

A Case of Accelerated Literacy Development for a Kindergarten Retention Candidate

Jalea L. Turner
P. K. Yonge Developmental Research School
University of Florida

Abstract

Supporting struggling learners is a greater challenge due to the COVID-19 pandemic and disruptions in millions of children's education. Many students entering kindergarten during the 2021–2022 school year experienced these learning disruptions during their most formative education years: the preschool years. This practitioner research focuses on the use of multisensory instruction, cross-grade level collaboration, and intrinsic motivation to accelerate the literacy development of a struggling kindergartener, whose literacy needs required intensive intervention and tier-three support. By collaboratively creating an individualized literacy plan to meet their learning needs, this intrinsically motivated student transformed into an above-grade-level kindergartener prepared for first grade from a potential kindergarten retention candidate. This field-based research underscores the need for practitioners to refocus their attention on intrinsic motivation, collaboration to create individualized learning plans for all learners, and using research as cornerstones to guide instructional practice and maximize student outcomes.

Keywords: literacy intervention, multisensory, struggling reader, early childhood, Covid-19

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted teaching and learning on a national scale impacting millions of students' educational experiences. In 2020–2021, some students participated in distance learning from their homes, while others remained in schools wearing masks and following social distance mandates. For the 2021–2022 school year, all students at my institution returned to the physical classroom and the data reflecting their abilities were substantially below grade level, especially in reading skills. Many students required intensive literacy intervention to meet grade-level expectations and be promoted to the next grade. Given the severity of the student literacy needs, I dedicated this practitioner research to working with the kindergarten student in my learning community who was most at risk for retention. Through the implementation of intensive evidence-based literacy intervention practices, I worked with this student's grade-level teacher to collaboratively create an individualized learning plan to accelerate their literacy development, resulting in the successful promotion to the first grade.

This study takes place in the K/1 learning community at a public research university laboratory school, Rising Stars Academy. Rising Stars Academy is divided into three learning communities: K/1, 2/3, and 4/5. Each learning community has three teachers per grade level and one learning community leader. In K/1, there are three kindergarten teachers, three first-grade teachers, and one learning community leader. Each kindergarten and first-grade teacher work together as a team to form a smaller community within the larger cross-grade level community. My teaching assignment is first grade with my teaching partner, Maria Gutierrez, who teaches kindergarten. Ms. Gutierrez and I have worked together on the same team as teaching partners for the last four consecutive school years. We established a strong working professional relationship and close friendship.

Our similar teaching philosophies and the shared belief that relationships with students and families are critical to student success allowed us to easily build community with one another and our classes. Together, we created an environment of shared responsibility and accountability for all our students. We spent time in each other's classrooms as observers and provided support to students, while the other taught core lessons and provided support to other students. Just as my students loved and cherished me as their first-grade teacher, they loved and appreciated Ms. Gutierrez as our kindergarten partner teacher, too. The feelings were mutual between her class and me, too. Our partnership fostered love and community, which started with who we were as professionals and close friends.

With shared responsibility for our students came the need to address challenges as a team. When there was a struggling student, regardless of grade level, we thoroughly discussed what we noticed. We talked regularly about the difficulties our students faced, observed these students in their context, and brainstormed ideas to support these students. When we could determine a plan of action that could be implemented by either of us, we provided additional support to that student. Our professional responsibility was shared as we collaborated to address student learning needs and created an individualized educational plan for all students. There existed a high level of trust between us to do what was best for all our students with the use of evidence-based practices implemented with fidelity.

Student Academic Considerations

The 2021–2022 school year followed an unprecedented period of COVID-19 schooling, and all students were required to return to campus for in-person instruction. My first-grade students had a variety of educational experiences in kindergarten during the previous school year: five students remained virtual all year (28%), three students were virtual and switched to in-person instruction halfway through the year or later (17%), two students were new to Rising Stars Academy (11%) and eight students were in-person all year (44%). Of these current first-graders, five of the 18 (28%) were below reading grade level based on their small reading group placement in Being a Reader Small Group created by the Center for the Collaborative Classroom. This placement screener assessed students' knowledge of phonics (letter(s)/sound correspondences), ability to blend decodable words, and capacity to identify high-frequency words with automaticity. From this group of five students below reading grade level, two of these students (40%) attended SAIL, an intensive summer reading program created to support students who require additional reading instruction to meet end-of-year benchmarks. One of these students attended kindergarten virtually all year and the other attended virtually 80% of the school year and then switched to in-person schooling at the end of the academic year. The first student was a Black male and the latter was a White male.

Ms. Gutierrez had a class of 19 kindergarten students, some of whom attended preschool prior to entering kindergarten and others who did not because of the pandemic. Of her 19 students, five of them (26%) required additional reading support (Tier II intervention) because of their low letter naming scores and/or retention status. From this group, two of the five (40%) knew three or fewer letters. Both students were Hispanic: one male and one female.

Purpose and Wonderings

After teaching virtually since March 2020, I had personal reservations about transitioning back to in-person instruction. To accommodate students' and families' desires to engage in distance learning, I pivoted my teaching practices and learned how to navigate teaching via Zoom. Although it was very difficult to connect with students on a social-emotional level and meet learners' needs, especially those who required more personal and individualized instructional time, I learned how to navigate teaching virtually. This impacted how I saw myself as a teacher transitioning back into the physical classroom. I felt nervous about the transition. How would I address the learning gaps that were widened because of digital learning due to the pandemic?

Given the responsibility and privilege of continuing my relationship with the students whom I taught virtually during the previous school year, I felt deeply obligated to provide these students with the best in-person school year, as they had missed out on many social and academic experiences learning at home. I felt more obligated than in previous years to support those students who were not meeting academic benchmarks, especially in reading, to meet benchmarks in preparation for the next grade.

Literature on Supporting Struggling Readers

Our most struggling readers would need support beyond our core (Tier I) instruction. Support for these students would require Tier II, and in some cases Tier III, interventions along with highly effective, explicit, and direct core reading instruction. This reading intervention would be more intensive than what is created for a student who is meeting benchmarks. When reading instruction is intensive, the opportunities for engagement beyond core instruction are increased, which can be through individualized, one-on-one instruction, or through the addition of reading groups. To support successful student engagement in the reading process, Rupley et al. (2009) discussed how explicit/direct instruction has been shown to be efficacious in students experiencing the full scope of reading from phonemic awareness to reading comprehension. Direct reading instruction must be implemented systematically and explicitly to students, which is especially beneficial for students who have been identified as struggling. Along with the need for students to experience direct and explicit instruction is the need for varied and frequent opportunities to practice and engage in the application process, which increases student interactions with print (Brown, 2014; Rupley et al., 2009). Literacy instruction that is direct/explicit, systematic, and provides students with frequent and increased opportunities to practice beyond core instruction (intensive) is necessary to support struggling readers.

Another strategy shown to help develop young learners' reading abilities is integrating multisensory activities. Multisensory activities can be visual, auditory, and/or kinesthetic/tactile. Multisensory refers to "the simultaneous engagement of sensory modalities and to programs that are Orton-Gillingham based or use Orton-Gillingham tenets" and "engages a child's sensory modalities (e.g., visual, auditory, and tactile), as well as their linguistic system" (Schlesinger & Gray, 2017, p. 220). Despite the mixed research on whether multisensory approaches to reading instruction are more effective than other methods of reading instruction (Stevens et al., 2021), Lane (n.d.) suggests that "there is research that supports the use of some specific types of multisensory methods...the distinctions lie in the kinesthetic/tactile elements, or the movement and touch involved in reading and writing words." When it comes to the use of macro-level multisensory instructional strategies, which includes gross motor movements, skywriting, using magnetic letters, shaving cream, and kinetic sand, there is evidence that suggests that these methods are effective in strengthening students' letter knowledge and increasing overall engagement during instruction (Birsh & Carreker, 2018).

Considering the research above and the student with the most intensive needs shared between Ms. Gutierrez and me, my practitioner research focuses on the following: How can the literacy development of a significantly below-grade-level kindergartener be accelerated with the use of an intensive multisensory reading program in consultation with their classroom teacher?

Research Design & Methods

To protect the privacy of all participants discussed, all names used in this article are pseudonyms. As a developmental research school respectful of student and family privacy and rights, Rising Stars Academy has obtained informed consent to use student data and artifacts for research from the legal guardian of the targeted student in this practitioner inquiry. The targeted student in this article listened to an assent script, describing the possibility of their work being used to help other educators learn, and agreed to share their work with the public for this purpose. Rising Stars Academy maintains

updated IRB approval for all teacher practitioners to engage in a yearly inquiry cycle with students as a form of research-based professional development.

In collaboration with Ms. Gutierrez, we created an individualized reading plan for Raphael. Raphael had significantly below grade-level letter name knowledge for the first half of the school year, during which his classroom teacher and I decided to create an individualized reading plan to accelerate his letter acquisition. Because this intervention took place at the midpoint of the school year, it was important that Raphael learned to master his letter names and sounds with expedience. Raphael received Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention support. For his Tier 2 intervention support, Raphael attended a small reading group focused on learning his letter names, using the Center for Collaborative Classroom curriculum. For his Tier 3 support, Raphael attended a small reading group intervention, which focuses on phonemic awareness, letter names, decoding, and sight word reading. These interventions occurred in addition to Raphael receiving all core instruction.

Raphael’s Individualized Literacy Intervention Plan

The intervention used with Raphael for this study was created using evidence-based guidance on how to support the literacy development of struggling readers using direct, explicit, and intensive multisensory strategies (Birsh & Carreker, 2018; Brown, 2014; Lane, n.d.; Rupley et al., 2009; Schlesinger & Gray, 2017; Stevens et al., 2021). Raphael’s individualized reading plan was implemented daily for 15 minutes and focused on the following skills: letter recognition, letter sounds, letter writing, CVC word construction, and CVC word decoding. The progression of the skills increased in difficulty as Raphael mastered the preceding concepts. Table 1 displays a sample intervention lesson plan, using the letter “p” as an example.

Table 1. Sample Beginner Intervention Lesson Plan

Review	Using a card deck of mastered letters, Raphael is shown each letter and says the letter name.
Introduce new letter(s) + practice	<p>*Using the new letter card, Raphael is introduced to a new letter or letters. T: “This is the letter p. *while showing the card* What letter is it?” R: “P” *while tracing the letter with his index finger* T: Say the letter name and trace over it four more times. R: *Traces over the letter p with his index finger, while saying the letter name*</p> <p>*Using a sand tray, Raphael practices making the letter p using his index finger, while saying the letter name* Repeat six times.</p> <p>*Using a whiteboard and dry-erase marker, Raphael practices writing the letter p, while saying the letter name* Repeat 10 times.</p> <p>*Given a tray of magnetic letters, Raphael identifies and removes the targeted letter* T: Find the letter p and take it away R: *points to the letter p and removes it* Repeat until all known letters have been identified and removed.</p>
Review	After adding the new letter(s) to the card deck, Raphael is shown each letter and says the letter name.
Connected Text	<p>Raphael receives a new book focused on the targeted letter. The book follows a predictable pattern, such as “P is for puppy. P is for popcorn” with a matching photo. See Figure 1 for an example.</p> <p>Raphael points to each word and reads the book aloud. He adds the book to his book bin to practice during independent reading.</p>

Note. An example lesson plan for Raphael’s individualized reading plan focused on letter name recognition and mastery.

Figure 1. Letter “P” Book Example



Note. This Lakeshore (2002) letter book was used to extend Raphael’s learning during independent reading. He engaged with the text after mastering the letter, used the picture for reading support, and the predictable pattern provided an access point. A book exists for each letter.

Raphael required multiple engagement opportunities in using, seeing, and writing each letter before mastery. Sometimes, it took him several sessions to master a letter independently. Once Raphael mastered recognizing all his lowercase letters, we transitioned our time to learning letter sounds and building CVC words. We continued to review our letter names, incorporating letter sounds when applicable. We transitioned from writing letters using their names in our sand tray to writing the letters given the sound in the sand tray. We began building and manipulating words and sounds using magnetic letters. Table 2 outlines an example lesson that progressed in difficulty.

Individualized Literacy Intervention Results

These interventions took place over the Spring semester with all the core instruction provided by Ms. Gutierrez. Ms. Gutierrez provided Raphael with tools to access his academic skillsets, such as phonological and phonemic awareness, and a growth mindset. A growth mindset is critical for all students, especially for those who are struggling or behind in school (Cho et al., 2019). Raphael developed a strong growth mindset and a love for learning. Table 3 displays Raphael’s growth over the year with all his interventions.

Table 2. *Sample Intermediate Intervention Lesson Plan*

Review	<p>Using a card deck of mastered letters, Raphael is shown each letter and says the letter name, and sound, when applicable.</p> <p>Example: T: *shows the letter T* R: “T, /t/, /t/”</p>
Introduce new letter sound + practice	<p>Using the new letter card, Raphael is introduced to a new letter sound.</p> <p>T: “The letter p says /p/ *while showing the card* What sound?” R: /p/ *while tracing the letter with his index finger* T: “Say the letter sound and trace over it three more times.” R: *Raphael says /p/ while tracing over the letter p with his index finger*</p> <p>*Using a tray with sand, Raphael practices making the letter p using his index finger, while saying the letter sound* Repeat six times.</p> <p>*Using a whiteboard and dry-erase marker, Raphael practices writing the letter p, while saying the letter sound* Repeat ten times.</p> <p>*Given a tray of magnetic letters, Raphael identifies and removes the targeted letter*</p> <p>T: Find the letter that says /p/ R: *points to the letter p and removes it* Repeat until all known letters/sounds have been identified and removed.</p>
Review	<p>After adding the new letter(s) to the card deck, Raphael is shown each letter and says the letter name along with the letter sound, when applicable.</p>
Word building + manipulation	<p>Using a tray of magnetic letters, Raphael builds CVC words and manipulates different parts (initial, middle, or ending) of the word to generate a new word.</p> <p>T: “Build the word cat.” R: /c/ *grabs the c*, /a/ *grabs the a*, /t/ *grabs the t* T: “Change cat into bat.” R: *puts back the c and grabs the letter b to replace the initial sound* T: “What word did you build?” R: “Bat.” Repeat the process changing different parts of the word.</p>

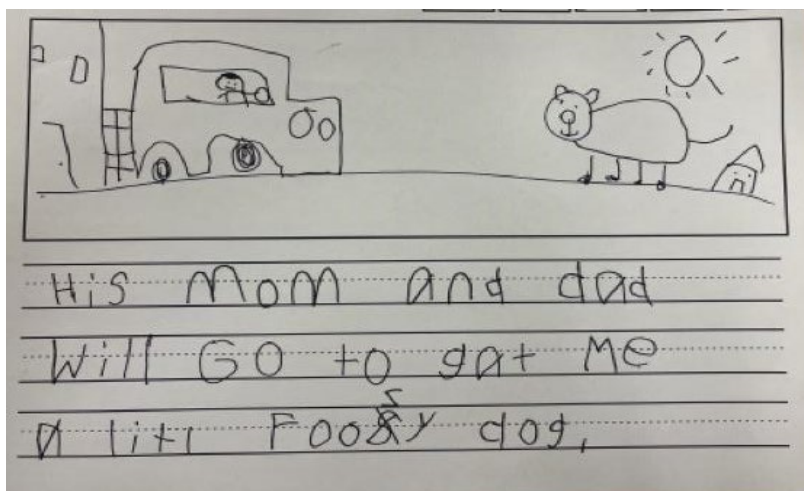
Note. An example lesson plan for Raphael’s individualized reading plan focused on letter name recognition, CVC word construction, and manipulation.

Table 3. Curriculum-Based Measure Assessment Data

	Fall 2021	Winter 2021	Individual Literacy Intervention Begins	Spring 2022
Letter Sounds	0	7 (13)		26 (20)
Letter Naming Fluency	0 (8)	0 (21)		45 (40)
Hearing Sounds in Words		6 (19)		32 (33)
Phoneme Segmentation Fluency		24 (20)		60 (40)
Nonsense Word Fluency		0 (17)		28/8 (28/0)
Decoding CVC Words				10 (5)

Note. Student score (benchmark score).

Raphael focused during every session on learning his letters and sounds, building words, and translating this knowledge into writing. At the beginning of the year, Raphael knew zero letters and could not write his name. During the first few weeks of school, he needed support writing his name, which required him to trace over his name written in a yellow marker by his teacher. His writing consisted of detailed illustrations, and he transitioned into writing initial and ending sounds of words, and eventually developed into writing complete sentences. Raphael needed a lot of support to write, including segmenting words in the middle of the year. By the end of the year, Raphael could write independently using the skills taught by his classroom teacher, intervention teacher, and through his individual reading plan intervention. Figure 2 displays an end-of-the-year writing sample that reflects Raphael's growth as a writer.

Figure 2. Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words Assessment

Note. This assessment asked Raphael to write an orally dictated sentence. The sentence reads, "His mom and dad will go to get me a little fuzzy dog."

At the end of the year, Raphael was meeting almost all his end-of-kindergarten reading benchmarks. He mastered all letter names and sounds and demonstrated a strong ability to decode nonsense and real words. Raphael is capable of reading grade-level texts independently using his phonics knowledge and reading strategies. The growth Raphael made was tremendous considering that he was a retention candidate based on his academic performance for the first semester of the school year. He responded extremely well to his continually adapted individualized reading plan and made quick gains during the second semester. Given his social-emotional and academic growth in the spring semester, Raphael was promoted to first grade.

Practitioner Researcher Reflection

As I reflect on how this inquiry will inform my practice, I have identified three overall themes worth sharing: authentic collaboration and community works, each day is an opportunity, and multisensory learning and increased engagement.

Authentic Collaboration and Community Works

Ms. Gutierrez and I have always been great co-teachers, who genuinely care about each other. This genuine care for each other extends to those important in our lives, including our students. We are intentional about building a community within our individual classes and between our classes. Because of this community, we developed a shared responsibility for ensuring the success of our students. Because of the trust between Ms. Gutierrez and me as professionals, we worked together to create an individualized learning plan to meet Raphael's specific needs and accelerate his literacy development. Because of the relationship Raphael and I built during the first semester of the school year, he trusted me and enjoyed attending his daily reading intervention group.

Each Day is an Opportunity

Supporting Raphael's literacy development reinforces the concept of never giving up on students. Toward the middle of the year, we were concerned about Raphael making enough gains in preparation for first grade and felt that there was not enough time for him to master what he needed to know to be successful moving forward. Rather than settling for the potential reality of retaining Raphael, Ms. Gutierrez and I extended ourselves, using the research to best support his literacy development. It took going the extra mile to create and implement an evidence-based individualized plan together to accelerate Raphael's literacy development. This taught me the importance of believing in students and being creative with my time and resources as an educator until the last day of school. Each day in the classroom provides an opportunity for students to learn and experience success. If I am to ask students to put forth their best effort and persevere despite challenges, I must put forth the same effort as their teacher.

Multisensory Learning and Increased Engagement

Incorporating multisensory elements in literacy instruction was successful with Raphael. Not only did these intervention methods support Raphael in learning his letters, letter sounds, and decoding/encoding, they functioned as tools of high engagement, which made the intervention group enjoyable. Raphael looked forward to using a hands-on multisensory tool during our time together to strengthen his literacy skills. Because of this high interest and engagement, I am now encouraged to figure out how to incorporate multisensory learning tools into core literacy instruction to provide a more engaging experience for all my students next school year.

Implications for Practice

Beyond the evidence-based literacy intensive literacy instruction provided, I propose that one of the greatest contributions to Raphael's success was his approach and mindset to learning and growing, as taught to him by Ms. Gutierrez. We spend the first six weeks of the school year teaching social

behaviors and attitudes to be successful learners. Growth mindset is a concept that we take time to teach thoroughly because we know that students will always encounter challenges, and they need to know how to approach these challenges with the appropriate mindset. We teach our students to persevere, to ask for help, and to believe in themselves and the power of “yet.” Although they might not be able to do something we learned in class yet, we teach them to persevere and engage in the productive struggle. Raphael embodied the concept of having a growth mindset and used the language whenever he approached a challenge. He knew that at the beginning of the year, he did not know his letters or sounds yet, but he continued to have a great attitude and work hard every day, even when he felt defeated or frustrated. Raphael was determined to master his letters and sounds to become a reader and writer. His intrinsic motivation to learn paired with his teacher’s and family’s support and development of an individualized learning plan created the perfect environment for Raphael to experience success.

The inclusion of multisensory elements into an intensive literacy plan for struggling readers proved to be highly effective for Raphael, who demonstrated tremendous growth from a kindergarten retention candidate to an above-grade-level kindergartener by the end of the school year. In addition to improving his literacy skills, this intensive multisensory intervention increased Raphael’s overall engagement, as Birsh and Carreker (2018) suggested. Incorporating opportunities for struggling students to engage in mastery of their literacy skills through multisensory instruction embedded within an intensive plan focused on repetitions and ample opportunities to practice and engage in print could be beneficial within a predictable routine (Brown, 2014; Rupley et al, 2009). Multisensory activities could include using rice or sand in trays to practice letters, using foam letters for sound recognition and word construction, flashcards to trace letters, and using whiteboards, too. The possibilities for incorporating these activities that engage multiple senses with the linguistic systems to cement literacy skills are numerous, engaging for students, and supported by the current literature on supporting struggling readers as more effective than other literacy interventions (Schlesinger & Gray, 2017; Stevens et al., 2021).

Educators should reconsider the value of collaboration, multisensory intervention, and intrinsic motivation fostered through a growth mindset. Teaching is a rewarding profession, but it is one that is tough because our students have many needs that we can struggle to meet on our own. Rather than shouldering the full burden of ensuring the success of our students, we should trust and be able to collaborate with the professional community around us for support. Educators need an environment with trusted professionals who are supportive and willing to help because teaching and learning is a collaborative process. Just as we encourage our students to ask for help and use their peers as resources, educators should be encouraged to do the same. We all have different strengths, and weaknesses, which can be complemented with the help of other professionals. A strong community built on mutual respect and trust is required for this collaboration to take place because strong relationships are at the center. When we prioritize building community and developing relationships within our communities first, a shared responsibility develops for all our students and love begins to grow.

When we think about setting up students for success, we should consider how our current practices will impact students beyond the academic requirements of our classroom. We must consider what values, attitudes, and habits we are helping our students foster beyond the mandated academic standards. Good teaching goes beyond meeting students’ academic needs but also includes meeting their social-emotional and behavioral needs. All students can experience success within a supportive community, in which collaboration, relationship building, trust, love, accountability, and evidence-based practices are the cornerstones.

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Corresponding Author: Jalea L. Turner

Author Contact Information: jturner@pky.ufl.edu

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