An analysis of a struggling reader:
a look into the steps taken to improve reading skills and the progress made

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Victoria Wade

Thesis Advisor
Dr. James C. Stroud

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May 2013

Expected Date of Graduation
May 2013
Abstract
Reading is a huge part of everyday life whether you are a child or an adult. This thesis is an analysis, in narrative form, of the process of tutoring a struggling, elementary reader. The reader was in the fifth grade but was reading at an early third grade level. His lack of reading ability began to affect his performance in other subjects, as well as his attitude toward school. This combined with a less than ideal home life were major factors in his lackluster academic performance. This thesis showcases the implementation some effective reading strategies and describes what could be done in the future in order to help this student's academic performance continue to grow.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. James Stroud, for his patience as I completed this project, as well as his continuous help, guidance, and support from the birth of the idea to final product.

I would also like to thank my mentor teacher in the fall of 2012, Kelli Dillon, for her support of my idea. She has had a large impact on who I am as a teacher today.
Author’s Statement

I wrote this not only to provide documentation to remind myself what I did to help a struggling reader and how it helped, but also to showcase the implementation some effective reading strategies. I have used a pseudonym to protect identity of the student that I tutored.
My first experience working with a struggling reader was a challenging one. The reader was at the point where lack of the ability to read was affecting all subjects in school. When I took on this challenge, I knew for certain that this would not be the last time I would be presented with a challenge such as this. In fact, this time I had the advantage of having the time to work one-on-one with the student for a number of weeks. This experience set the bar for me as a teacher, as well as all of my future interactions with struggling readers.

During the fall of 2012, I participated in a Ball State immersive semester in conjunction with Teachers College called Urban Semester. This semester immerses education majors in urban classrooms four days a week, while taking eighteen credit hours of methods courses remotely. I interned in a fifth grade classroom in Indianapolis, Indiana. The class of twenty-four was made up of five Hispanic students and nineteen Caucasian students. There were fifteen boys and nine girls. Most students were of low socioeconomic status. About ninety percent of students in the school were eligible for free or reduced lunches. I would say that about half of my students were on grade level and the other half were below grade level in most subjects. My duties as an intern included teaching at least one lesson a day, reviewing homework assignments with the students, monitoring behavior, working with small groups daily, lunch/recess duty, etc. One reason that I enjoyed this program was that I started on the first day of school, so I was able to meet the students at the same time as my supervising teacher.

One student in particular stood out to me, starting during my first few days in the classroom. Bobby was a quiet, "cool" kid. Most boys wanted to be friends with him; most girls had a crush on him. One thing that made Bobby different from the typical "cool kid"
was that he did not seek out this attention. He was generally quiet. He did not have many close friends, but it never seemed to bother him. I would describe his social life as content.

Bobby also demonstrated other behaviors in class that stood out to me. For instance, he went through a period of a few weeks where he would fall asleep consistently throughout the day. His eyes would be bloodshot. Also a few times he would randomly burst into tears and refuse to talk to anyone. It was obvious that something was really upsetting him. His parents were contacted.

**Academic Performance.** My first impression of his academic performance was that he was lazy. He never participated in class, even when called on. He was frequently slumped over with his head down, not paying attention. During instructional time, Bobby usually did not get much work done. In fact, we were lucky if he even wrote his name on the paper. When confronted then redirected, he would just put on this goofy smile and say, “Ok, ok!” in his quiet manner. We all celebrated if he finished even half of an assignment. Once he wrote two pages front and back in Writing, and he ran around showing everyone; he was so proud. Every time I observed him during independent reading, I could tell that he was just pretending to read. Another example of his academic performance occurred during morning work. Each morning students were required to practice math and language skills on a one-page (front and back) handout. It was designed to take less than 30 minutes to complete; most students were able to accomplish this on a regular basis. Students completed this practice Monday through Friday, but on Friday it was counted as a quiz grade. Bobby rarely, if ever, finished his morning work. As a result, he usually failed the weekly quiz. When he did pass, we praised him excessively. He obviously needed motivation in this area.
Perhaps Bobby's biggest struggle, simply because it affected every other subject, was reading. When I first met Bobby, he was reading at a beginning of third grade level. He did not read directions on assignments and only pretended to read during silent reading time. After having him read aloud to me a few times, I could really see that reading was a real challenge for him. I asked him what interested him in an attempt to pick out books related to his interests, but he would not reveal anything. I then began to probe him and suggest books that I thought may interest him, like sharks, cars, survival, etc. He insisted that none of these books sounded good at all. I was stumped. He never volunteered to read out loud and was rarely called on. When he was chosen to read, he struggled so much that he just gave up. His writing skills were the same. His spelling skills and knowledge of sentence structure were severely lacking, and this hindered him greatly. Bobby had been gradually left behind each year. By the time he got to fifth grade, he was very far behind. He really had no motivation to do any schoolwork, let alone reading and writing which were the hardest for him. His approach to reading was a very negative one, which makes sense. Why would he want to do something that he was not good at? My teacher and I discussed how my working one-on-one with him could help; maybe he wouldn't be as embarrassed or shy about reading in a more intimate setting. His social skills were not lacking, just his participation in class during whole-group activities in every subject. He had a hard time keeping up and paying attention; he would often zone out. Since I wanted to help him, I realized that building a connection through reading would be a good place to start.

**Home Life.** Once I noticed Bobby's behavior I began wondering if there was anything causing it. After a long discussion with my supervising teacher, I learned about Bobby's home life. Bobby had an older brother in seventh or eighth grade that was very
smart. He constantly earned high grades and was very involved in his schoolwork. I think that living in his brother's shadow was one cause of Bobby's lack of motivation in school. Also, apparently Bobby's parents had been separated for a few months. After the separation, the family found out that Bobby's dad had a life threatening form of cancer. The doctors only gave him a few months to live. Bobby was forced to live with his mom for multiple reasons. He really wanted to be with his dad. As a result of this, new living arrangements were made. Bobby spent two weeks with his mom then two weeks with his dad. When he was allowed to stay with his dad, he would stay up all night spending time with him, not do his homework, and occasionally come to school in the previous day's clothes. This caused his sleepiness and extreme swings of emotion. As an adult trying to support him, it was difficult because there was not much I could do to fix his home life. However, I was able to change things at school. In the end, we found out the Bobby's dad would make a full recovery. His parents got back together briefly then split again.

In a parent-teacher conference that I attended and in which both of his parents were present, Bobby's parents were asked if they knew why his homework did not get completed. Both of his parents awkwardly tried to blame each other, but they realized that neither of them knew that he had any homework that needed to be turned in. This showed me that responsibility was another factor that Bobby needed to work on. Apparently he did not show his assignment book to his parents or take initiative to get the work finished by himself.

Intervention. I was not the only person who recognized that Bobby needed academic assistance. He received tutoring in reading from a Title I instructor three days a week. Bobby was paired with another student who was on a level close to his for these
pull-out sessions. The Title I instructor would come during the guided reading time of the
day and work with the students in another part of the school. Before I started working with
Bobby, I observed one of these sessions. The instructor started the half hour with a very
quick lesson and then listened to the students read, occasionally helping with words and
working on word recognition. I am sure this was expanded upon as the semester and year
progressed.

As soon as I recognized that I would like to work one-on-one with Bobby as well, I
started to plan how to approach it with him. Before I did this, I worked to build a
relationship with him. This was difficult, because he was not willing to share much about
himself. However, I did my best to show interest and to show him that I cared about his
well-being. I did this by offering to help him with work in class and during homework time.
Also, I would seek out conversations with him. When he got even one problem finished, I
praised him. He loved to play with a small, plush football, which actually sometimes helped
him focus, so I began to use this as an incentive to finish work. He also loved to sit at the
back table; this was also used as incentive. I started reading with him during partner
reading and monitoring him closely during independent reading time. After several weeks
of this, I started pulling him out during guided reading time on the days he did not receive
extra instruction from Title I.

I noticed that Bobby didn't use many reading strategies. He struggled through
words, often mispronouncing them. He was easily distracted while reading. He did not use
his finger to follow along, and he lost his place frequently. He also skipped lines often and
didn't seem to notice. This showed me that he didn't understand what he was reading
aloud very much. He often missed main ideas of readings. When I asked him questions
about the reading, he knew about half of them. He did not break words into syllables or try to sound them out. Bobby really didn’t have much motivation or incentive to read; he simply didn’t care.

**Goals.** By analyzing my observations about his reading practices and the running record I had completed with him, I was able to form goals for Bobby. My first goal was to improve his word solving strategies, to allow him to figure out words on his own, and therefore expand his vocabulary. Another goal was to teach him to evaluate what he was reading in order to figure out what a word is or means from the context clues. As his word solving improved, I saw another issue with his reading: fluency. So towards the end, my goal became to help him read more fluently.

**Progress and Strategies.** Like I mentioned before, Bobby started out fifth grade reading at reading level “N”, which is a third grade level. When our time working together started, I assisted Bobby in picking out a book for us to read together and for me to use a springboard from which to implement and teach strategies to Bobby. I had been trying to get to know Bobby’s interests prior to starting, but he had been reluctant to reveal any information. Now, standing in the library suggesting books to him, he still was not open to many genres. He really did not want to read at all. I eventually sold him on a book that was one level above where he was reading at the time, Gary Paulsen’s *Danger on Midnight River*. Paulsen’s book was about a boy on his way to wilderness camp, whose car crashes leaving him and others stranded in the wilderness trying to survive. This book had so many fantastic vocabulary words, and I hoped that when we started reading, Bobby would become engrossed in the story.
In order to achieve my first goal of improving Bobby’s word-solving ability and expanding his vocabulary, I first reviewed with Bobby how to split a word into multiple syllables. Then when he was reading aloud to me and came across a word he didn’t know, I covered up most of the word except for the first syllable. I had him sound out and pronounce each syllable as my finger gradually showed more of the word. If the sounds were irregular, I helped him pronounce that syllable correctly. After he knew how to pronounce each syllable, I had him blend the syllables together to make the word. I started off covering the word for him, modeling how it was done, but after that, he began covering the word himself. To distinguish syllables in a word, Bobby and I clapped our hands in time as we said the word aloud. This helped him hear distinctively how words were broken down.

I came up with a game that helped Bobby and others word-solve and deduce meanings of words, using context clues. The Flashcard Game consists of flashcards that help students sound out words by splitting it into syllables and discover the meanings of words using trial and error and context clues. This works best with a small, guided-reading group. Teachers should pick 8-10 words from a book that students are currently reading that you think the students may not know. Teachers need to make the flashcards: 2 for each word. On one side of the first flashcard, write the word as it appears in the book, and on the other side, write the word broken into syllables. On the other flashcard, write only the definition of the word. When it is time to read with the students, spread out all of the definition flashcards face up on the table, with the word cards in a stack to the side. Allow students to read aloud. When they come across a word that they do not know (pronunciation and/or definition), stop them and pull out the word card to show them the
sylable break down. Using context clues and previous knowledge, allow students to take
turns eliminating definitions until they have the correct one. Continue this throughout the
book. Bobby loved this game, and it really helped him use the context of the sentence to
eliminate definitions that didn’t make sense. He learned to substitute words and definitions
back into a sentence, which is also a helpful, multiple-choice test-taking strategy.

Expanding his vocabulary was another part of my goal for Bobby. This was
challenging because his spelling was not very accurate. He often spelled words how they
sounded, not how they were really spelled. He almost never added the silent “e” on the end
of words like “made” and “take”, which is a result of poor phonemic awareness and phonics
development. The flashcard game mentioned above was one strategy I used to improve
Bobby’s vocabulary. Picking out vocabulary words from reading that we are about to do
was important to me. My motive was for Bobby to be familiar enough with the vocabulary
word ahead of time, so that by the time he came across it in the book, he did not stumble
over it, which boosted his confidence. Equally important as recognizing the words is
making a connection with them. I usually had Bobby define the vocabulary word in his own
words, draw a picture for it, and say a sentence using the word. Another important aspect
to vocabulary instruction is keeping the previous words in practice. Every week we would
go over a few words from previous weeks. Also Bobby would earn a reward point (Class
Dojo) whenever he pointed out a past vocabulary word to me during his independent
reading.

For my second goal (fluency), I used a short booklet over elections (which is what
we were studying at the time). I had him pick a page that he was interested in. Before he
read the page out loud, I asked him to point out some words that he didn’t know, and we
discussed how to sound them out and pronounce them. Then I had Bobby read the page (only one paragraph) out loud to me. He struggled the first time and said it was hard. We again went over the words he had trouble with and I had him read it again. On the first day, Bobby read the passage three times, improving each time. I asked him if it was easier to read it the third time compared to the first time. He replied yes in awe. The following day, he read the passage with only one mistake. The second time he read it, it was perfect. We continued practicing fluency like this until Thanksgiving break.

An important strategy I frequently used while working with Bobby was modeling. We would usually take turns reading paragraphs aloud, allowing him to observe my reading strategies and listen to my voice inflection. I would mostly do this on days that we simply read to each other. This, along with running records, allowed me to see how Bobby was progressing. As we continued working together, I could see that Bobby was responding well to the strategies I had taught him. He began applying them in the whole group setting as well. I believe that these strategies worked because even though he was resistant at first, Bobby gradually became open to the idea of improving as a reader. It is all about motivation. While Bobby still has a long way to go, I can see that we took the first steps together.

As the time for me to leave got closer, Bobby kept improving more and more. We were moving much more quickly through the story. He was picking up on vocabulary words and investigating what they meant using context clues. He even started to open up to me a little and was genuinely delighted when he accomplished something new. I could see him start to enjoy reading, and that was really what this whole thing was about for me. I
was only able to work with Bobby for half of the semester, but during that time he made large strides.

**Results.** I believe Bobby has improved in both word-solving and fluency, both of my goals. Bobby went from not sounding out words at all, to using a strategy to sound out words. He also knows now to look at context clues to figure out the definitions of words he does not know. He has also seen how reading a passage more than once makes it easier to read and more fluent. I suggested that my classroom teacher give him a passage ahead of time if she would like him to read aloud. He will be much more confident reading it aloud if he has practice. I know that he improved because he jumped reading levels from an N to an R. This was the result of me working with him as well as a Title I interventionist. We were very proud of him!

**Continuation.** Unfortunately, I was only given the chance to work with Bobby for a little over eight weeks. In this time, I was lucky to have seen him improve so much. However, I would have loved to continue to work with him in order to bring him up to (or past) a grade-appropriate reading level. If I had the opportunity to continue working with Bobby, I would have expanded on what we had been working on so far. I would let him pick out a new, more challenging book from the library for him to read aloud to me every other day. Additionally, I would continue to work on his fluency, by having him read poems and other short works of literature. Every few weeks, I would complete running records to assess his reading level. This would also allow me to see patterns in the miscues he made while reading out loud and answering questions about a passage.

There are two main things that I would turn my focus towards: comprehension and inflection. I have noticed that Bobby does not understand much of what he reads. He must
look back and read again or skim what he already read. While it is good that he knows
where to look for and find this information, it would be better if he could comprehend and
read simultaneously. Currently, Bobby focuses so much on pronouncing and sounding out
words that he does not have time to worry about comprehension. The same thing happens
with inflection. Bobby cannot really get involved with a good story, because he is so focused
on the words. I am excited for the day when Bobby can read with inflection and passion, as
well as accuracy and fluency. Hand-in-hand with both inflection and comprehension, comes
connections. My ultimate goal for Bobby and for any reader is to truly understand what he
or she reads by making it personal. This would open up Bobby to a whole new world of
literature and stories. Reading with inflection opens the reader up to feeling empathetic
toward the character or responding to the information in some way.

In order to improve Bobby’s comprehension I would use a few research-based
strategies from Gail Tompkin’s book, *50 Literacy Strategies*, to which I think he would have
responded well. One strategy to improve comprehension is a double-entry journal
(Tompkins, 33, sec. 13). A double-entry journal is a two-column journal entry. On one side
students write a quote or inspiration from a text, and on the other side they respond to it
and reflect on it. A double-entry journal requires the students remember main events or
quotes from the book. It also helps the students make connections between the book and
their life, which in turn will help the book stick in the students’ minds better. While Bobby
may struggle a bit with the writing, this would be a good outlet for expressing his feelings
and personal connections to characters, phrases, or stories. Another strategy I would
encourage Bobby to use when reflecting over what he has read is the open-minded portrait
(Tompkins, 77, sec. 28). An open-minded portrait is a two-fold activity. First, students draw
what a character's face looks like. Then students draw what they think the character is thinking or what events in the story are like for that character. This activity allows students to focus on the main character in a story and how major events in the story relate to that character. Students can recall appearance details from the story as well as review important story elements, such as theme and character's motivation. Bobby may be able to relate and emphasize with characters more through a picture than words. At the end of each session, together we would choose the "Reflection Activity" for the day, almost as an evaluation. These activities and others would be more engaging to Bobby than simply answering a list of questions about what he read.

In order to improve Bobby's social and presenting skills, as well as comprehension, I would have him do an activity called a book box. A book box is a collection of objects that is related to a book, put in a decorated box, and shared with the class (Tompkins, 12, sec. 5). I would have Bobby do this when we finished each book together. This activity would enhance Bobby's comprehension of the book he had read by creating visual representations. It also would increase his comprehension by giving him more time in the book and more time to interact with physical objects from the book or story. Bobby could benefit from sharing, in his own words, how each object is related to the plot of the book. I also think that he would enjoy compiling the materials required for the book box.

As my teaching experience grows, I have found that many strategies that I use for fluency may also be used to improve inflection and other reading traits. One such activity that would be beneficial for Bobby is a language experience approach (Tompkins, 60, sec. 23). This activity uses a student's own dictated to improve fluency and animation while reading. While this is often used with younger students, I think knowing that he did not
have to write anything down would provide some relief to Bobby. Since the story is personal, it is familiar and therefore will improve his fluency with practice. Another strategy that ties back to what I've already done with Bobby is a listening station as part of literacy centers (Tompkins, 67, sec. 25). I would have Bobby sit in a quiet area and listen to a book on tape. He could listen and observe to the way the speaker says sentences, as well as work on listening comprehension. During our sessions, I would usually take turns reading paragraphs with Bobby, so I could model good reading strategies and voice inflection.

Reading is not the only thing I would work on with Bobby, because writing and spelling are closely connected to reading. I believe that these three things work hand-in-hand to form literacy. Because focusing on spelling requires going back to basic phonetic roots and patterns, I would need much more time with Bobby (Brummitt-Yale, "How Spelling Instruction Relates to Reading Ability"; Weiss, "Helping Children Spell"). This might even be something that my classroom teacher would review with the whole class, since everyone's spelling can improve. Besides practical current and future use, the main reason I would work on spelling with Bobby would be to boost his confidence. When he writes, he feels unsure and self-conscious, which makes him not want to do it. Learning spelling would be a gateway for him to effectively express ideas on paper instead of only orally.

One important aspect of being an effective teacher is reflection. In looking back at my time spent with Bobby, I can identify things that went well and things that I would change if I were able to start again. I have already discussed many things that went well while tutoring Bobby, including implementing reading strategies that worked for him. One
major thing that I would attempt to change would be the amount of time I was able to spend with Bobby. Usually our sessions were no longer than twenty minutes, two to three days a week. I would have loved to work with Bobby on a more frequent, more consistent basis. I also wish I would have started tutoring him a little closer to the beginning of the year, as this also would have given me more time to work with him. As I was reflecting over how each period was spent, I first regretted the days when Bobby simply read to me or when we took turns reading. However, after giving it more thought, I realized that those days were necessary. I needed to give Bobby the chance to show me what he had learned; he needed a chance to practice.

I believe that, because of the work others and I have done along with continued, future work, that Bobby can be a successful reader. Bobby took the first few steps of his journey that semester. He did not suddenly turn in to an amazing reader. He was not suddenly extremely motivated in school. However, he did start to make a change that will lead him to where he needs to be and where he wants to go. What Bobby needs are more motivational, caring teachers to take the time to make sure that he succeeds. His life and his future depend on it. Reading is such a vital skill in this game we call life; no one should be without it.
Works Cited


Senior Honors Thesis Proposal
5 messages

Victoria Wade< vewade01@gmail.com>  
To: jmulcahy@bsu.edu, jmweaver@bsu.edu  

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a senior in the Honors College. I am currently in the Urban Semester Program in Indianapolis (Elementary Education) in fifth grade at Stout Field Elementary. For my individual senior thesis project, I would like to do a case study studying a particular student in my class currently. The student's identity would not be revealed. I would like to try different teaching strategies and see how he reacts to them and whether they increase his understanding in certain subjects. This student has some issues in his home life that I believe may also be impacting his work ethic and social and academic behaviors. What do I need to do in order to start the process?

Thank you for your time,

Victoria Wade

Victoria E. Wade
Ball State University
Class of 2013
Teachers College, Honors College

Weaver, Jennifer< jmweaver@bsu.edu>  
To: Victoria Wade <vewade01@gmail.com>  

Victoria,

Working with one person does not qualify as Human Subjects Research, as a suggestion, you may want to let the school know about your project and what you would like to do. As well as informing the guardians of the student. Please work closely with your advisor.

Jen
Jennifer Weaver
Office of Research Integrity
Ball State University
2000 University Avenue
Muncie, IN 47306
O: 765-285-5034

https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ui=2&ik=5d619f8b8b&view=pt&search=inbox&th=13a... 5/23/2013
CONFIDENTIALITY NOTE:
This e-mail, including all attachments, is for the official use of the person(s) to whom it is addressed or their authorized representative(s). This transmission may not otherwise be distributed, copied or disclosed to any other parties. The contents of this transmission may be subject to privacy and security regulations, state and federal statutes and/or intellectual property rights. If you have received this transmission in error, please notify the sender immediately by return e-mail and then immediately delete this transmission, including all attachments, without copying, distributing or disclosing any of the content.

Jen

This is really not HSR. She may want to consider letting the school know what she has in mind and may want to inform the parents. She really should discuss this project with her advisor before doing anything, but this is really not an IRB reviewable project.

CM

From: Weaver, Jennifer
Sent: Thursday, October 18, 2012 8:31 AM
To: Mangelli, Christopher
Subject: FW: Senior Honors Thesis Proposal

Please see the note below.

interesting question below. I see red flags with this project (mandated reporting) however, is this even research?
Working with one student?

J

[Quoted text hidden]
Victoria Wade <vewade01@gmail.com>
To: John Emert <emert@bsu.edu>

Dr. Emert,

This is the reply I received! So, we are good to go?
Thank you for all your help!

-Victoria Wade

Emert, John <emert@bsu.edu>
To: Victoria Wade <vewade01@gmail.com>

That's the response you wanted to receive; good work! And BTW, a case study can be research. 😊
I believe your next step is to pass your idea through your mentor. I'll watch for your emails.

JWE

From: Victoria Wade [mailto:vewade01@gmail.com]
Sent: Thursday, October 18, 2012 9:49 AM
To: Emert, John
Subject: Fwd: Senior Honors Thesis Proposal

[Quoted text hidden]