A literacy lesson framework for children with reading problems

This lesson framework combines productive instructional components with the flexibility necessary for addressing individual children’s interests and needs.

Children who are poor readers tend to receive different instruction than their more skilled peers. Poor readers may primarily be involved in instruction that emphasizes accuracy in identifying sounds, letters, and words rather than the construction of meaning. They may be asked to read orally more frequently than good readers, and they are likely to be off task more often than better readers. Additionally, teachers frequently interrupt their reading rather than encouraging them to monitor their own reading (Allington, 1983b).

I work with preservice elementary education majors, who teach reading to these low-achieving children in an after-school tutoring program at the university reading clinic. The course includes 15 one-hour tutoring sessions following an initial assessment period. Course content includes theories of the reading process, assessment procedures, lesson planning, instructional techniques, and case reporting. Most children we tutor come from the area public schools, are in the primary grades, and are in the lowest reading groups in their classrooms.

Our first four tutoring sessions are spent assessing children’s literacy strengths and weaknesses using several informal instruments, which include an interest inventory, an informal reading inventory, a miscue analysis, a story retelling evaluation, and a writing sample analysis. Each tutor develops an assessment report that details the child’s strengths and lists several beginning instructional goals. Typically, we see several characteristics in the children served in our program: (a) overreliance on the graphophonic cueing system, (b) lack of fluency in reading, (c) a view of reading as accurate word recognition versus meaning construction, (d) few writing strategies, and (e) little self-monitoring and self-correcting behavior.

I have developed the lesson framework described in this article based on my experiences working with children and supervising tutors in several university-based reading clinics, my experiences as a Reading Recovery teacher, my knowledge of whole language philosophy, and my faith in literature-based reading instruction.

Underlying beliefs

I have developed several understandings as a result of my training and work with children that are reflected in the lesson frame-
work. The first is that although children involved in the tutoring program may not demonstrate many reading and writing strengths, tutors must believe that they can learn to be good readers and writers (Clay, 1985; Pinnell, Fried, & Estes, 1990).

A second understanding is that children need the support of predictable reading materials to help them in their reading. Since controlled vocabulary tends to diminish predictability, reading materials should be authentic, meaningful whole texts. Because literacy develops from whole to part, in reading in this lesson framework is done in complete texts. The only work done in isolation is with patterns that the child has already experienced in context and is always followed by a contextual reading activity.

The teaching of reading is best accomplished through the use of quality children’s trade books (Indrisano & Paratore, 1992). Teachers must provide engaging texts for their students that can touch their lives in some small ways. Because tutors want their students to learn to write well, they acquaint them with high quality books written by well known authors of children’s books, and they encourage children to “read like a writer” (Smith, 1983, p. 563). After reading, children should make substantive responses to help extend, refine, and clarify their thinking about what they have read. In this lesson framework, tutors are encouraged to relate all activities in the lesson to a theme, if possible, and to provide postreading activities that encourage further involvement with the texts read.

Another belief which underlies the framework is that tutors should focus on students’ strengths and plan lessons that build on these strengths. Initial assessments aim to elucidate the reading and writing competencies of the child rather than the weaknesses. Following assessment, instruction is focused at the strategy level, and children are taught the process of reading versus isolated or sequenced skills. Readers construct meaning using prior knowledge and experience and the interacting semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic language systems (Goodman, 1986). These systems cannot be isolated without disrupting the interactions that are needed for reading to occur.

Goodman’s (1986) model of reading, which suggests that readers make predictions, sample text, confirm, and self-correct as they construct meaning, is the basis upon which tutors make moment-by-moment teaching decisions. Readers and writers need to be encouraged to make guesses and to develop as risk takers. Children are encouraged to make and verify predictions as they read. The use of invented spellings during writing is another way in which children learn to make approximations.

**Lesson framework overview**

The lesson framework provides learning opportunities for children that are based on these beliefs. The remainder of this article
describes a lesson conducted with a child. Following the example, each lesson component and the reasons for its inclusion in the lesson are discussed. The framework is just that—a structure to assist preservice teachers in developing appropriate instructional activities for students. Tutors observe the reading and writing behaviors of their students and provide the type of teaching and prompting necessary to help students become efficient and independent readers and writers. As an overview, the components of the framework are listed in Figure 1.

A lesson with Gayla and Chase

Chase is a second-grade child enrolled in the tutoring program. He is in the lowest reading group in his class and reads in a first-grade, second-semester basal reader; he is struggling.

Chase begins his lesson with his tutor, Gayla, by selecting from three books laid out on the table. He has seen these books before and grins with recognition as he thumbs through them to make his first selection. He chooses My Boat (Cowley, 1987) and prepares to read aloud. Gayla reminds him to “read so it sounds interesting to hear” and periodically stops to praise him for doing so.

Just Like Daddy (Asch, 1981) is Chase’s next choice. On this text, Gayla reads each page while modeling fluent reading. Chase echoes her after each page. She emphasizes phrasing, inflection, and expression as she moves through the text, and she encourages Chase to try to emulate her reading.

Successful fluent reading is possible during this familiar reading part of the lesson because Chase does not have to focus on word analysis; he has read these books before, and they are easy for him, so he can devote his attention to fluency and comprehension.

Next, Gayla presents Tammy and the Gigantic Fish (Gray & Gray, 1983), which she has chosen for guided reading because she knows Chase frequently goes fishing with his father. Chase has difficulty activating existing prior knowledge when he reads, and Gayla understands that his background knowledge will assist him with this story.

Before reading she tells Chase the title of the book and asks him to tell her about a time when he went fishing. After a brief description of that event, Gayla and Chase develop a web around the word “fishing” (see Figure 2). They talk about equipment needed for fishing, people who have gone fishing with Chase, what to do with the caught fish; all these ideas come from Chase’s past experiences. Gayla writes in this part of the lesson to conserve time and free Chase to think and make connections to the concept of fishing.

Now Gayla feels that Chase is ready to read Tammy and the Gigantic Fish. She reminds him of the title and subject and tells him that thinking about their discussion of fishing as he reads will help him when he encounters difficult parts. During Chase’s reading of the book, Gayla is very supportive, but at the same time she explicitly prompts him to use reading strategies. Chase tends to rely too heavily on the graphophonic cues, so she encourages him to use the surrounding context, think about what he knows about fishing, think about what is happening in the
story, and look at the pictures when he encounters unknown words. She wants Chase to learn to use the semantic and syntactic cues in conjunction with graphophonic cues every time he reads, since the “sounding out” procedure he uses is frequently inaccurate and, therefore, ineffective for him. Gayla also encourages Chase to use other strategies such as rereading, self-monitoring, self-correcting, and making guesses.

Gayla also wants to increase Chase’s risk-taking behavior. Chase seems to believe that word-perfect reading is the goal, so Gayla spends a great deal of time encouraging him to make a guess that sounds right, looks right, and makes sense. As Chase reads, Gayla focuses his attention on the meaning of the story. She periodically employs the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA) and asks him, “What do you think will happen next?” followed by “Why do you think that?” This prompting helps Chase learn to make predictions as he reads and then read to confirm or disconfirm the predictions. The DR-TA helps him learn to monitor his own reading without help.

When Chase has finished the story, Gayla praises him for using specific reading strategies throughout the text. She selects instances in the text where he used rereading to help him gain meaning, and she asks him to articulate how that strategy worked for him (Clay, 1985).

As a postreading activity, Gayla focuses his attention on the story elements, another area of difficulty for him. Chase tends to remember details but misses the “big picture.” She has made construction paper cut-outs in the shape of a fish, a hook, a worm, a boat, and several fishing poles. Using the book as a reference if needed, Chase identifies the main character and writes it on the fish. He then identifies the setting, the problem, the major story events, and the resolution and writes them on the other shapes (see Figure 3). Gayla alerts him to the story grammar because she knows that understanding these elements will assist him in making good predictions as he reads other stories. When they have completed the activity, Chase rereads what he has written and realizes that he has written a summary of the story he has just read!

Next, Gayla begins the writing portion of the lesson. She hopes to expose Chase to the writing process by taking him through each step: brainstorming, drafting, editing, sharing, revising, publishing. In this lesson she asks him to brainstorm ideas for a story he will write about one of the fishing trips he has
taken with his father. Gayla helps Chase elaborate on his ideas by asking him questions such as, “What are the names of some of the places you have gone fishing?” “What kind of fish have you caught?” “What do you like the best about going on fishing trips?” Her goal is for Chase to create a list of ideas to include in a story that he will publish in a blank book. Gayla will make the connection between reading and writing by having him include the same story elements they have identified in their prior reading. The finished book will also serve as material to be read in the familiar reading part of subsequent lessons. Because it is his own writing and ideas, Chase will be very successful reading his book.

In the fifth part of the lesson, Chase is engaged in word sorting. Gayla noticed in previous lessons that he had some difficulty reading words beginning with sh, tending to make guesses that began with the s sound. Because she also noticed this confusion in writing, Gayla has written words beginning in s and words beginning in sh on cards that Chase will sort into categories. Chase reads each word and decides if it goes in the column of words beginning with s or the column
of words beginning with *sh*. Gayla wants him to generalize that these two spelling patterns result in two different sounds. Following the sorting, Gayla asks Chase to write a few of the words, thus helping him make the connection between reading and writing.

Finally, as the lesson comes to a close, Chase listens to a story Gayla has selected to read to him. For the book sharing portion of the lesson, she chooses a book that she thinks will interest him and contains text that is more difficult than he could read on his own without assistance: *The River Boys* (Michl, 1986). Chase is enthralled with the adventures of three children his age who fish, swim, and raft on a river unsupervised by adults!

The lesson is over, and Chase selects several books from his familiar reading pile to take home and reread to family members. He will bring these books back to the next lesson and be ready to start all over again.

**Lesson components**

Following is a description of each lesson component and the reasons for its inclusion in the framework. Since the lessons complement the child’s regular school reading program, books and writing topics provide opportunities for the child to employ reading and writing strategies which require more practice.

**Familiar reading.** A poor reader is probably not reading at grade level and therefore is likely to face frustration level materials in classroom reading contexts (Allington, 1983a). In the familiar reading part of the lesson framework, the tutor selects several familiar, independent level texts; the child chooses a text to read from this assortment. The child reads and rereads books on many successive lessons, practicing the strategies learned in previous lessons (Clay, 1985). These experiences serve as confidence builders and warm-ups for the lesson to follow; they also provide materials tutors can use to model and teach fluency.

A portion of the familiar reading time in each lesson is spent in silent reading, since poor readers spend less time (25% of reading) reading silently in school than their more-skilled peers (Allington, 1983b). The independent silent reading time gives students the opportunity to read without the teacher corrections that typify classroom reading instruction.

Researchers have many hypotheses about why poor readers read with less fluency (Allington, 1983a; Nathan & Stanovich, 1991): They may not have been read to at home and thus have not had good models for fluent reading; they have fewer opportunities to read in context; the material they read is too difficult for them; they do not read silently very often; they focus too much on accuracy; or they receive instruction focused on words, sounds, and letters. Fluency suffers when children focus their attention more on the details of print than the meaning of the text; thus comprehension suffers too.

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In this lesson framework, the tutor uses a variety of fluency techniques, such as neuro- logical impress, echo reading, modeled reading, and repeated reading (Blum & Koskinen, 1991; DeFord, 1991; Heckelman, 1969; Mathes, Simmons, & Davis, 1992; Samuels, Schermer, & Reinking, 1992; Weinstein & Cook, 1992; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991). The materials used in the familiar reading portion of the lesson provide the easy texts that children need, so they can focus more on building fluency and less on decoding of print.

**Guided reading.** For the guided reading portion of the lesson, the tutor selects a book that will provide opportunities for the student to practice using reading strategies that she or he is beginning to control or needs to practice (Chall & Curtis, 1992). The printed readability labels are not used in book selection; instead, the tutor considers such characteristics as the degree of illustration support, how the text is arranged on the page, the student’s prior knowledge, the subject, the theme, the
length of the sentences, and the type of vocabulary (Peterson, 1991).

**Before reading activities.** Before beginning to read the guided reading book, the child is involved in a schema activation or schema enhancing activity. This may take the form of generating prereading questions, a book introduction, or making predictions about story content as a part of the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (Dole, Valencia, Greer, & Wardrop, 1991; Nolan, 1991; Richards & Gipe, 1992; White & Lawrence, 1992). A student may also be encouraged to ask questions about the content of what will be read, especially if the content is expository, using techniques such as K-W-L (Ogle, 1986) that help the student activate and organize background knowledge and set purposes for reading. As a part of the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (Stauffer, 1975), the student may be asked to make predictions about story elements before reading. The teacher may focus the child’s attention on the cover, give the title, and ask for predictions about possible outcomes. These predictions are evaluated later in the reading and help the student think critically about the story.

In selecting books for the guided reading portion of the lesson, the tutor takes great care to consider the reader’s prior knowledge. If the tutor believes that the book may challenge the student, she or he may do a book introduction before the child’s first attempt at reading. The introduction assists the child in successfully processing print even on the first reading (Clay, 1991).

In the book introduction, which is a part of the Reading Recovery lesson framework, the teacher scaffolds the child’s experience with the text (Clay, 1991). The tutor talks about the book while focusing the child’s attention on the general plot or sequence of events in the story. The child is encouraged to bring in background knowledge and talk about the illustrations. Any difficult, repeated, or literary language is used in the book introduction, so the child can hear it before reading it. The child may even recite a repeated refrain to get a feel for the textual language.

**During reading activities.** Following the prereading activity, the child reads the selected text as independently as possible with the tutor teaching, guiding, and supporting along the way. The teaching is focused at the strategy level, and a Directed Reading-Thinking Activity is simultaneously conducted.

Research shows that poor readers’ miscues tend to be more graphophonically similar and semantically dissimilar to the actual words in the text than the miscues of good readers (Feldman & Feldman, 1983; Goodman, 1973). In fact, Weaver (1988) states “the very poorest readers tend to read almost one word at a time, as if each word stood in a list rather than in a sentence” (p. 116). This overreliance on the surface structure, which may be a result of instruction that dwells on words in isolation rather than contextual reading (Hiebert, 1983), inhibits readers’ ability to construct meaning.

Because instruction aimed at graphophonemic analysis may cause the student to pay even more attention to surface structure, the guided reading part of the lesson framework is aimed at teaching children how to use reading strategies rather than reading skills. Strategies are defined as “mental activities initiated by the child to get messages from a text” (Clay, 1985, p. 14). During guided reading, the student is taught how to use the semantic, syntactic, and graphophonemic cueing systems through prompting such as, “Does that make sense?” (semantics), “Does that sound right? or “Could we say it that way?” (syntax), and “Does that look right?” or “What would you expect to see in that word?” (graphophonics). In addition, the child learns one-to-one matching and directionality, searching for cues (“It looks like you are stuck. Could you look at the picture for help?” “Could you reread the sentence and think what would sound right and make sense?”), self-monitoring (“Does that make sense?” “Do you understand what is happening in the story?”), self-correcting (“Is something wrong?” “What could you do to fix it up so it makes sense?”), and cross-checking information from various cueing systems (“It could be that word, but check the letters carefully,” “Look at the picture to see if you are right”) (Clay, 1985). These strategies are intended to make the student an independent reader; the goal is to foster self-monitoring and metacognitive awareness (Brown, 1978; Garner, 1992).

During the guided reading part of the les-
son the student makes predictions, reads with these predictions in mind, and then confirms or disconfirms them. The tutor previews the book and marks several stopping points for discussion throughout the text (Marlow & Reese, 1992; Richards, 1993; Stauffer, 1975).

Postreading activities. After reading, the child completes a follow-up activity that involves answering prereading questions; evaluating predictions; or clarifying, extending, or refining thinking about the story. For example, the child may be asked to answer prereading questions through discussion, returning to the text to find answers, or writing answers on the K-W-L sheet (Ogle, 1986).

The tutor may also select from a wide variety of postreading activities that refine, extend, or clarify the student’s thinking about the book (Schunk & Rice, 1991; White & Lawrence, 1992), since poor readers need opportunities to think about texts in many ways and to bring in their experiences and background knowledge (Hansen, 1981). In all postreading activities the tutor models how to answer questions and encourage children to use text “look backs” (Garner & Reis, 1981). The tutor helps students understand which answers to questions are explicitly stated in the text, which must be inferred from the text, and which require one’s background (Raphael, 1986).

Predictions made in the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity may be evaluated after students read, or the tutor may alert students to story structure through discussion. Other activities for this part of the lesson bring children back into the book in some way: illustrate a scene described in the book, write a letter to the author, create a character web or a dialogue between two characters, retell or summarize the story, develop a Venn diagram comparing two characters, map the story, or respond orally or in writing about how the book made them feel or related to their own lives (Kelly, 1990).

Writing. Reading and writing are related:

In writing, the child must construct his own words, letter by letter. The attention of eye and brain is directed to the elements of letters, to letter sequences and to spatial concepts. The child who writes a simple story is caught up in a process of synthesizing words and sentences. This building-up process is an excellent complement to the visual analysis of the text in his reading book, which is a breaking-down process. (Clay, 1979, p. 124)

Reading and writing are also processes of constructing meaning (Tierney & Pearson, 1983). Reading involves making predictions and getting a sense of what a text will convey, while writing similarly involves the process of deciding what is important and drafting it. Reading involves revising predictions and interpretations, and writing involves revising for content and mechanics. Each process helps the child learn more about the other.

Each lesson in the framework has a writing component that may take the form of a shared writing procedure followed by a cut-up sentence (Clay, 1985), a more general process writing activity, or primarily independent writing. In addition, prereading or postreading activities may involve writing.

Shared writing, adapted from the Reading Recovery Program, is used with emergent writers who are not yet fluent in developing content or in using the mechanics necessary for writing (Clay, 1985). The student generates a message with the tutor’s assistance. The child says the words slowly, listens to the sounds, and encodes them with the appropriate letters. When the child needs help, the tutor writes a known word that contains the same spelling pattern and shows the child how to use known words to figure out unknown words in writing. New words are added to a writing vocabulary inventory so the tutor and the child can see progress (Clay, 1982). The child continually rereads the sentence as more words are added on, which allows for checking the message and detecting errors in content.

Following the writing of the message, the tutor copies it onto a sentence strip while the child reads it. The tutor then cuts the sentence between each word, and the child reassembles it without looking at the original sentence. This activity provides practice in checking, self-monitoring, matching printed and spoken words, directionality, studying details in words, and language segmentation. The tutor may also cut the sentence into segments that provide practice with a certain letter(s) or sound(s). For instance, if the child is working on the at pattern, the tutor could emphasize that pattern by separating it from the initial sounds when cutting words from
the sentence strip.

The tutor may engage more proficient writers in activities that illustrate the writing process. Tutor and student may develop a piece of writing over several lessons, moving from planning to composing and finally to revision. These writing activities may be linked to books the student has read in guided reading or books she or he has heard in the book sharing part of the lesson (Gentile & McMillan, 1991; Graham, Harris, MacArthur, & Schwartz, 1991). As tutors assist in creating texts, they help them see how both reading and writing are geared toward creating and constructing meaning.

**Word sorting.** Word sorting helps children learn about semantic, structural, and sound patterns in words. Words are collected from a variety of sources to use in word sorting activities: guided reading texts, familiar reading texts, and children’s own writing. Analyzing words for common features is an essential strategy for both decoding in reading and encoding in writing (Fresch, 1992; Gillet & Temple, 1990; Hiebert, Colt, Catto, & Gurry, 1992). Words with common spelling patterns or sounds may be sorted, or those that share meaning may be sorted to develop a concept.

Sorting words by semantic categories can help children see how words are related to each other by their meanings. For example, in order to sort words into two categories, “Living Things” and “Things Not Alive,” the child must read each word, consider its meaning, and then use inductive thinking to classify it (Gillet & Temple, 1990). When children are taught to analyze words for common features, the range and flexibility of their vocabulary knowledge increases (Lipson & Wixson, 1991). Word sorting gives children needed practice in learning how to analyze and generalize in reading and writing situations.

**Book sharing.** The final component in the lesson framework is the sharing of a quality children’s trade book. Because listening to stories has links to developing comprehension skills, this part of the lesson is very important (Wells, 1986). Children are exposed to a variety of genres when their tutors read aloud and listen to texts that they cannot read on their own. They also have the luxury of simply relaxing and enjoying the unfolding story. Tutors select books that contain topics of interest, but they also wish to stretch children’s imaginations. As Huck (1977) wrote, “Literature also has the power to influence children’s lives. Much of what a child learns in school is concerned with knowing; literature is concerned with feeling. It can educate the heart as well as the head” (p. 356).

**Results and summary**

As the semester progresses tutors document their students’ progress in literacy portfolios that include the original assessment information, lesson artifacts, and progress evaluations by the tutors and the children. Typically, we see progress in several areas: (a) children make more meaningful miscues, self-correct more frequently, and use all cueing systems in a more integrated fashion; (b) children become more fluent readers, (c) children gain skill in talking about books, evaluating their feelings about stories, and thinking critically about texts; (d) children come to understand writing as a process versus simply focusing on the product and mechanics, (e) children begin to evaluate their own reading and writing strategies, and (f) children begin to change their views of the reading process as is evident by their attempts to gain meaning when reading versus focusing on graphophonics and word calling. The contents of the portfolio illustrate these behavior and attitude changes, which are shared with me and with the child’s parent(s).

The lesson framework we use combines productive instructional components for the children we tutor with opportunities for tutors to tailor lessons for individual children. Most important, the framework enables tutors to see and implement the links between current reading theory and practice.

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**References**


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Read to them
Read to them
Before the time is gone and stillness fills the room again.
Read to them.

What if it were meant to be that you were the one, the only one, who could unlock the doors and share the magic with them? What if others have been daunted by scheduling demands, district objectives, or one hundred other obstacles?

Read to them
Be confident Charlotte has been able to teach them about friendship,
and Horton about self-worth;
Be sure the Skin Horse has been able to deliver his message.

Read to them
Let them meet Tigger, Homer Price, Aslan, and Corduroy;
Take them to Oz, Prydain, and Camazotz;
Show them a Truffula Tree.

Read to them
Laugh with them at Soup and Rob,
and cry with them when the Queen of Terabithia is forever lost;
Allow the Meeker Family to turn loyalty, injustice, and war into something much more than a vocabulary lesson.

What if you are the one, the only one, with the chance to do it? What if this is the critical year for even one child?

Read to them
Before the time, before the chance, is gone.

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Read to them

Children's books cited
Figure 1
The literacy lesson framework

1. Familiar reading (fluency)—approximately 5 minutes
2. Guided reading—approximately 30 minutes
   Before-reading activity (generating prereading questions, introducing the book, or making predictions)
   During-reading activity (teaching for strategy use, Directed Reading-Thinking Activity)
   Postreading activity (answering prereading questions; evaluating predictions; or clarifying, extending, or refining thinking about the story)
3. Writing (shared writing and cut-up sentences, process writing)—approximately 15 minutes
4. Word sorting—approximately 5 minutes
5. Book sharing—approximately 5 minutes