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ABSTRACT

This action research project highlights the implementation of reading strategies that work for at-risk primary students. The targeted population consists of first grade students located in a suburban at-risk school. The dilemma of how to best teach children to read who are at risk for academic failure upon entering school has been documented through data indicating the reasons for difficulties in reading. The probable cause data indicates the following: at-risk readers lack experiences before entering school, parental support is low, and the child's potential lack of intrinsic motivation to learn. Additionally, teaching strategies are not adapted to meet the special needs of the at-risk child. A review of the solution strategies led to the implementation of several new reading strategies in the classroom specifically designed to meet the needs of students at risk. One solution strategy is the implementation of the four blocks literacy model (Pat Cunningham, 1999). The literacy model encompasses the following teaching strategies: Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing, and Working with Words. Phonics instruction, cooperative learning, vocabulary enhancement, and language support and acquisition also were integrated into the model. Post-intervention data indicated enhanced academic performance in the area of reading and overall improvement in the targeted skills. (Contains 29 references, 14 tables, and 8 figures of data. Appendixes contain tests, word lists, student survey instruments, and reading comprehension tests.) (Author/RS)

CS

I CAN READ!

READING STRATEGIES THAT WORK FOR STUDENTS AT RISK

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An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

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This action research highlights the implementation of reading strategies that work for at-risk primary students. The targeted population consists of first grade students located in a suburban at-risk school. The dilemma of how to best teach children to read who are at risk for academic failure upon entering school has been documented through data indicating the reasons for difficulties in reading.

The probable cause data indicates the following: at-risk readers lack experiences before entering school, parental support is low, and the child's potential lack of intrinsic motivation to learn exist. Additionally, teaching strategies are not adapted to meet the special needs of the at-risk child.

A review of the solution strategies led to the implementation of several new reading strategies in the classroom specifically designed to meet the needs of students at risk. One solution strategy is the implementation of the four blocks literacy model (Pat Cunningham, 1999). The literacy model encompasses the following teaching strategies: Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing, and Working with Words. Phonics instruction, cooperative learning, vocabulary enhancement, and language support and acquisition also were integrated into the model.

Post intervention data indicated enhanced academic performance in the area of reading and an overall improvement in the targeted skills.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students of the targeted first grade class exhibit low academic achievement based on at-risk status. "Young people are at risk, or educationally disadvantaged, if they have been exposed to inadequate or inappropriate educational experiences in the family, school, or community" (Pallas, 1989, p. 1). Evidence for the existence of the problem includes student survey results, pre test and post test data, student performance assessments in reading comprehension, and results from a school readiness test that indicates student academic potential upon entering school.

Immediate Problem Context

The targeted elementary school is located in a suburban area. The school enrolls early childhood and primary students from ages 0 – 8.

The school has a total enrollment of 268 students. The racial/ethnic break down is as follows: African American 71.3%, Hispanic 22.4%, Caucasian 6.3%, Asian/Pacific Islander 0.0%, and Native American 0.0%. The attendance rate is 94.1% and the mobility rate is 14.3%. The average class size at the targeted site for Grade 1 is 17.0 (State Report Card, 1999).

Within the school district that includes the targeted site, the total number of teachers is 95. The racial ethnic breakdown is as follows: Caucasian 47.9%, African American 46.8%, Hispanic 4.2%, Asian/Pacific Islander 1.1% and Native American 0.0%. The gender rate is 81% female and 19% male. The average teaching experience in the district is 12.7 years, with 71.1% of the teachers holding a bachelor's degree and 28.9% of teachers holding a master's degree and above. The pupil–teacher ratio at the elementary level is 18.9:1, while the pupil-administrator ratio is 170.6:1. The average teacher salary for the district is $34,242. The average administrator salary is $60,086.

The dated building is one-story that houses 5 preschool classrooms, 1 kindergarten classroom, 2 first grade classrooms, 2 second grade classrooms, and 1 third grade classroom. Each room has one or two computers available for student and teacher use. One end of the building contains a gymnasium that also serves as a cafeteria. Outside the building is a parking lot for the staff. There is also a small, high-fenced playground that services all the students in the building. The building is on a small lot by the street. The lot backs up to a wooded area, which is virtually unsafe for the children. It is also located near a busy suburban intersection. The students are bused on three city company buses hired by the school district.

The targeted elementary site offers many special programs for the students and their families. Some of these programs are funded through grants from the state. Free government breakfast and free and reduced lunch is served daily. The school offers preschool to all children in the district. The school also houses a play group for children ages 0 – 3 and their families to initiate the development of early emergent literacy skills. Title 1 services are available to all primary students. The school is proud to offer an after

school tutoring program with bus service two days a week, a family literacy class, a parent training program, and a summer school program designed specifically to target at-risk students.

The Surrounding Community

The community the school services was incorporated in 1917 and is one of the oldest all African American governed towns in the United States. The socioeconomic status of the town is low, wherein the median family income is $36,875. The racial distribution within the community is found in Table 1. Additionally, the age distribution is found in Table 2.

Table 1

Racial Distribution

Caucasian	0.9%
African American	98.4%
Hispanic	0.4%
Other	0.4%

(Local Tribune, 1998)

Table 2

Age Distribution

Under age 1	11.9%
Age 1 – 13	25.5%
Age 14 – 18	7.9%
Age 19-29	17.5%
Age 30 – 39	12.8%
Age 40 – 49	8.2%
Age 50 – 59	10.0%
Age 60 – 69	9.0%
Age 70 – 79	4.8%
80 and over	2.5%

(Local Tribune, 1998)

Housing within the community offers 57.9% single-family units and 42.1% multifamily units. The median gross rent is $364 and the median price for a home is $36,000. In 1999, only 10 homes were sold in the area. The marital status of residents age 15 and over who have never married is 39.7%, residents who are married yet their spouse is absent is 10.3%, residents who are divorced is 8.1%, and residents who are widowed is 11.9% (Local Tribune, 1998).

The community's total school enrollment is preprimary 2.8%, elementary or high school 23.7%, and college 5.4%. The educational attainment within the community of residents age 18 and over can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Educational Attainment

Less than 9th Grade	16.0%
9th – 12th Grade	30.0%
High School Graduate	28.4%
Some College	15.9%
Associate's Degree	4.4%
Bachelor's Degree	4.1%
Graduate Degree	1.3%

(Local Tribune, 1998)

The economic development of the 7,220 residents is that 39.2% are employed, while 10.0% are unemployed, and 50.9% are not in the labor force (Local Tribune, 1998).

In 1998, 125 violent crimes were reported and 319 property crimes were reported. However, within the community there are 26 places of worship of various denominations within a 3 square mile radius (Local Tribune, 1998).

National Context of the Problem

The problem of students at risk was brought to the forefront in 1983 when the National Commission on Excellence in Education put forth the declaration that the United States of America was a nation at risk. "Since 1983, over 10 million Americans have reached the 12th grade not even having learned to read at a basic level" (Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1999, p. 1). The number of students at risk is continually on the rise as children face increasing problems within their family, school, and community. According to Donnelly (1987), students who are considered at-risk are those who are not achieving success in school. Generally, the at-risk student portrays low self esteem and displays low achievement in academic endeavors. An incommensurate amount of these students are minorities from low-income families.

One of the most influential factors that potentially places a student at risk is living in poverty. In the 1970's, the number of impoverished children in the United States school system was 16 percent. This number has risen to 25 percent and continues to be on the rise. The current number of children living in poverty can be equated to one-fourth of all students in the educational system. Thus we can deduct that one-fourth of the students entering the classroom today may be considered at risk (Cunningham & Allington, 1999). It is, however, important to recognize that poverty is not the only cause to obtain at risk status.

Comer (1990) ascertains that our modern families endure a greater amount of stress. These stress factors may include divorce, families which are supported by both parents working, or single parent families. These complexities lead to a deterioration of the family, which may result in less academic preparedness for the school age child.

Thus you cannot assume that the only children at risk for failure are impoverished. Children from various socioeconomic backgrounds can easily become targets for failure in the school setting.

Since students at risk are a current problem in education that affects a large proportion of our student population, it is important to consider the best ways to reach these children in order to help them succeed. Some programs are currently in place to help at risk students increase achievement in the school setting. In order for these programs to be beneficial to at-risk students, they must be effective. Effective programs embrace changes in the school setting to increase achievement in at-risk students. These changes may involve implementing early childhood programs, a low student-to-teacher ratio, a counseling and support staff available, and a curriculum suited to the needs of the students (Donnelly, 1987).

Although a sufficient amount of improvement can be obtained through school wide at-risk programs, the greatest indicator of change in an at-risk child's life is the classroom teacher. The day-to-day instruction in the at-risk child's classroom can determine whether or not the child will achieve academic success. The teacher can affect positive change by utilizing teaching strategies that work with at-risk children within the classroom. Teachers who are successful with a great amount of students at risk share similar traits in their teaching style (Cunningham & Allington, 1999). Using early intervention strategies at the primary level, teachers can help at risk students become successful.

"The new mission can be stated simply - Learning for All: Whatever it Takes!"(Lezotte, 1997, p. 2).

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

In order to document the extent to which students entering first grade are at-risk academically, the results of a school readiness pretest were recorded. The test was administered during the first 2 weeks of the school year. The test assesses the extent to which a child is prepared to begin reading based upon the following developmental areas: vocabulary, identifying letters, visual discrimination, auditory discrimination, comprehension and interpretation, and developmental spelling ability (Appendix H).

Of the 11 students in the class, 11 were given the school readiness test upon entering first grade. A summary of the students' potential readiness is recorded and presented in Table 4.

Table 4

School readiness pretest results, September 2000

STUDENT	VOCABULARY		IDENTIFYING LETTERS		AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION		VISUAL DISCRIMINATION		COMPREHENSION INTERPRETATION		SPELLING ABILITY
	# correct	# possible	# correct	# possible	# correct	# possible	# correct	# possible	# correct	# possible	
A	5	6	12	12	11	12	8	11	6	6	Semi-phonetic
B	6	6	12	12	11	12	9	11	5	6	Semi-phonetic
C	5	6	11	12	7	12	11	11	4	6	Phonetic
D	4	6	12	12	11	12	8	11	2	6	Pre-phonetic
E	5	6	12	12	11	12	11	11	4	6	Pre-phonetic
F	6	6	12	12	8	12	9	11	3	6	Pre-phonetic
G	6	6	12	12	3	12	7	11	3	6	Semi-phonetic
H	6	6	5	12	11	12	4	11	1	6	Pre-phonetic
I	6	6	12	12	5	12	11	11	5	6	Phonetic
J	4	6	12	12	9	12	9	11	1	6	Semi-phonetic
K	5	6	12	12	9	12	8	11	3	6	Semi-phonetic

Of the test scores recorded within each category, an overall accuracy level was determined by calculating the total number correct out of the total number possible. The students as a whole averaged an 88% accuracy level in the area of vocabulary, 94% accuracy in letter recognition, 72% accuracy in auditory discrimination, 78% accuracy in visual discrimination, and 56% accuracy in comprehension and interpretation. Upon further analysis the test scores indicate that 36% of the students were pre-phonetic, 45% of students were semi-phonetic, 18% of students were phonetic, and 0% were at the

transitional stage in reading. Based upon these test results, it can be determined that the students entering the targeted first grade class were not prepared with adequate readiness skills needed to be successful in the area of reading. Additionally, of all the students entering the class, none of them were able to read, only 18% were at the phonetic stage of beginning literacy, while 0% were ready to make the transition into reading based on their phonetic understanding.

In addition, the children were given a pretest to determine the ability to recognize uppercase letters, lowercase letters, and sounds. The letter/sound recognition test was also given during the first 2 weeks of school (Appendix A). Of the 11 students in the class, 11 were given the test upon entering school. A summary of the test results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Letter and sound recognition pretest results, September 2000

STUDENTS	LOWER CASE LETTER RECOGNITION		UPPER CASE LETTER RECOGNITION		IDENTIFYING SOUNDS	
	# correct	# possible	# correct	# possible	# correct	# possible
A	22	26	25	26	11	26
B	24	26	25	26	17	26
C	26	26	26	26	24	26
D	25	26	26	26	20	26
E	26	26	26	26	24	26
F	25	26	25	26	17	26
G	25	26	25	26	12	26
H	4	26	6	26	1	26
I	26	26	25	26	19	26
J	26	27	26	26	12	26
K	26	26	26	26	23	26

An overall accuracy level was determined by calculating the total number correct out of the total number possible in all three categories. The scores indicate that of the

students tested, the lowercase letter recognition was completed at an 88% accuracy level, the uppercase letter recognition was completed at a 91% accuracy level, and the sound identification was completed at a 63% accuracy level. Thus, it can be determined that, although the majority of the students were able to recognize both upper and lowercase letters, the children were much less likely to recognize the sound assosciated with each letter. Yet, it is critical to understand the sounds that letters make to create a solid foundation upon which to begin reading.

Finally, to further determine the extent of reading capabilities, the incoming first graders were given a sight word test of 20 words taken from the Dolch list (Appendix B) for the first grade level. Again, of the 11 students in the class, 11 were administered the sight word test during the first two weeks of school. The following graph represents the percentage of students who were able to master the basic sight word list. Recognition of 75% or better was considered mastery level.

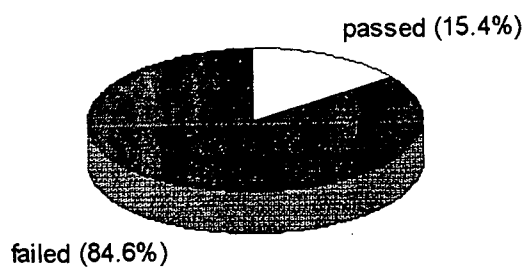

Figure 1. Basic sight word recognition, September 2000

As the figure indicates, only 15.4% of the targeted first graders were able to recognize sight words at the mastery level, which means that almost 85% of the students in the class were unable to identify basic sight words. This is another foundation block to beginning reading.

Additionally, student surveys were completed to analyze the percentage of negative experiences that affect the entering student based upon lack of experiences before entering school and the child's own intrinsic motivation to learn (Appendix C). Table 6 indicates the questions asked in the survey regarding previous experiences and feelings toward self that may indicate a lack of school readiness or self esteem. Table 6 documents the results of the student survey responses.

Table 6

Student survey responses, September 2000

Survey Questions	Responses Yes
Experiences	
I went to Preschool.	60%
I went to Kindergarten.	100%
I have gone to the library.	50%
I go to the park.	90%
I go to the zoo.	80%
I have books at home.	40%
My parents read to me.	
Self	
I like to talk.	90%
I can write my first and last name.	90%
I know the sounds the letters make.	60%
I can hear rhymes.	70%
I want to learn to read.	100%
I can read.	80%
I like playing in a group.	90%
I am happy cooperating with friends.	90%

The responses indicate the percent at which the students responded yes to the given survey questions. As stated above, the questions were targeted at the following areas of concern: experiences before entering school and feelings of self-esteem. Each area will be addressed respectively. Questions concerning experiences before entering school prompted factual responses and included preschool and kindergarten attendance, experiences outside of the home, and whether or not the child is read to at home. Based on the survey results, the teacher/researcher was able to note that nearly half of her class did not attend preschool, even though the targeted site houses 5 preschool classrooms that are known to the community. Additionally, many of the children were lacking in outside stimuli related to school readiness, particularly outings to the library and the zoo. It is also paramount to note that the majority of the students in the targeted first grade classroom are not read to at home, which also contributes to school readiness.

Second, the survey questions targeted some feelings about the self. These questions prompted opinionated responses and included the following: communication skills, the ability to write own name, the ability to recognize letter sounds, the ability to hear rhymes, a desire to learn to read or already reading, enjoying group work, and having a desire to cooperate with others. Overall, the children surveyed generated positive responses, supporting a positive feeling of self. It is important to recognize that the survey questions about self generate beliefs about oneself as opposed to factual information. For example, 80% of the students surveyed responded that they could read, yet the administration of the pretests indicated that none of the students were ready to read nor could they read. In addition, 2 questions that focused on necessary reading

skills, letter and sound association and rhyme recognition, generated the least positive responses, again supporting the notion that these students lack school readiness.

It is important to note that while giving the survey the teacher/researcher noticed that some of the students seemed to attempt to answer in a way they felt would please the teacher most, while others attempted to be honest. Of the categories, based upon the survey questions, the teacher/researcher was able to determine that while a large proportion of her students lacked crucial key experiences before entering school, the majority of the students still had positive feelings towards self and their abilities to learn.

Probable Causes

The literature suggests several underlying causes for the lack of school readiness in the at-risk child. Problems arise through a lack of parental support, teaching methods that are inappropriate for students at risk, and finally, the at-risk child may lack an intrinsic motivation to learn. Each aforementioned problem will be addressed sequentially.

Lack of Parental Support

A large barrier to the at-risk child's success in school is a lack of parental support. The lack of support begins well before the child even enters a classroom. Through a child's stages of development from an infant to a preschooler, many interactions are necessary to begin early emergent literacy. These interactions include daily singing, reading, and talking from the primary caregiver. An infant should be provided with outings to begin learning and making associations, through experiences such as trips to the zoo, stores, restaurants, and parks. Toddlers should begin the transition to adult language and be introduced to the spelling of his or her name. Toddlers should also

experience books by utilizing picture walks to read and recognizing rhyme patterns in text. By preschool age, a child should be familiar with books and how they are read and even have favorites memorized (NAEYC, 1996). These experiences are key in preparing a child for school and literacy. The at-risk child has a lack of exposure to these experiences due to such things as time constraints, lack of resources, and language barriers. Many at-risk students do not experience read alouds before entering school. The act of utilizing the five senses while a book is being read aloud is critical in learning how to read. Children who are read to are able to mentally develop concepts about the printed text without being taught (Shapiro, 1990).

Children who are at risk lack influential experiences before entering school. It is important that a child experiences such outings as trips to the zoo or the library, yet it can be difficult to provide these key experiences when the parent is impoverished. A lack of income, transportation, and resources prevents a parent from providing these experiences to a child. Parental income affects the development of a child. A lower income bracket places a parent at a disadvantage. The parent may not always provide a positive and safe environment for the child. The parent may not always be able to provide adequate health care for the child. Additionally, parents who fall into a low socioeconomic class often become demographically challenged. A lack of income may equate to a lack of better schools and better community facilities, such as libraries and parks (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Maritato, 1997).

Another barrier to success in school that is greatly influenced by the parent is language. Home language can influence students' academic success. Language is problematic in two ways. Language restraints generate from either a non-English

speaking family or a family that utilizes the ethnic dialect, ebonics, and speaks using the casual register. Casual register can be defined as "language between friends...characterized by a 400- to 800- word vocabulary. Word choice general and not specific. Conversation dependent upon non-verbal assists. Sentence syntax often incomplete" (Payne, 1998, p. 42). The problem arises in that the socially accepted register is the formal register, which can be defined as "The standard syntax andword choice of work and school. Has complete sentences and specific word choice" (Payne, 1998, p. 42). To obtain success in our society it is expected that you speak using formal register. The problem arises due to the fact that a large number of minority students are not exposed to the formal register in their home setting (Montano-Harmon, 1991).

At-risk students are taught that casual register is the accepted form of speech, thus the parent does not realize the disservice this is to the child. In addition, a child being taught to speak only in the casual register leads that child to lacking the ability to both hear and say all the phonemic sounds of the alphabet. In order for the child to gain the use of formal register, it is as if they must learn another language. An at-risk child lacks the motivation to learn the formal register because it is only expected of the child at school. At home, speaking in the casual register is acceptable (Payne, 1998).

Finally, the at-risk parent may have negative feelings about self or logistical problems that prevent responsible parenting. The parent feels unable to help the child become successful in school, lacks communication skills with the school and the child's teacher, feels uncomfortable due to personal negative experiences with school, and so on. Low-income parents also have a tendency to believe it is not their responsibility to teach their children. Instead, it is the sole responsibility of the child's teacher. In this way, if

their child does not achieve well in school, it is not the parents' fault, but rather the teacher's fault. Logistically, a parent may lack a child care provider, a parent may lack transportation, or an economic restraint may cause an obstacle to responsible parenting (Liontos, 1991). Due to these restraints, a lack of parental support is a barrier to an at-risk child's success in school.

Inappropriate Teaching Methods

A second hindrance to the at-risk child's success in school is that teachers may opt to teach using methods inappropriate for the at-risk student. It is a natural tendency for teachers of at-risk students to slow down the pace of instruction to set the children up for success. Although the teacher feels she is supporting the child's academic needs by making the child feel successful, in actuality this results in an at-risk student who is not able to function at grade level (Hopfenberg, 1993).

A second negative approach to learning is skill-based, wherein children are expected to stay in their seats and complete grueling worksheets to master skills. The skills are often taught in isolation. Skill-based assignments usually focus on only one skill and require only minimal thinking skills. In this case, a teacher sets up the student for success on a preconceived notion that the at-risk student cannot think on a more complex level (Hunt, 1990).

Another teaching method that can be mistakenly avoided in an at-risk school is group activities. A majority of minority students are field dependent, meaning that they prefer to engage in group activities. The cultures in which minority children come from tend to speak in a louder voice while communicating. Speaking in loud voices can be construed as misbehavior. Teachers should make an effort to view what they foresee as

negative behaviors from a cultural point of view. However, the need for quiet order within the classroom, which some teachers prefer, does not accept the louder discussions that will arise during group activities, thus it is avoided (Kuykendall, 1992).

Additionally, other teachers of at-risk students may opt to use ability grouping within the classroom to track students' progress. Unfortunately, the majority of at-risk students are placed in the lower-ability groups. Although this is considered a help to the lower ability student, it is actually a hindrance. When a low ability child is tracked into a slow paced group, the child actually learns less. On the other hand, a low ability child who is tracked into a faster paced group learns more (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992).

Also, teachers have a tendency to avoid teaching the higher-order thinking skills to students at risk. "Many teachers focus only on literal comprehension when asking questions of at risk readers and, as a result, at-risk readers are given few opportunities to develop higher level thought" (Hunt, 1990. P. 7).

Lack of Intrinsic Motivation

Finally, a teacher is faced with the challenge of instilling the motivation to read within the at-risk student. Motivation is either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is internally manifested. It is a desire within oneself to accomplish a task. Extrinsic motivation is based upon what one can obtain from someone else if a given task is accomplished (Wankat & Oreovicz, as cited by Hill, 2001). The desired motivation within students is intrinsic. However, many at-risk students lack intrinsic motivation.

The most basic reason for a lack of intrinsic motivation is based upon Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. A pyramid illustrates Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, see Figure 2.

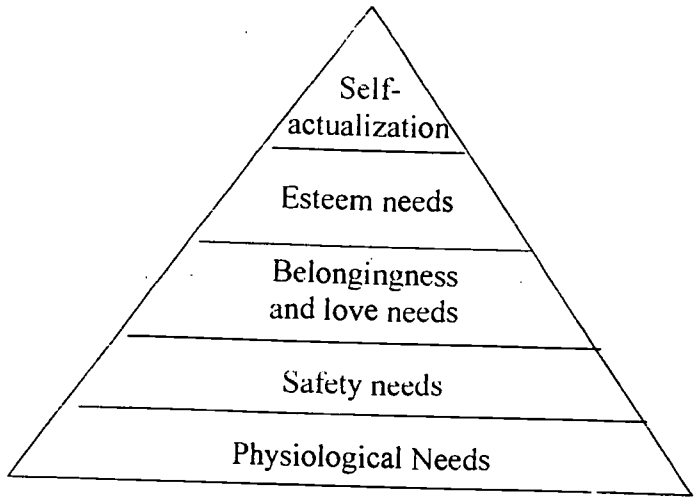

Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Hill, 2001, p. 4)

The base of Maslow's pyramid indicates the most basic needs, the physiological needs. The physiological needs include food, water, air, and shelter. The second tier of the pyramid indicates the safety needs. The safety needs include order, freedom from fear, and security. The third tier of the pyramid indicates the belongingness and love needs, which include a circle of friends and family. The fourth tier of the pyramid indicates the esteem needs, which include achievement, self-respect, and reputation. At the top of the pyramid is the self-actualization tier. Self-actualization is to become the individual most suited for the skills developed by the individual (Norwood, 1999).

According to this theory, each need is built upon the actualization of the previous need. Once a lower level need becomes fulfilled, an individual may begin to fulfill the needs of the next tier, and so on. However, for the at-risk student, these needs become tantamount in importance. Once a need is unfulfilled, it becomes a priority until the need is once again fulfilled. If a child is hungry, she will only be able to function on the physiological level. Many other needs on the bottom tiers, such as shelter, security,

freedom from fear, or love needs, can easily be missing from an at-risk child's life, which places the needs on a lower level, and the individual cannot focus on higher needs which are necessary to achieve success. "...Less developed persons have a more precarious relationship with their ability to cope. Much of their energy is spent in efforts to ensure that they survive in a less-than-generous-world"(Joyce & Weil, 1996, p. 317).

A second hindrance to intrinsic motivation is the lack of a parental support system. A significant relationship, or role model, must be present in a child's life for significant learning to occur (Comer, 1995 as cited by Payne, 1998). All individuals have persons in their lives who they admire and follow their example. However, at-risk children may suffer if their role model acts in a fashion that does not nurture positive growth within the child (Payne, 1998). The stress of everyday family life also pays a toll on the child's motivation.

In addition, in order for a child to be motivated, the child needs engaging work. However, as aforementioned, the use of inappropriate teaching methods leads to a lack of engaging work for the student. According to Robinson, Silver, and Strong (1995), there are 5 basic goals that motivate a person towards success. These goals include success, curiosity, originality, relationships, and energy. The authors suggest that a classroom setting that is inviting and geared towards the success of all students increases the chances that the goals become intrinsic and the child becomes a life learner. The development of intrinsic motivation becomes both a constant and a self-enhancement strategy (Kohn, 1993, as cited by Robinson, et al, 1995). Yet if the at-risk child's classroom lacks the ability to nourish these goals towards intrinsic motivation, the child is much less likely to be motivated.

Often, teachers and parents mistakenly try to coerce children to succeed by using extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivators, such as candy, only seem to motivate a child to learn. The child will complete a given task when extrinsically motivated, but the child is not completing the task to learn the material, but rather the child is completing the task to obtain the candy. In other words, the learning material does not motivate the child; candy motivates the child. Consequently, the use of extrinsic motivators downplays the importance of being intrinsically motivated. If a child is intrinsically motivated to learn, yet the child is given a reward for accomplishing the task she wanted to do, the reward becomes counterproductive to producing intrinsic learners (Kohn, 1994).

Last, many at-risk readers do not understand or believe they possess a reading deficiency. As a result, if you do not believe you read below average, you have no need to be motivated to improve. The reason at-risk students do not feel they have a reading disability is due to the fact that it is common practice in our school system to place students at reading levels that fit their various needs. A teacher may encounter a third grade student who is only capable of functioning on a first grade reading level. So the teacher provides the third grader with first grade books to foster success in reading. However, the student perceives that she can read with ease all of the materials provided her by the classroom teacher, accordingly, there is no reason to strive to improve her reading abilities. Providing a student with books slightly above the current reading level will allow the student to see that the current reading level is below average, but not so far below that the student cannot obtain success (Hunt, 1990).

In summary, the probable causes can be attributed to three general categories, including the lack of parental support, the use of inappropriate teaching methods for targeted students at risk, and the child's potential lack of intrinsic motivation to learn.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

Children who are considered at risk are in critical need of academic intervention. Educators cannot allow these children to slip through the cracks. We must find and develop ways to teach and reach these children so that they, in turn, can become productive citizens in the 21st century. Upon reviewing the literature, solutions lie amongst the following two categories: early intervention and innovative teaching methods. Each category will be addressed respectively.

Early intervention became a concern in the United States in 1990. Early intervention pertains to children who are known to be at risk, resulting in a special need that may affect their development (Kidsource, 2000). The concern was simply that children were not ready to learn upon entering school. A summit meeting was held with the President of the United States and the National Governor's Association in 1990. Together they formulated a common goal that children will be prepared to learn upon entering school. Three objectives emerged from discussion of ways to achieve this goal. First, communities and schools must provide disadvantaged children with developmentally appropriate preschool programs to increase school readiness. Second, parents must be provided with support and training to be an affective teacher for their

children. Third, communities must improve prenatal care to lower the number of premature and low birth weight babies while also ensuring that all children will continue to receive adequate and proper healthcare needed before entering school (Katz, 1991).

Based upon these objectives, it is apparent that readiness must begin at home in a supporting, nurturing environment. Ways in which a parent can begin to prepare his child for school includes, but is not limited to, the following: (a) allowing for positive social interactions with the child's peers, (b) allowing for the child to explore language and print, (c) providing read alouds, (d) taking trips, and (e) providing ample opportunity to explore and discover new things and discuss the outcomes.

Once a child reaches preschool age, academic accomplishments should be apparent. The child should display fine motor skills, numeration, correct language usage, signs of emergent literacy, social skills, and emotional skills. However, if the child comes from an at risk family, she is much more likely to be lacking in these emergent skills. A lack of parental education and the language primarily used in the minority household are known disenabling factors linked to a lack of emergent literacy skills in the at-risk preschool age child (NCES, 1995).

The steps to early intervention should begin at the infant stage and continue to develop until preschool age. Children must gain exposure to a multitude of experiences before entering school to ultimately be prepared to learn and comprehend what was learned. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998) delineate ways in which skills can be reinforced at home before entering school. NAEYC suggests that while a baby is still an infant, she can be exposed to a wide variety of experiences that begin the early intervention process at home. During the infancy stage, babies learn

using sight and sound. To increase the babies learning through sight, take the baby on many outings. While the baby is out, draw her attention to sights the baby can focus on, such as people or things. Additionally, at home a parent should always provide books as a part of the infant's toy selection. The baby should be allowed to touch and manipulate the books. Once the baby displays an active interest in books, the parent can begin to show the infant the pictures in the books and relate the picture to a word. To increase the babies learning through sound, a parent should read, talk, and sing to the baby on a daily basis.

Once a child has grown through the infancy stage, she should be exposed to new information that will continue to foster early intervention at home. The next stage the baby will encounter is known as toddlerhood. At this stage begin to make connections between symbols and meanings. A toddler should begin to recognize symbols and be able to associate the meaning of the symbol. A common association made by toddlers is that of a logo to a product. Continue to expose the child to various outings and talk with the child about the outing. Toddlerhood is the stage in which baby begins to explore language. At this time it is appropriate to begin transitioning your child from baby talk. The proper method of transition is to simply repeat requests made by the toddler correctly. It is not necessary to chastise the child for incorrect language usage, but rather guide the child by repeating language correctly. At this stage continue to read to your child every day. At this stage, however, allow the child to complete story sentences, or even encourage the child to tell the story while manipulating the book. In this way, the child begins to develop reading awareness. At the late stages of toddlerhood, begin to familiarize the child with the spelling of her first name (NAEYC, 1998).

The extent to which parents become involved in their children's school readiness can be associated with accomplishments in school age children. Parents who devote time to their children's learning before their child reaches school age develop children who will be academically prepared for school learning. Parents who do not prepare their child for school run the risk of developing a child associated with lower accomplishments and may be found to have difficulties socially, emotionally, and academically (NAEYC, 1998).

The second step to early intervention is the attendance in a preschool program. Given the emergence of Head Start Programs, High Scope Programs, government funded early childhood classes, and daycare, the opportunity for a child to attend preschool is phenomenal. Unfortunately, many at risk parents are unaware of the free programs available to them for their preschool age child. Upon enrollment in a preschool class, an at risk child will be exposed to a variety of learning experiences which will better prepare him for formal education. Preschool focuses on social interactions, gross and fine motor skills, emergent literacy skills, and emergent numeracy skills. All of these skills are presented at a developmentally appropriate level and significantly increases the child's likelihood for success upon entering school. "Attending Head Start, prekindergarten, or other center-based preschool programs was linked to higher emergent literacy scores in 4-year-olds...This benefit of preschool attendance accrued to children from both high-risk and low-risk family backgrounds" (Zill, 1995, p. 2).

It is important to attempt to include families of at risk children as much as possible in the school setting. According to Liontos (1991), the majority of at risk parents may have a general dislike for school simply because they foresee it as an

institutionalized building led by authoritarian figures. Educators are responsible to reach out to these families, to make them feel welcome, and to understand that they are valuable assets to their child's success in school. There is a common link between parental involvement and the child's academic and social success during the school age years. The child who stands to reap the most benefit from parental involvement in the school setting is the at-risk child. Since it has been noted that 25% of all children entering school can be considered at risk for academic failure, schools must seek out effective methods to reach the parents of the at-risk student (Liontos, 1991).

Parents can be involved and feel empowered through Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), before and after school programs, field trips, classroom volunteers, and collaboration with the community. The key is to be prepared, stay on neutral territory, do not make the parents feel intimidated, and provide programs that are of value to the parents to increase their involvement. A wise African Proverb states that it takes a village to raise a child. A positive collaboration must be developed between the parents, the school, and the community (Liontos, 1991).

The second solution strategy lies within innovative teaching strategies. It has been claimed that the classroom teacher is the most influential factor in the school system. The at-risk child's teacher can either promote success within the child, or, adversely, promote failure (Cunningham, 1999). According to the literature, there are many teaching strategies that have been proven to either succeed or fail when it comes to educating an at-risk student. It is incumbent upon the classroom teacher to select the strategies that will garner success in the at-risk classroom. Successful educational programs are all-inclusive. They include a curriculum that is organized, rigorous, and

provide the opportunity for the students to be assessed frequently (Educational Research Service, 1989).

First and foremost, the issue of language must be addressed. Children speak a multiplicity of dialects and languages (Cunningham, 1999). It is the job of the classroom teacher to both accept the form of speech used by students at risk while teaching them to enunciate and speak standard English. This quickly becomes a challenge as interactions children make outside of school are in casual register. The only person who is correcting the child's speech is the classroom teacher. To the at-risk child, the only significant person insisting that the child speak formally is the classroom teacher. Other adults who the child may have a significant relationship with most likely speaks in the same casual manner as the child. Therefore, in order for a classroom teacher to succeed in teaching the at-risk child to speak using standard English, she is required to utilize direct instruction of the desired language (Payne, 1998).

In addition, the patterns used to format a story vary from the casual register to the formal register. When using the formal register, it is assumed that the person will go directly to the point of the issue being addressed. However, while using the casual register, it is expected that the speaker will go around the issue being addressed before arriving at the point. Thus story structure becomes a difficult format for an at-risk student. A formal story is designed to have an introduction, a problem, a climax, and a solution. A casual register story begins with the solution, then a retelling of the story in small parts.

A direct correlation between achievement and language can be created. The classroom teacher can easily make some adjustments to the way material is presented to embrace both forms of language the child must possess. According to Payne (1998), (a) allow students to write using their own speech, then convert into standard English, (b) establish a condition wherein students express a problem using standard English to avoid a chastisement, (c) in the classroom, tell stories both using the students' language and standard English. Use a graphic organizer to compare and contrast the two stories, (d) encourage storytelling, and (e) use stories in other curricular areas to broaden perceptions. In this way, the classroom teacher both supports the child's common language and provides a framework for language that is accepted within the productive society.

Additionally, the classroom teacher may need to alter his or her attitude about the at risk child. There are a lot of pre-conceived notions that can be made towards a child who is at risk for academic failure. As a teacher it becomes a responsibility to not fall into these bias traps. According to Kuykendall (1992), a staff member in an at risk school needs to make several attitude adjustments. These may include, but are not limited to, (a) appreciating the dynamics of the child's extended family, (b) watching out for cases of institutionalized racism, (c) appreciating all children as individuals despite their background, and (d) viewing foreseen negative behaviors from a cultural point of view. Also, your teaching style should teach to different learning styles and avoid tracking. Once the teacher's mind is clear of bias, she will better be able to service the children in a positive way.

In order for at risk students to be successful in school, several strategies also need to be utilized frequently. If these strategies are built into the curriculum, the students within that classroom will be set up for success, instead of set up for failure, which is sadly too often the case. The strategies are as follows: respect intelligences that are non-academic, interact personably with the students, make the learning environment attractive and include positive slogans and multicultural bulletin boards, establish mutual trust, and create a positive connection with parents (Kuykendall, 1992). When teachers have created a stimulating, inviting learning environment for their students, they will be ready to focus on academics.

In order to create an academically sound reading program, there is a consensus about the type of model that should be created within the at-risk classroom. The key is to continuously modify instruction, regroup accordingly, and continuously assess progress.

The teacher is expected to use small groups of students who are at similar skill levels. Since children often can master one skill and not master another, the teacher will need to regroup often in order to continually group students of similar skill level based on the various skills taught. Small group instruction is directly correlated with increased achievement in the area of reading (Educational Research Service, 1989).

In an attempt to encompass many of the strategies noted as effective by various experts on educating the at-risk child, the researcher has opted to initiate the Four Blocks Literacy model in her daily reading instruction. Four-Blocks is a program that embraces the different ways in which all children learn to read. "The Four-Blocks framework was developed by teachers who believe that to be successful in teaching *all* children to read

and write, we have to do it *all*! Doing it all means incorporating daily the different approaches to beginning reading" (Cunningham, 1999). The approaches to literacy used in Four-Blocks include the following: Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing, and Working with Words. Four-Blocks directly correlates with the successful interventions for underachievers in reading provided by Quatroche (1999).

The author suggests that the explicit teaching of both word identification strategies and letter-sound relationships is necessary. Also, explicit teaching of decoding strategies and comprehension strategies must be provided. The use of word repetition should be used to develop mastery. Finally, provide many opportunities to reread familiar texts to foster fluency development.

Project Objectives and Processes

As a result of the implementation of the Four Blocks Literacy Model, during the period of September 2000 – December 2000, the first grade students from the targeted class will improve reading skills as measured by the Post School Readiness test.

As a result of the implementation of Phase 1: Guided Reading and Self-Selected Reading, during the period of September 2000 to December 2000, the first grade students from the targeted class will improve reading comprehension skills as measured by teacher-made tests.

As a result of the implementation of Phase 2: Working with Words and Writing, during the period of September 2000 to December 2000, the first grade students from the targeted class will improve phonetic awareness as measured by a teacher-made checklist.

In order to accomplish the objective, the following processes are necessary: (a) daily instruction plan using the Four Blocks Literacy Model will be utilized during reading instruction, (b) materials that foster an atmosphere that promotes success in reading for students at risk will be constructed, (c) teacher administered tests will be used to monitor the improvement of reading development skills in students.

Project Action Plan

The action plan to improve reading for students at risk is outlined in calendar format. The calendar clearly indicates the dates in which specific steps to the plan will be put into effect. The month of September indicates a multitude of tasks, see Figure 3. This is due to the fact many facets of the action research will be employed during September. This includes student surveys, administration of school readiness pretest, letter/sound recognition pretest, and sight word pretest, introduction of the reading strategies to be used throughout the timeline, and the start of full implementation of the Four Blocks Literacy Model. During the months of October and November, see Figure 4 and Figure 5, the continuation of the full implementation of Four Blocks will be in effect. In addition, the students will take teacher-made comprehension tests to monitor growth in reading skills. In December, see Figure 6, the Literacy Model will continue to be implemented daily, as well as the administration of the school readiness posttest, the letter/sound recognition posttest, the sight word posttest, and the final comprehension test.

September

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1 Student Survey	2
3	4 Administer readiness, sight words, and letter/sound recognition pretests	5	6	7	8 Completion of pretests	9
10	11 Introduction of 4 Block procedures, rules, directions	12 Teacher model- Guided Reading Block	13 Teacher model – Self-Selected Reading Block	14 Teacher model – Writing Block	15 Teacher model – Working with Words block	16
17	18 Full implementation of 4 Block	19	20	21	22 Comprehension test	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

Figure 3. September Action Plan

During the first 2 weeks of school, the students will be required to complete a survey (Appendix C). Additionally, the students will complete pretests in the areas of school readiness, sight word identification (Appendix B), and letter/sound recognition (Appendix A). The remainder of the month of September will begin the implementation of procedures used in the Four Blocks Literacy Model. The teacher will do extensive modeling of the stages associated with Four Blocks. The students will begin to internalize the daily procedures used during reading instruction. By the end of the month,

the literacy model will be fully implemented for reading instruction. The children will take the first of a series of teacher-made comprehension tests (Appendix D).

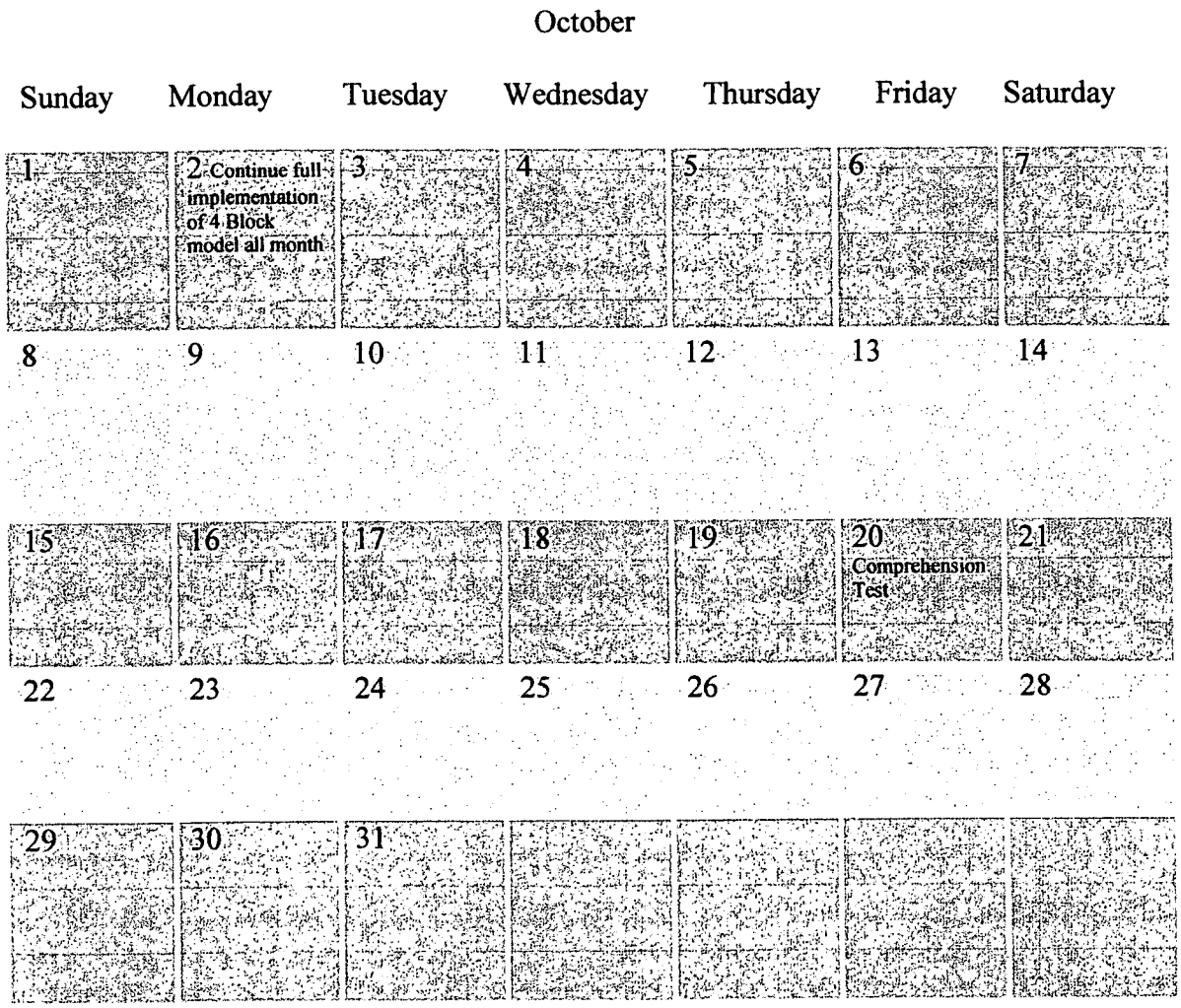

Figure 4. October Action Plan

During the second month of implementation of the action plan, the full use of Four Blocks will be implemented during reading instruction time, which is the entire morning of the school day. The daily routine begins with Making Words, followed by Guided Writing and Guided Reading, and ending with Self-Selected Reading. Also in the month of October, the children will take the second of a series of teacher-made

comprehension tests (Appendix E).

November

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			1 Continue implementation of 4 Block all month	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17 Comprehension test	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

Figure 5. November Action Plan

Throughout the month of November, the full implementation of Four Blocks is continued. The students will take the third in a series of teacher-made tests to assess comprehension of reading materials (Appendix F).

December

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8 Comprehension test	9
10	11 Administer readiness, sight words, and letter/sound recognition posttests	12	13	14	15 Completion of posttests	

Figure 6. December Action Plan

December is the final month in which the action plan will be in effect. During this month, full implementation of the literacy model will continue to be in use. The final teacher-made comprehension test of the series will be administered (Appendix G). The children will complete the school readiness posttest, the sight word recognition posttest, and the letter/sound recognition posttest.

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the intervention, a test covering reading comprehension will be administered at the end of each month from September through December. Additionally, the children will be taking pretests and posttests to determine their reading ability in the areas of vocabulary, letter identification, visual and auditory discrimination, comprehension and interpretation, and developmental spelling ability. A letter/sound recognition and a sight word recognition pretest and posttest will also be administered.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to incorporate reading strategies considered successful as a means of helping at risk students learn to read. The implementation of the Four Blocks Literacy Model was selected to promote the desired literacy skills in the targeted first grade classroom. The original plan required the students to complete a survey and pretests in the areas of school readiness, letter/sound recognition, and sight word recognition. The first week of implementation was devoted to completing these tasks.

In order to implement the Four Blocks Literacy Model, a schedule was developed to be used daily during reading instructional time. The time devoted each day to completing activities within each of the four components of the literacy model was four hours.

The first hour of instruction was devoted to the Working with Words block. During this time block, the focal point of learning is on high frequency words and decoding skills. A major component during this block is doing the word wall activities. The routine was followed every week during the implementation period. Each week, the teacher selected five new words to add to the word wall. Daily the students were

engaged in activities that required them to find, write, and chant the spelling of each new word. The week would also include a review of the previous word wall words. Phonics and Spelling instruction were also focused on during this block. Patterns to distinguish onset and rhyme were explicitly taught. Some popular activities preferred by the children were chanting the word wall words, making words with letter tiles, and guessing the covered word in a selected text.

. The literacy model suggests that one way in which students learn to read is through writing. Therefore, the second hour of instruction was devoted to Guided Writing. The format used during this instructional piece of the framework was to present a mini writing lesson directed by the teacher. Often the teacher provided a written sample of her own work as a model. After the mini-lesson, the students spent approximately 20 minutes working independently on their own writing. While children were independently writing, the teacher took the opportunity to conference with students on an individual basis to serve as an editor and help prepare children's work for publication. The final portion of this block is devoted to sharing students' writing pieces. The use of the "Author's Chair" was utilized for sharing writing.

The third hour of the school day was devoted to Guided Reading. During this block, students are exposed to a wide range of literature. During Guided Reading, the teacher presents comprehension strategies that allows for the students to read various texts as the material becomes increasingly more difficult. During this block each day, the activity always included a before, during, and after reading strategy to focus on comprehension. Some before reading strategies used were venn diagrams to activate prior knowledge, "picture walks", making predictions, and building vocabulary. During

reading, the students engaged in choral reading, partner reading, echo reading, and shared reading. The after reading strategies included discussion, completion of graphic organizers created before reading, acting out the story, and following up on the previous predictions. In the targeted classroom, guided reading was used in a whole group setting, a small groups setting, partner, or individually.

The final block used each day in the classroom was Self-Selected Reading. The purpose of this block is to promote independent readers through self-confidence, fluency, and self-selection of reading materials. Each day the block began with a teacher read aloud. Next, the students selected books to read independently from baskets on their tables. While the students read independently, the teacher conferenced with individual students. The conferencing students were asked to bring the book they had selected to read, read the book aloud to the teacher, and answer questions about the text delegated by the teacher. Last, some of the students were allowed to share what they had read with the rest of the students in the classroom.

Throughout the implementation period, the literacy model was used daily. Each month during the implementation of the literacy model the students were required to take a teacher-made comprehension test. Last, the students were administered posttests, which were the same as the original pretests, in the areas of school readiness, letter/sound recognition, and sight word recognition.

In addition, the teacher was committed to creating a classroom environment that was conducive to the Four Blocks Literacy Model. The environment created was rich with text, and a visible word wall was posted. The teacher also posted a "chunking wall" which presented various rimes for each vowel sound that the children could utilize to aid

in their reading and spelling by adding the appropriate onsets. The desks were arranged into tables of four desks per group, to promote cooperative learning. An Author's Chair was permanently placed within the classroom. A table was located in the classroom to be used for conferences. The classroom library was sorted using baskets. Each basket contained books on various reading levels and various topics of interests. The books and baskets were color coded so the children could file the books they selected.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to assess students' growth in academics in the area of reading, the students were administered a pretest and a post test in the area of school readiness. The skills analyzed in the administration of this test include vocabulary, identifying letters, visual discrimination, auditory discrimination, comprehension and interpretation, and developmental spelling ability. All of the facets of the test attempt to assess the extent to which a child is prepared to read. Each skill test is a key to reading readiness. The findings of the pretest and posttest data are presented in Table 7 and Table 8.

Table 7

School readiness pretest and posttest results

STUDENT	VOCABULARY			IDENTIFYING LETTERS			AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION			VISUAL DISCRIMINATION			COMPREHENSION INTERPRETATION		
	SEPT	DEC	TOTAL	SEPT	DEC	TOTAL	SEPT	DEC	TOTAL	SEPT	DEC	TOTAL	SEPT	DEC	TOTAL
A	5	6	6	12	12	12	11	12	12	8	11	11	6	5	6
B	6	6	6	12	12	12	11	12	12	9	11	11	5	5	6
C	5	6	6	11	12	12	11	12	12	11	11	11	4	6	6
D	4	6	6	12	12	12	7	12	12	8	9	11	2	4	6
E	5	6	6	12	12	12	11	12	12	11	8	11	4	4	6
F	6	6	6	12	12	12	11	12	12	9	11	11	3	3	6
G	6	6	6	12	12	12	8	12	12	7	8	11	3	5	6
H	6	6	6	5	10	12	3	11	12	4	5	11	1	5	6
I	6	6	6	12	12	12	11	12	12	11	11	11	5	3	6
J	4	5	6	12	12	12	5	11	12	9	11	11	1	5	6
K	5	6	6	12	12	12	9	12	12	8	11	11	3	3	6

The data show either that the scores remained stagnant from September to December, or that there was a marginal to drastic increase. The vocabulary and the letter identification tests showed the least amount of change. The majority of the students' scores remained unchanged, while others only improved by a margin of one to two points. Only student H made a drastic improvement in letter identification. The score improved by 50%. However, comparing the accuracy percentage rate of the pretest and the posttest results, a greater amount of improvement can be seen by the class as a whole. An overall accuracy level was determined by calculating the total number correct out of the total number possible. In the area of vocabulary, the students scored with an 88%

accuracy level on the pretest, while on the posttest, the students scored with a 98% accuracy level. An increase of 10 percentage points. In the area of letter identification, the students scored with an 94% accuracy level on the pretest, while on the posttest, the students scored with a 98% accuracy level.

The scores in the area of visual discrimination improved by a margin of 0 to 3 points. Student A and student K portray the greatest improvement of 3 points. Student E is the only student who lowered the performance by 3 points. However, the comparison between the accuracy percentages of the pretest and the posttest again show a favorable amount of improvement. In the area of visual discrimination, the students scored with a 78% accuracy level on the pretest, while on the posttest, the students scored with an 88% accuracy level. Resulting in an overall percentage growth of 10%.

In the area of comprehension and interpretation, the scores remain stagnant, or increase by 1 to 4 points. There are two incidences of scores decreasing, Student A's score decreased by 1 point, while student I's score decreased by 2 points. The greatest amount of improvement of 5 points can be observed in student H and student J. However, comparing the overall percentage scores of the whole class again reveal a drastic growth in overall achievement. In the area of comprehension and interpretation, the students scored with a 56% accuracy level on the pretest, while on the posttest, the students overall accuracy was 98%. This indicates the greatest amount of overall achievement, a 42% increase in the test scores in this area.

Upon further analysis, it can be seen that the greatest amount of personal growth was seen in the area of auditory discrimination. The scores in the area of auditory discrimination improved within a margin of 1 to 8 points. A majority of the students

again only improved the score by 1 point. However, several students made a great degree of growth. Student K improved by a margin of 3 points, student G improved by a margin of 4 points, student D improved by a margin of 5 points, and student J improved by a margin of 6 points. Student H once again made the most drastic amount of change, increasing the test score by 9 points. In comparing the overall percentage of growth of the class in the area of auditory discrimination, it can be stated that while the students scored with a 72% accuracy on the pretest, the students scored with a 98% accuracy on the posttest. Thus revealing an incremental growth of 26 percentage points.

The final area the school readiness test assessed was in the area of developmental spelling ability. Based upon the students' responses to the test entries, the teacher/researcher could identify whether the child was functioning on the pre-phonetic, semi-phonetic, phonetic, or transitional stage in reading. The data from the pretest and posttest section on spelling ability are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Developmental Spelling Ability, Pretest and Posttest Results

STUDENT	PRETEST SPELLING ABILITY	POSTTEST SPELLING ABILITY
A	Semi-phonetic	Phonetic
B	Semi-phonetic	Transitional
C	Phonetic	Transitional
D	Pre-phonetic	Phonetic
E	Pre-phonetic	Phonetic
F	Pre-phonetic	Transitional
G	Semi-phonetic	Transitional
H	Pre-phonetic	Phonetic
I	Phonetic	Transitional
J	Semi-phonetic	Transitional
K	Semi-phonetic	Transitional

As the data indicate, all of the students increased their phonetic spelling ability to either phonetic or transitional, regardless of what ability level the student was at

previously. The pretest data indicate that 36% of the targeted students were pre-phonetic and 45% of the students were semi-phonetic. Thus it was determined that 81% of the targeted first grade students were not prepared with the adequate phonetic skills needed to be successful beginning readers. Only 18% of the pretested students had begun to develop phonetic awareness, yet none of them were at the transitional level. However, once the students were administered the posttest, none of them remained at the pre-phonetic or semi-phonetic ability level. Instead, 36% of the students were tested at the phonetic level, and 63% were tested at the transitional level.

In addition, the students were given a pretest and a posttest to determine uppercase letter recognition, lowercase letter recognition, and letter sound identification. A copy of the test administered can be found in Appendix A. A summary of the pretest and posttest results is presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Letter and Sound Recognition Pretest and Posttest Results

STUDENT	LOWERCASE LETTER RECOGNITION			UPPERCASE LETTER RECOGNITION			IDENTIFYING SOUNDS		
	SEPT	DEC	TOTAL	SEPT	DEC	TOTAL	SEPT	DEC	TOTAL
A	22	26	26	25	26	26	11	26	26
B	24	26	26	25	26	26	17	26	26
C	26	26	26	26	26	26	24	26	26
D	25	26	26	26	26	26	20	25	26
E	26	26	26	26	26	26	24	26	26
F	25	26	26	25	26	26	17	26	26
G	25	26	26	25	26	26	12	26	26
H	4	16	26	6	18	26	1	15	26
I	24	26	26	25	26	26	19	26	26
J	26	26	26	26	26	26	12	26	26
K	26	26	26	26	26	26	23	26	26

The scores indicate that all of the students were able to increase letter and sound recognition. The lowercase recognition showed almost a 10% improvement on overall scores. The majority of the students were able to recognize one to two more lowercase letters. Student A was able to recognize four more letters than on the previous test, and the largest improvement can be seen in student H, who was able to recognize 12 additional lowercase letters. Overall, the entire class completed the lowercase letter recognition with an 88% accuracy level on the pretest, and a 97% accuracy level on the posttest.

The uppercase recognition showed the least amount of improvement. The majority of the students either remained stagnant or increased recognition by one letter. The only exception is student H, who only recognized six uppercase letters on the pretest, but was able to recognize 18 uppercase letters on the posttest. Overall, the entire class completed the uppercase recognition test with a 91% accuracy on the pretest, and a 97% accuracy level on the posttest, indicating an incremental growth of six percentage points.

The greatest indicator of change is the pretest and posttest results in the area of letter sound identification. None of the students tested remained stagnant. All of the students made an increment of growth. The smallest increment of growth was an improvement of identifying two additional letter sounds, while the largest increment of growth was an improvement of identifying fifteen letter sounds. Overall, the entire class completed the sound identification test with a 63% accuracy level on the pretest, and a 96% accuracy level on the posttest, indicating the largest overall improvement of 33 percentage points.

The final pretest and posttest administered to the targeted first grade students was a sight word recognition test. See Appendix B for the list of sight words presented to each student. The results indicating the percentage of students who passed or failed the sight word pretest, as well as the results indicating the percentage of students who passed or failed the sight word posttest are indicated in Figure 7.

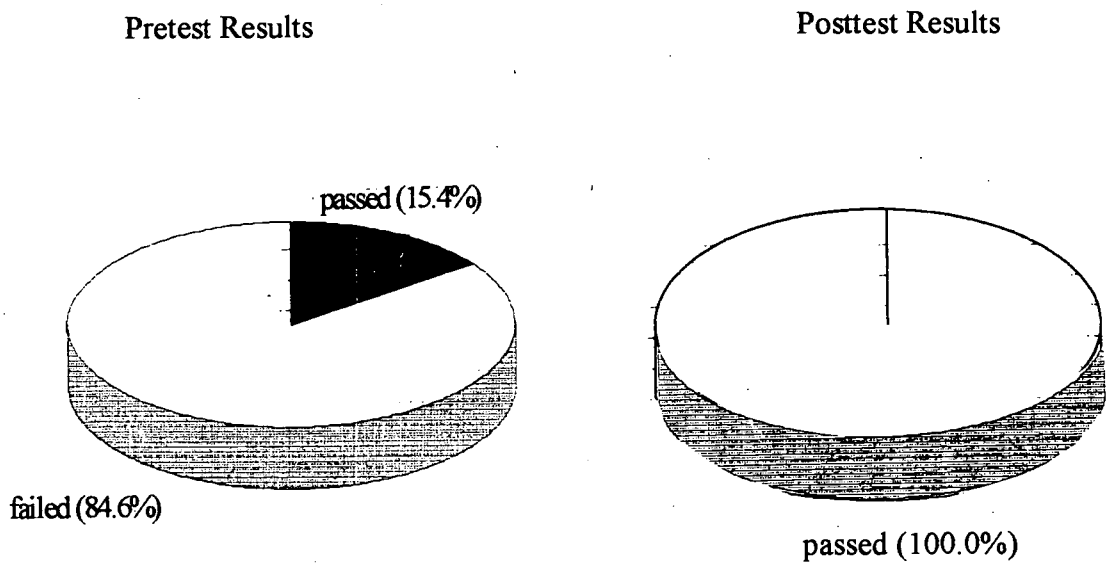

Figure 7. Basic sight word recognition pretest and posttest results

As the graphs indicate, there has been a considerable amount of improvement in the area of sight word recognition. Of the 84.6% of students who initially failed the sight word recognition pretest, 100% passed the sight word recognition posttest. More than three-fourths of the class made a drastic improvement in sight word recognition.

The final measure taken by the teacher/researcher to determine academic growth in the area of reading was through a series of comprehension tests. The tests were administered one per month during each month in which the implementation occurred. The tests became increasingly more difficult each month. A test score of 80% or better

was considered passing. A copy of the test administered in the months of September, October, November, and December can be found in Appendices D through G. Results of the monthly comprehension tests can be found in Figure 8.

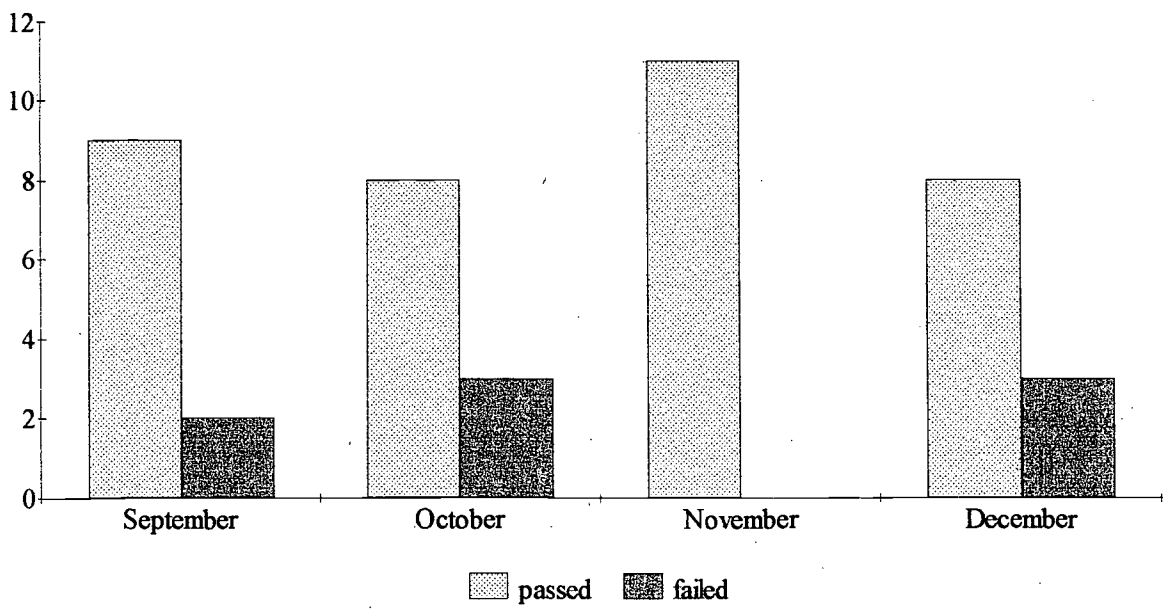

Figure 8. Comprehension Test Results for the Months of September through December

As the figure indicates, during all of the months in which the Four Blocks Literacy Model was in place, a majority of the students excelled on the comprehension tests. Even as the tests became increasingly harder, most of the students were able to continue to achieve success on the comprehension test. In the months of October and December, 73% of all the students who were administered the test passed with an 80% accuracy or better. During the month of September, 82% of all the students who were

administered the test passed with an 80% accuracy or better. During the month of November, 100% of the students passed the comprehension test.

According to the test results, the majority of students increased their skills in all areas related to school readiness. Of particular note are the areas on the school readiness test that were a particular focus of the literacy model showed the most improvements. The students scored with a 98% accuracy in the posttest area of vocabulary. During the implementation period, vocabulary was taught in correlation with the Guided Reading block. Additionally, the students again scored within a 98% accuracy in the posttest area of comprehension and interpretation, which was also taught in correlation with the Guided Reading Block. Additionally, all of the students increased their developmental spelling ability to either phonetic or transitional, which directly correlates with the direct teaching of phonics during the Working with Words block, and the writing opportunities provided in the Writing block.

A noticeable improvement was seen in the areas of both letter recognition and sound recognition, the most improvement having been in the area of sound recognition. The teacher researcher felt that the noticeable increase in letter sound recognition directly correlates with time spent on phonetic skill building during the Working with Words block of the literacy model. As noted in teacher anecdotals, most of the students had a firm grasp on the connection between sounds to the formation of words. This led to increased ability in decoding skills, which helped the targeted class to become more efficient readers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based upon the presentation and analysis of the data collected in connection with developing successful reading strategies for at-risk students, the students showed a marked improvement in reading achievement. The area that the teacher researcher felt was the most successful in the classroom was supported by the data collected. All the students in the targeted first grade class successfully passed the sight word posttest. This marked improvement in sight word recognition is related to the Working with Words block, particularly the success of the word wall activities. The most successful component in the teacher researcher's classroom was the chanting of the word wall words. Through the chanting, the children were able to quickly and successfully recognize the spelling of a great deal of words. In turn, the students were able to recognize these words in text, which helped the students to become more successful readers. The recognition of the sight words in text greatly built the confidence of the at-risk readers in the first grade classroom. Coupled with the successful decoding skills also being built during this block, the children felt able to attack new material.

By direct teaching and applying the sight word and word attack skills, the children were confident in their ability to read. The teacher researcher felt that it was due to this success and built in confidence that the students were able to produce such positive results on the comprehension tests, even as early as September. Even as the comprehension tests became increasingly difficult, the students were able to use their reading skills to continue to succeed. Comprehension was also a major component of the Guided Reading block, which aided the children with various strategies to comprehend text.

One of the reasons the teacher researcher felt that this literacy model was so successful with at-risk students is due to the highly engaging and motivating methods used to teach reading. The students were very motivated to learn using this model. The literacy model also presents reading in a way that promotes all learning styles every day. In this way, the teaching of reading supports all of the students in the classroom every day.

In conclusion, due to the immense amount of success in the first grade classroom, the teacher researcher highly recommends the implementation of the Four Blocks Literacy Model in all at-risk classrooms. The results of this action research project confirm the recommendation provided. The daily use of Guided Reading, Writing, Self-Selected Reading, and Working with Words was found to greatly increase the reading ability levels of all the students in the targeted classroom. The most invigorating outcome was that all of the students believed they could read, so they read.

To further enhance this research as it applies toward classroom applications, it would be beneficial to enhance personal knowledge of the procedural methods for the use of Guided Reading instruction in the classroom. Additionally, several key points aforementioned in this action research would be worthwhile to attain additional information as it applies to at-risk children. These areas include motivation, early intervention, parent and community economics, and effective schools.

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Appendices

Name_____ Date_____

LETTER/SOUND RECOGNITION TEST

letter	sound
s	
m	
g	
v	
c	
w	
d	
j	
q	
f	
z	
o	
x	
b	
h	
a	
k	
t	
p	
i	
r	
l	
n	
e	
u	
y	

letter	
S	
M	
G	
V	
C	
W	
D	
J	
Q	
F	
Z	
O	
X	
B	
H	
A	
K	
T	
P	
I	
R	
L	
N	
E	
U	
Y	

Circle one:

Pretest Posttest

SCORE

Lower case letters ____/26

Sounds ____/26

Upper case letters ____/26

s m g v c w

d j q f z o

x b h a k t

p i r l n e u y

S M G V C W

D J Q F Z O

X B H A K T P

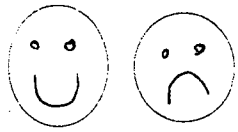
I R L N E U Y

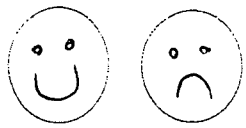
THE DOLCH 220-WORD BASIC SIGHT VOCABULARY

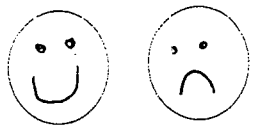
1.	go	41.	what	81.	they	121.	live
2.	help	42.	up	82.	ran	122.	found
3.	look	43.	it	83.	went	123.	green
4.	here	44.	but	84.	then	124.	of
5.	run	45.	now	85.	was	125.	wash
6.	come	46.	work	86.	white	126.	when
7.	at	47.	my	87.	black	127.	our
8.	me	48.	little	88.	try	128.	just
9.	get	49.	us	89.	got	129.	old
10.	down	50.	have	90.	her	130.	some
11.	jump	51.	red	91.	him	131.	could
12.	said	52.	two	92.	came	132.	from
13.	and	53.	three	93.	new	133.	why
14.	I	54.	big	94.	had	134.	into
15.	no	55.	funny	95.	call	135.	over
16.	you	56.	where	96.	yellow	136.	give
17.	can	57.	yes	97.	your	137.	must
18.	that	58.	thank	98.	after	138.	five
19.	not	59.	out	99.	soon	139.	under
20.	is	60.	eat	100.	saw	140.	again
21.	want	61.	good	101.	then	141.	four
22.	to	62.	blue	102.	walk	142.	an
23.	with	63.	are	103.	so	143.	any
24.	play	64.	there	104.	laugh	144.	buy
25.	did	65.	too	105.	an	145.	brown
26.	the	66.	pretty	106.	upon	146.	many
27.	away	67.	on	107.	its	147.	were
28.	we	68.	put	108.	show	148.	long
29.	see	69.	don't	109.	about	149.	every
30.	find	70.	please	110.	has	150.	as
31.	this	71.	fast	111.	which	151.	stop
32.	ride	72.	take	112.	right	152.	ask
33.	in	73.	read	113.	be	153.	may
34.	will	74.	know	114.	first	154.	think
35.	for	75.	she	115.	his	155.	very
36.	one	76.	let	116.	tell	156.	once
37.	do	77.	how	117.	sleep	157.	round
38.	who	78.	all	118.	off	158.	well
39.	a	79.	make	119.	cut	159.	made
40.	like	80.	he	120.	going	160.	wish

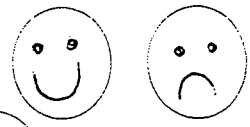
161. both
162. sit
163. around
164. if
165. gave
166. clean
167. kind
168. bring
169. fly
170. pill
171. use
172. their
173. those
174. much
175. say
176. light
177. better
178. best
179. would
180. by
181. start
182. today
183. before
184. six
185. keep
186. cold
187. only
188. never
189. always
190. ten
191. or
192. small
193. been
194. pick
195. hurt
196. goes
197. does
198. because
199. far
200. ate
201. open
202. together
203. carry
204. own
205. these
206. seven
207. eight
208. write
209. hold
210. hot
211. drink
212. grow
213. done
214. full
215. sing
216. fail
217. myself
218. shall
219. warm
220. draw

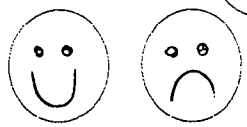
Student Survey

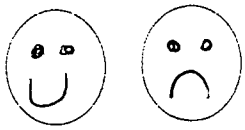
1. I went to Preschool. 

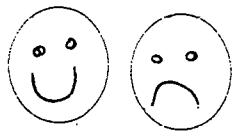
2. I went to Kindergarten. 

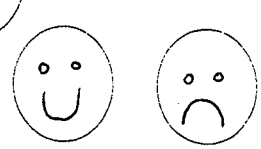
3. I have books at home. 

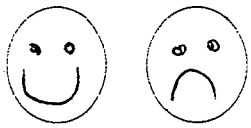
4. I am happy cooperating with friends. 

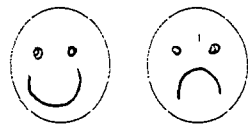
5. I have gone to the library. 

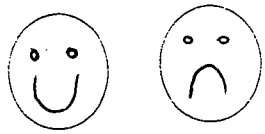
6. I like to talk. 

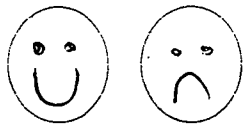
7. I like playing in a group. 

8. I can write my first and last name. 

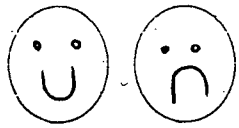
9. I go to the park. 

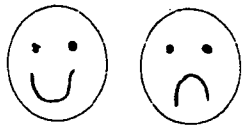
10. I know the sounds the letters make. 

11. My parents read to me. 

12. I go to the zoo. 

13. I can hear rhymes. 

14. I want to learn to read. 

15. I can read. 

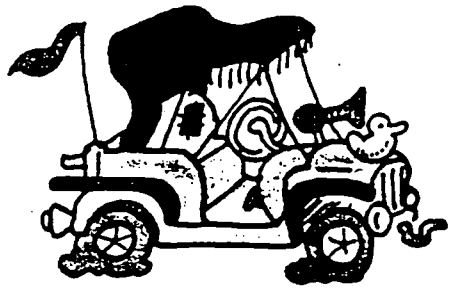
Reading Comprehension

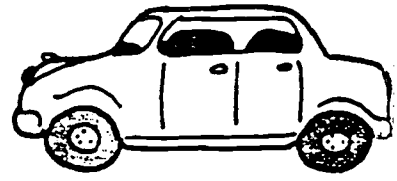
Directions: Read the story. Circle the answer to each question.

I know a silly man,
Who walks on his hands,
He has a silly car,
but he doesn't go too far.
And in his silly town,
shops are upside down.
Tell me if you can,
when you see this silly man.

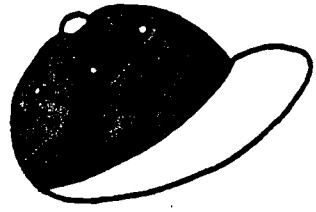
1. Which one is the silly man?

2. Which car is his?

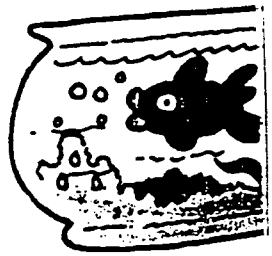




3. Which hat would be his?



4. Which pet should be his?



Reading Comprehension

Directions: Read the story. Fill in the circle next to the correct answer to each question.

The dog is brown and white.
He likes to play.
He plays with a red ball.

1. What color is the dog?
   - o Red and white
   - o Black and white
   - o Brown and white
   - o Brown

2. What does the dog like to do?
   - o run
   - o jump
   - o sleep
   - o play

3. What does the dog play?
   - o ball
   - o fetch
   - o frisbee
   - o house

4. What color is the dog's ball?
   - o orange
   - o green
   - o blue
   - o red

Reading Comprehension

Directions: Read the story. Answer each question. Write a complete sentence.

Maria has a new bike.
It has two wheels.
It is blue.

1. Who has a bike?

2. Is the bike old or new?

3. Does the bike have three wheels?

4. What color is the bike?

Reading Comprehension

Directions: Read the story. Answer each question. Write a complete sentence.

"Take off your coat," said the wind.
"I will blow and blow."
The man did not take it off.
"Take off your coat," said the sun.
"I will shine and shine."
The man did take off his coat!

1. Who can shine?

2. Who can blow?

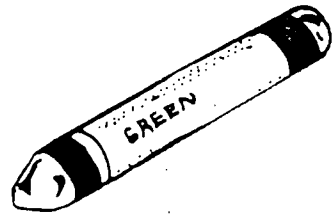
3. Who is walking?

4. What is the man wearing?

5. Why does the man take off his coat?

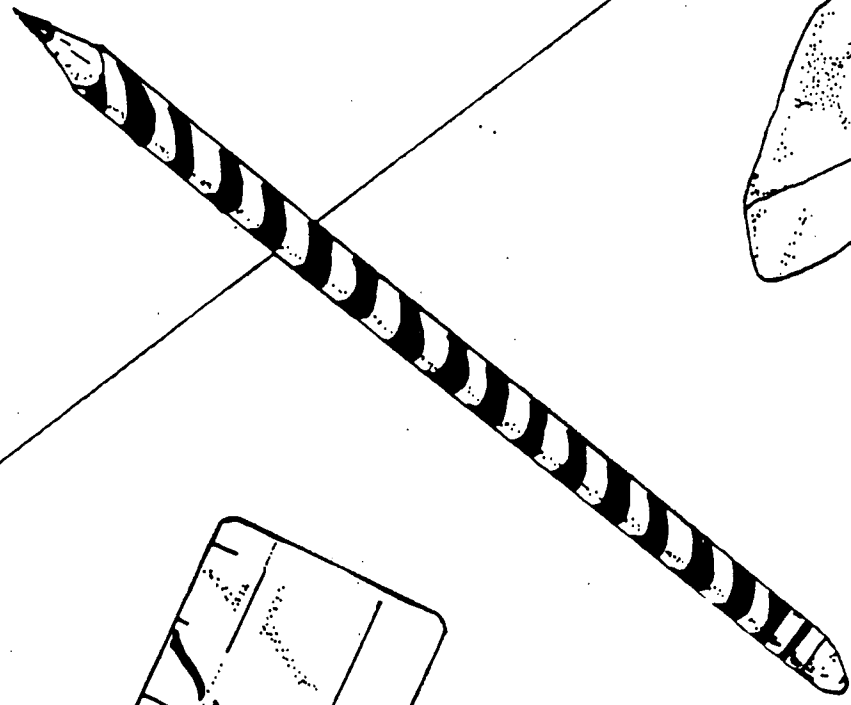
Appendix H

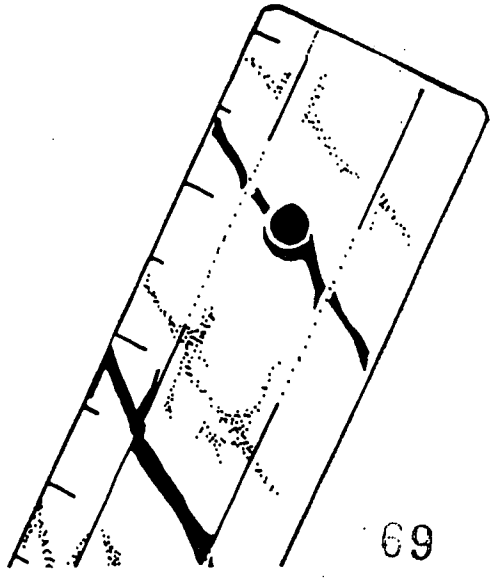
SCHOLASTIC TESTING SERVICE, INC. / BENSENVILLE, ILLINOIS

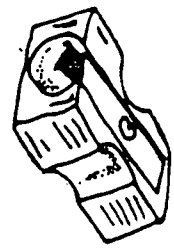


school readiness test

Project Coordinators:
O.F. Anderhalter, Ph.D.
Jan Perney, Ed.D.







Saint Xavier University
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
I Can Read! Reading Strategies that Work for Students At Risk

Dear Parents:

The children and I are off to a wonderful start of the school year. We are enjoying getting to know one another and learning in fun and exciting ways. As a teacher, I have a profound love of learning. As a result, I have gone back to school, too! The children think it's neat that their teacher goes to school. They really get a kick out of the fact that their teacher has a teacher. I am in my second year of study to obtain a Master's Degree in Education. The purpose is for me to learn more about being an effective teacher. I have enjoyed my classes and used a lot of new ideas to improve my classroom instruction.

At this point, I have A LOT of homework! I am in the process of writing a research paper. The focus of my paper is to find the very best strategies to teach children to read. As I research, I will be using these strategies in class to help teach your children to read. I need your permission for your child to be involved in my studies. Our school year will not be altered in any way. But as the children partake in reading activities, projects, and tests I will be able to record the results and use the results in my paper. I simply need to measure how well they do in reading before I use new strategies and then how well they are reading afterwards.

Please know that any information I gather will **not** be reported with your child's name and only I will be looking at the information. The only reason I am doing this study is to improve instruction in the classroom. In turn, this will improve your child's education. So it is good for all of us! I look forward to a class full of readers!!

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you very much!

I, the parent/legal guardian of _____, understand that Mrs. Angell is conducting a research study to improve reading skills in her classroom. I voluntarily agree to my child's participation in the study. I understand that all information she gathers will be confidential. I understand that I must return a signed copy to the classroom teacher and I may keep one for my records.

Signature_____ Date___ _____

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