

# ANOTHER CHANCE

## *Help for Older Students with Limited Literacy*

BY JANE FELL GREENE

**D**ick and Jane are gone. But if the old readers reappeared in American classrooms today, legions of middle and high school students wouldn't be able to read them. And yet, we assign these same students to read *Of Mice and Men* or *Romeo and Juliet*. When they can't, teachers are reduced to showing the video, holding class discussions, and accepting for-credit projects that require minimal reading and writing: acting out a different ending; taping an interview with a character; making a diorama or a mobile or a poster.

Over the last two decades, middle and high school teachers have faced exploding numbers of students who don't read or write well enough for minimal functioning in their content classes. In large and small, urban and rural, affluent and impoverished school districts across the nation, I work with thousands of teachers who tell me stories like one I recently heard from an eighth-grade teacher in the Southwest: "This year, our district is emphasizing literacy. They gave me a two-hour reading/language arts block. I got a set of eighth-grade literature books and a set of eighth-grade grammar books. There are thirty-four kids in the block. Only one or two can actually read the eighth-grade literature book...you know, Edgar Allen Poe short stories. It's ridiculous. These kids can't read this stuff. Lots of these kids can't read more than about third-grade level, if that. I've brought in a lot of books my own kids had when they were little, just to try to get them reading. Forget the grammar book. Four kids in my block have only been in this country since last summer. They can't speak a word of English. On Thursdays, an ESL teacher pulls them out of the block for about an hour. I really don't know what to do. It's not just reading. They can't spell. They can't write. I'm an English teacher. I really care about these kids. I do. But there's no time for me to cover the material I have to teach *and* to teach them how to read—supposing I knew *how* to teach them to read."

The last National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; U.S. Department of Education, 1995) astonished educators with the revelation that only about a quarter

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of fourth graders tested could actually read at or above a fourth-grade level. Older students' performance was exponentially more tragic. Those fourth graders were sent on to fifth-grade teachers who used fifth-grade materials and who were mandated to teach a fifth-grade curriculum. And so it went. NAEP results told a tale that teachers know well: Each year, more students fall farther behind in basic reading, writing, and spelling.

It's become popular to blame society, to blame television and drugs and parents who work and parents who don't read to their kids. And of course there's some truth to that. But we have our students five days a week for twelve years. What happened? How did we get into such dire straits? Why is it that so many of our kids can't read?

Lots of "experts" now postulate that a significant percentage of people with normal intelligence simply *can't* learn to read. Gregory Adams\* would be outraged by the statement; he had been the victim of that notion. When I first met him, Gregory was a nonreader. He had been in special education forever. Gregory told me he was in special ed with Moses. He was just one of those who "couldn't learn to read." In grade nine his teacher introduced his class to a literacy curriculum for older students. Gregory became literate. This is how it happened.

### The Mission

In the sixties and seventies, I was a high school English teacher. By the mid seventies, I became aware that lots of my kids weren't reading. Not because they wouldn't. They couldn't. I trudged back to grad school. My mission: to figure out how to make readers of non-readers. It took fifteen years to figure out how to do it well.

I entered the eighties with a new doctorate in reading and linguistics and a new job. As a college professor, I taught reading courses to undergraduate and graduate students. My students and I were running a clinical reading laboratory, spending long, hard hours working one-to-one with kids in the community. There

*\*Students' real names are not used in this article.*



were hundreds of kids on our waiting list. My worst headache each semester was calling parents who had applied, but whose children we couldn't serve. The same kids would apply for several succeeding semesters. We weren't making any significant gains, we weren't closing any gaps, and I knew it. I worried about it, but I knew that nobody worked harder than we did and that my students and I were doing everything I'd learned in my doctoral program. No matter how hard we worked, though, we were barely keeping kids' heads above water in school.

By the mid-eighties, I had begun reading research involving things I hadn't learned in grad school. Scientists were now documenting the importance of phonemic awareness in reading. (Today, we know that phonemic awareness—discriminating and manipulating isolated sounds in words—is the most potent predictor of reading success. See Adams, et al., this issue.) My linguistics training had included a firm foundation in phonology, so I was able to read and understand what these researchers were doing. Over the past two decades, The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)—one of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Research and Improvement, the Office of Special Education Programs, and the Canadian Research Council have all scientifically investigated diverse aspects of reading. I followed this research, implementing what I was learning with our students. I began to question psycholinguistic reading theories (Goodman, 1968; Smith, 1971) I had accepted as gospel in grad school. It became clear that much of what I had been taught in my graduate studies was merely theory—it lacked a rigorous scientific base. In the clinic, we began implementing research-based instructional procedures that reading scientists were disclosing, and we finally began experiencing real success with our students.

Meanwhile, each succeeding year, schools taught more and more literature and less and less literacy. Basic skills were denigrated, and certainly, it was ar-

gued, shouldn't be taught directly. All would be well if only kids were enveloped in a "literacy-rich environment." I recalled one of my own reading professors, who'd repeatedly warned, "Never teach phonics." That advice resounded throughout

America's colleges of education for twenty years (Moats, 1995). At the end of the nineties, many teachers say it's the spiel they still hear in reading courses. I have heard variations on one same theme reprised by teachers around the country. It goes something like this: "I went back to grad school to learn more about how to teach reading. When I finished, they told me I was a reading specialist. Diploma in hand, I thought to myself, 'Yes, but how do you teach somebody *how* to read?'"

As the "dump-the-skills-and-drills" philosophy became thoroughly entrenched in our area, our waiting list continued to multiply. Success with our students was rewarding, but the more deeply I became involved in phonemic awareness, explicit, systematic phonics, code-based instruction, and decoding to the level of automaticity, the more derision I faced from my professional colleagues, trendily afloat in the anti-skills current. Once I overheard two colleagues discussing how I'd really "gone overboard with this ludicrous phonics stuff." They used terms like "boring," "drill and kill," and "phonic-damaged children." But I knew our kids weren't bored. They were turning on to reading and writing. I also knew this wasn't about me. It was about kids. I tried to put it aside.

My biggest headache was the realization that we couldn't help older kids one at a time. We'd have to figure out a way to deliver literacy to kids who'd fallen behind. And we'd have to figure out a way to deliver it in a *classroom*, not in a pullout or a tutorial. We needed something that would be comprehensive but that would permit teachers to individualize through small-group, rather than whole-group instruction. I knew from my years as a middle and high school teacher that a "program" wasn't enough. Lots of "pro-

grams” were available—but launching literacy in a middle or high school classroom was another thing. While research was illustrating the critical importance of explicit, systematic phonics for delayed readers and writers, teachers also had to involve students in literature, comprehension, and composition. Even if teachers *did* begin teaching older kids to decode, they’d still be responsible for teaching all the strands of the curriculum. And reading delay didn’t imply thinking delay: Higher-order thinking would have to be a part of the curriculum from the beginning. To create a comprehensive intervention curriculum, we would have to incorporate and integrate composition, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and literature that the kids could really read. And we’d have to organize *all* these strands at *every* level, since students’ mastery levels were all over the map. Teachers couldn’t possibly individualize instruction in decoding, comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and literature for thirty kids. Even special ed teachers weren’t able to do it with smaller numbers.

I began to realize that teachers could only address the issue of literacy in middle and high schools if they had a comprehensive, fully integrated curriculum designed for ease of implementation and individualization. If such a curriculum existed, and if we could provide professional development for middle and high school teachers, we could rescue millions of older kids who’d been written off. I knew what needed to be done.

## How Education Confused Literature with Literacy

Over the past twenty years, America’s schools have become heavily invested in what’s often called “literature-based instruction.” The nomenclature itself has confused lots of people. Who’s against literature? It’s like baseball and apple pie. The problem is, literature isn’t literacy. Good teachers have always read to and surrounded their students with good literature; that immersion was nothing new. But in order for *students* to read literature, they must first learn *how* to read. Literature-based instruction appeared to be ignoring what science was teaching us about effective reading instruction (Stanovich, 1991). It was based largely on the theory that children who were immersed in language and literature became good readers and writers because language acquisition was a “natural” human phenomenon. This hypothesis has now been thoroughly discredited (Adams & Bruck, 1995). Clearly, young children who are immersed in language and literature will develop spoken language. Spoken language acquisition *is* a natural human phenomenon. Written language acquisition, however, is not (Lieberman, 1990). A quick review of history and anthropology reveals that most societies never developed a written language, no matter how rich the culture or how intricate the spoken language. Written language is invented; it is code based. To



become literate, students must become masters of the code (Lyon, 1998). The lack of a firm foundation in decoding becomes devastating for students when they reach the middle school level. When they were in the primary grades, students could employ the Predict-the-Next-Word-by-Looking-at-the-Picture-and-Guessing technique currently in vogue. Even though they had not been explicitly taught to decode and thus had never reached the point of rapid, accurate, fluent decoding, they could sometimes wing it by predicting words that they were familiar with. For example, given “*John had a little red \_\_\_\_\_*,” most children predict *wagon*. The word *wagon* is in their listening vocabulary. Off they go to middle school, relying on guessing at words they can’t decode. But during middle school, kids reach a “break point” in reading, a point at which contextual guessing is no longer effective. Three factors contribute to this phenomenon:

a) New content-area vocabulary words do not preexist in their listening vocabularies. They can guess *wagon*. But they can’t guess *circumnavigation* or *chlorophyll* based on context (semantics, syntax, or schema); these words are not in their listening vocabularies.

b) When all of the words readers never learned to decode in grades one to four are added to all the textbook vocabulary words that don’t preexist in readers’ listening vocabularies, the percentage of unknown words teeters over the brink; the text now contains so many unknown words that there’s no way to get the sense of the sentence.

c) Text becomes more syntactically embedded, and comprehension disintegrates. Simple English sentences can be stuffed full of prepositional phrases, dependent clauses, and compoundings. Eventually, there’s so much language woven into a sentence that readers lose meaning. When syntactically embedded sentences crop up in science and social studies texts, many can’t comprehend. Teachers use content-area reading strategies, but these strategies are no bandage for their students’ gaping literacy wounds. Textbooks are no longer meaningful or useful. Teachers and students become frustrated. Frustrated teachers leave education; frustrated students drop out.

Two additional factors greatly complicate this already difficult situation. First, few middle and high school teachers are trained in the teaching of reading. Content-area reading courses, commonly required for credentialing of secondary teachers, offer various strategies to enhance comprehension in content-area courses. Content-area reading strategies, however, do not teach students with limited literacy *how* to read. These strategies are no substitute for the direct teaching of reading. Secondary teachers should not be expected to simultaneously teach content-area subject

matter and make their students literate. Such expectations are irrational.

Secondly, even if middle and high school teachers were prepared to deal effectively with the problems of semi-literate students, it would not take long to count the number of school districts who have a systematic means of identifying students that evidence literacy delays. And even if they did, they have no coherent intervention program that teachers can use.

Even in special ed, where many students with reading problems wind up, teachers tell me the literacy effort is usually “scatter shot,” randomly stuffing loosely woven gauze into gaping holes. Repeatedly, special education teachers report that their districts have no literacy curriculum continuity for special education students. Some kids never get to verb tense, while others repeat proper nouns for six years in a row. Bits and pieces are pasted together to repair the most severe problems (Mather, 1992). Inclusion programs have drastically reduced the individual time on task that specialists need to teach basic skills directly. Worse, special educators are often required to invest what little time remains in tutoring students through the Peloponnesian Wars and photosynthesis so they can pass orally administered tests. Middle and high school students who receive accommodations and modifications under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Services Act or special programs become more deeply entangled in webs of failure. Accommodations and modifications are sorry substitutes for literacy.

## A Literacy Curriculum for Older Students

By the early nineties, many teachers had begun to agonize over kids who were learning about literature but weren't learning to read. The problem, of course, didn't go away. It got worse. Many of our students, ineligible for special education, nevertheless received accommodations and modifications, including oral testing, extra time on tests, assistance with note taking—everything except a research-based literacy program designed for classroom implementation in middle and high schools.

In 1991, I began seriously thinking about developing such a program: a comprehensive literacy curriculum for delayed readers; an integrated curriculum that would include the literature, language, and composition components that classroom teachers were responsible for teaching. Such a curriculum could be heavy in composition and vocabulary and grammar. Students could be reading literature; they'd just be reading at the level at which they could really read, instead of being required to do something they couldn't do.

Even then, I realized that curriculum materials alone would be insufficient. Two other factors would be critical to relaunching literacy in middle and high schools: First, intensive professional development and follow-up would be crucial for middle and high school teachers, who traditionally have not been responsible for initiating the teaching of reading (likely candidates were

English teachers). Retraining would also be critical for elementary teachers, most of whom had received inadequate literacy preparation in colleges of education. Second, it was important that scheduling provide ample instructional time (a two-hour block for credit in reading and English seemed logical). But these two factors would require revamping curriculum and scheduling. And who was going to listen to me, anyway?

I had to try, and the only way to begin was at the beginning. I resurrected my own years in the classroom and remembered all of those at-risk students in my English and reading classes. What would I have needed to make them literate? During the next four years, I thought of and did little else but work on the project. When the curriculum was finished, it was integrated, systematic, and comprehensive; it was individualized and yet could be used in a classroom setting; it interwove components revealed to be scientifically crucial to literacy development and integrated the various strands of a sound reading/language arts curriculum.

Over the next few years, intensive teacher training began in several states; today, the curriculum has been successfully implemented by numerous school districts across the nation. I realize that its success has been due to teachers. When they participate in our professional development courses, teachers feel validated. They've known all along that what they had been asked to do made no sense. Elementary teachers repeatedly tell me they felt ineffective and frustrated by the “method” they were forced to use to teach kids to read, write, and spell. Middle and high school teachers tell me they were “burned out” by the frustrations of trying to teach students who lacked the most basic skills. Some middle and high school teachers prefer to continue teaching conventional literature courses to high achievers, but many wouldn't give up the opportunity to make kids literate—once they know how and have the materials to do it. One teacher summed it up: “It's the difference between covering material and teaching kids. I wish we'd been doing this for the past twenty years. In my mind's eye, I can see all the kids who would have learned to read if I'd had this.”

## Curriculum Components

Teachers begin by administering a simple placement test that measures encoding (spelling) mastery for each unit's phonology strand. Since encoding follows decoding, and since literacy requires mastery of written language, the mastery of a unit's phonology content cannot be claimed until encoding is mastered. The instrument, contained in the teacher's manual, is simple to administer to a group and requires nothing other than pencil and paper. Invariably, teachers are stunned by their students' placement test results. Teachers' initial guesstimates about students' mastery levels are consistently inflated.

Students are placed in an appropriate unit, based on placement test results, writing samples, and teacher judgment. Older students move through this basic-level material rapidly, but unless it is directly taught, teachers concur that there's too much risk of missing impor-

tant components. Building a firm foundation for literacy, they say, stands their students in good stead as they progress through the curriculum's three levels.

*Level One* features phonemic awareness, phoneme-grapheme correspondence, decoding, encoding, accuracy and fluency in passage reading, vocabulary, comprehension, wide supplementary reading, introduction to form and function in grammar (nouns, verbs, subjects, predicates), and abundant writing and editing. Objectives are straightforward. For example, students do not simply learn to spell twenty new words each week; rather, they learn how to spell the English Language systematically. Throughout the curriculum, each new concept incorporates what has previously been taught. Unit progression is dependent on concept mastery, as documented by a minimum of 80 percent mastery of the unit's application tasks, as well as other unit requirements in reading and writing.

*Level Two.* Some students may test in at level two, which introduces three new strands: syllabication (seven syllable types are taught sequentially and cumulatively for vocabulary development and spelling), morphology (Latin roots, prefixes and suffixes are taught for vocabulary and spelling), and Masterpiece Sentences (this strand serves as the vehicle for the direct teaching of syntax for enhancing composition, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension). Level two continues to develop level one's composition and grammar strands. The composition strand emphasizes both narrative and expository writing. Among various other requirements, expository writing emphasizes reading and paraphrasing science and social studies text for report writing.

*Level Three* incorporates two new strands: Greek morphology (Greek combining forms that constitute much of scientific and technical English vocabulary)

and literature. Literature has been *read* through levels one and two, but literature is not *studied* as a subject until students have mastered literacy skills required to comprehend the subject of literature—at the onset of level three. Literary devices like flashback and foreshadowing are directly taught, as are figurative language techniques such as metaphor, hyperbole, and personification. In level three, stories are used to introduce literary concepts such as universal theme, narrative style, tone, point of view, plot development, and character development. The curriculum's supplementary readers feature fourteen protagonists who weave in and out of the stories—characters to whom students can relate. Each of the stories is followed by vocabulary, comprehension, higher-level thinking, and written and spoken language expansion activities. In addition to demonstrating level three's required mastery of vocabulary, English grammar and usage, students continue to be involved in abundant supplementary reading and writing.

Wide supplementary reading is an integral part of the curriculum. The curriculum's units have been assessed by a sophisticated readability formula that provides a readability code for each unit. Using the unit's readability code and computer software that accesses 10,000 titles in fifteen different interest categories, teachers print out lists of books their students can actually read. Students select and read titles from classic literature and fifteen other interest categories that include adventure, sports, science fiction, history, biography, science, friends and relationships, and mystery.

No additional English texts, spelling texts, vocabulary texts, or any other language arts texts are required; the curriculum is both comprehensive and integrated. Extensive teacher training and follow-up classroom coaching are key components of the program.

**Table 1**  
**Gains in Reading and Spelling Measures over 12-month Period for Treatment (T)**  
**and Comparison (C) groups. (The t-tests presented indicate whether there is a significant difference**  
**between scores on the pretest and posttest for that group.)**

Subtest	Group	n	Pretest		Posttest		Gain	t-test	p-value
			M	SD	M	SD			
Rate	T	45	76.55	18.61	86.66	23.21	10.11	6.96	.00001
(GORT-3)	C	51	86.86	22.78	89.11	21.67	2.25	1.18	NS
Accuracy	T	45	83.22	22.03	94.55	26.98	11.33	7.95	.00001
(GORT-3)	C	51	91.57	26.05	95.39	26.34	3.82	2.57	.01
Comprehension	T	45	82.44	19.12	96.11	24.00	13.66	8.07	.00001
(GORT-3)	C	51	95.19	26.88	99.70	25.77	4.50	2.20	.03
Total Reading	T	45	79.62	22.81	92.62	27.56	13.00	7.34	.00001
(GORT-3)	C	51	94.35	28.99	99.00	29.27	4.65	3.24	.002
Written Expression	T	45	61.22	9.64	83.47	24.50	22.24	6.55	.00001
(PIAT-R)	C	0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Spelling	T	45	73.55	15.69	82.57	19.79	9.02	5.72	.00001
(WRAT-R)	C	51	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Word ID	T	45	74.22	16.13	92.13	22.19	17.91	9.80	.00001
(WRAT-R)	C	51	—	—	—	—	—	—	—



# Whole Language within Structured Language

The curriculum is structured; teachers directly teach each unit's concepts sequentially and cumulatively. But within the structured language format are many of the best aspects of whole language. For example: students do wide supplementary reading; teachers read to students; students read to each other; students are heavily involved in writing and in editing their own work; students learn pragmatics, the levels of usage in spoken and in written language; each unit contains a language expansion section designed for students to develop their spoken language abilities; higher-level thinking skills spanning all of the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy are incorporated into every unit; and most importantly, the reading and language arts strands are integrated. The logical links of language are interwoven rather than isolated. Many of these components, used for decades, are claimed by whole language "purists." They are not the property of any camp, however. They are elements of all good reading instruction.

## Intervention Results

On completion of the curriculum, a pilot study involving students in six different states was undertaken from 1994 to 1995, with research funding assistance from the National Center for Learning Disabilities. Subjects included young people in trouble with the law, who had been assigned by judges in their communities to six different centers of Associated Marine Institutes. The pilot study's results revealed significant gains. Statistical results are shown in Table One and can be further reviewed in the original research publication (Greene, 1996).

For ease of interpretation, the following general statement assesses middle and high school students' success: Participants averaged gains of about three years in measured literacy areas (isolated word recognition, contextual word recognition, reading comprehension, composition, and spelling) during an average of six months' enrollment in the curriculum.

School districts' evaluation plans have subsequently revealed similar gains among students in both general and special education classes. Success has been so rigorously documented that the Alabama Department of Education recently instituted a three-year statewide pilot through combined efforts of federal programs and special education departments.

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We don't have to give up on older students with limited literacy. The great majority of them do not have serious reading disabilities; they are better described as "curriculum casualties." And we can do something about that. It's not too late. But we must first stop pushing the situation aside as though it's not there. Ninth-grade students whose reading and writing skills are at the third-grade level should not be given "alternative projects for credit" and passed on to the next grade. We do them no favors with that approach. Instead, we should give them what they so desperately

need and want: a concentrated, ambitious, research-based literacy curriculum.

I will end with the story of Anthony—an eighteen-year-old-tenth grader who had spent three years in grade nine but still couldn't read or write beyond a basic second-grade level. Frustrated and angry, this minority youth was ready to drop out and head for L.A., where there were "real gangs." But between Anthony's ninth- and tenth-grade years, middle and high school teachers in his south Alabama district received intensive training in our literacy curriculum. Assigned to a two-hour block literacy class in grade ten, this youngster, once destined for a life on the margins of society, started back at the beginning: phonemic awareness, phoneme-grapheme correspondence, writing words and sentences, reading decodable connected text, and expanding his vocabulary. Like his classmates, he rapidly developed reading, writing, and spelling abilities. By the end of the second year, he was writing sophisticated, syntactically varied sentences, paraphrasing content area text, and reading for pleasure. He stayed in school for a senior year during which his elective course was journalism. He wrote a monthly column for his high school newspaper. Now able to write the lyrics to the songs he'd been creating and storing in memory, he recently cut a demo of his own compositions. Literacy has afforded him the ability to participate in society; he has a life. Anthony's personal observation said more than he could possibly have imagined: "I always knew there must be some kind of secret code to reading, but nobody ever taught me the code." □

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