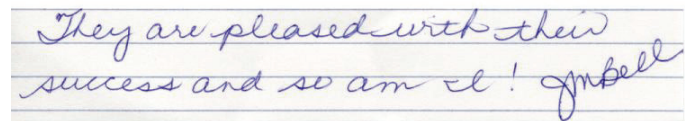
### Conclusion

This has been an exciting experience. Since it was my first Action Research project, I really didn't have any idea what the project entailed. We were presented with a huge box of resources which I thought was terrific. At that point, I did not realize that I would be expected to read them all. This has been very beneficial for me. I learned an enormous amount from the resources and from my colleagues on the project. This will all help me to be better able to assist my struggling students. We only had a short time to work with these students since we did not start the Action Research until the end of January. At times it was very frustrating since school activities, special days, special visits, class trips etc. seem to interfere constantly. I really liked using "Making Words". I have tried it with the Grade 2 students as well as the Grade 5 students. The shadow boxes really seemed to help the students listen to the beginning and ending sounds of a word. When the students ask me how to spell a word I make them work it out for themselves. "The Mind Reader game" and "Guess the Uncovered Word continue to reinforce this and strengthen the students ability to ask:" Does it



insert # 9

May 0



make sense?" and how do the letters sound?" I intend to keep using these strategies and to continue to look for new strategies to assist my students.

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