

How to Help the One: A Story of Reading Intervention for a Struggling Middle School Boy
Timothy G. Weih, Ph.D.
University of Northern Iowa, USA
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Abstract

This report describes the assessment, evaluation, and subsequent development of reading intervention strategies for a struggling middle school student. The family background and popular culture of the student were the primary means for creating the interventions. The student was taught to apply the reading strategies while completing classroom-based, subject area assignments.

Keywords: Reading Interventions; Intervention Strategies; Family Culture; Popular Culture; Middle School Students; Content-area Reading; Student-Teacher Relationships; Interviews; Reading Assessment; Reading Evaluation; Homework

Classroom Teacher's Reflection About the Student

Austin's comprehension is below objective level. He has difficulty making inferences and predictions. He doesn't understand figurative language techniques like similes, metaphors, and idioms which are the ones we teach at sixth grade. I think he can visualize if the text is easy enough. He has difficulty making connections (text-to-text, text-to-self, or text-to-world) because he has not read a lot or experienced much. We use the term "schema," but I am not sure he could tell you what it is. He has difficulty determining importance and main idea in nonfiction work. He also has problems with vocabulary in science and social studies. As concepts and vocabulary have become more difficult, he has struggled more. I haven't noticed that he will stop and reread passages to gain understanding. In his defense, he has not been read to at home. He has chosen books this year and then easily abandoned them. When I suggest books, he has failed to finish them. He loves to be read to and listens intently when I read after recess each day. Questions using higher level thinking skills are difficult for him. He has an attention problem so even repeating simple directions is a challenge on some days.

Middle school teachers are increasingly required to provide reading interventions to students with reading difficulties (Reed & Vaughn, 2010). Older students who are experiencing reading problems most likely have been coping with these difficulties for a period of years, but they may not have been as evident until they reach the middle grades. Middle school students are expected to be able to independently read greater amounts of information within subject areas as compared to students in lower grades (Gajria, Jitendra, Sood, & Sacks, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2007), and find reading for understanding especially difficult (Edmonds et al., 2009).

Austin (pseudonyms used throughout) was referred to me by his classroom teacher who shared her concerns included in the opening reflection in this report. Austin was not diagnosed with a learning disability and he had not received any special services. He was one of those students who had fallen between the cracks, but nonetheless, needed help. I am an education professor for a university in the U.S., and I also collaborate with K-12 classroom teachers and students to develop curriculum and deliver instruction. The purpose of this report is to describe

an approach towards literacy intervention that may be applicable for struggling readers that are in the middle grades. Being able to read with speed, accuracy, and understanding is essential for success in all subject areas in school, and as students become older, they receive less and less one-on-one guidance from their teachers. Therefore, the intervention strategies that are selected and taught to them need to be ones that they can apply independently while working on their schoolwork. The intervention approach that I implemented with Austin differs from many in that I did not follow a scripted formula or program for developing reading intervention strategies for him. My aim was to help Austin, to get to know and understand him, and through collaboration, develop literacy intervention strategies that would be the most meaningful for him. In this report, the *assessments* were the processes designed to gather the background and the literacy behavior of Austin (Palomba & Banta, 1999), and *evaluation* was the critical analysis and reflection upon the assessment results (TheFreeDictionary, 2013).

Develop a Collaborative Relationship

If I was going to be able to help Austin, I needed him to trust me. To begin this process, I opened up to him about myself. During our first meeting, I presented my Literature Autobiography Bag (Weih, 2006, see Appendix A) with Austin as a way of an introduction of myself, to make a personal connection, and to inspire him to open up and talk with me. I shared literature that I had read that were my favorites, beginning with selections from when I was a boy to what I am reading present day. When I introduced one of my adventure/survival books, *Two Against the North* (Mowat, 1956), Austin's eyes lit up! He said these are the types of books he likes to read and quickly launched into a conversation about *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987) and several others written by Gary Paulsen. When I was finished with my Literature Autobiography Bag, I asked Austin to prepare his own to share with me for our next meeting.

Assessing Austin's Background and Literacy Behavior

Culture and literacy interviews. The best made teacher plans will fail if teachers have not planned culturally relevant curriculum (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011) for their students. Designing literacy assessments that will lend the most valuable insights, and being able to create the best possible interventions, begins with getting to know the student at a personal level (Cowley, 2003). Two tools that are helpful towards this endeavor are the Culture Interview (see Appendix B) and the Literacy Interview (see Appendix C). I sat with Austin and conducted these interviews during our first meeting. I tape recorded this interview so that my full attention could be on Austin, with direct eye contact, and not on taking detailed notes. My aim was to learn about him, his life, his family, and his culture. I also wanted to begin to promote a sense of confidence inside of him by letting him know that I was personally interested in him.

The following information summarizes the interview data that I gathered about Austin. Austin is a 12 year-old Caucasian boy and in the sixth grade at Prairie Crossing Community School. He has attended this school since he was in first grade. He is currently in a self-contained classroom, and his teacher is Mrs. Grau. Austin lives with his dad, step-mom, step-sister, and biological sister. His family likes to play a card game called Apples to Apples and play catch with a Velcro ball. He likes to go fishing with his dad and grandparents. His family rents movies together to watch such as *Jeepers Creepers* (2001), *Death Race* (2008), and *Mirrors* (2008). His favorite television shows are *CSI-Miami*, *Family Guy*, and *I-Carly*. His favorite actors are Van

Diesel and Jason Statham. His favorite music is hard rock and pop, and he particularly enjoys listening to the Apostles and Buckcherry on a local radio top 40 rock station. His favorite sports are playing soccer, basketball, and fishing. His favorite sports teams are the local college teams in his city and the Pittsburgh Steelers. For special holidays, his family likes to celebrate Halloween, Christmas, and Thanksgiving. They used to attend a Methodist Church in his city before they moved, but they have not attended in awhile. He said that they plan to start going again in the near future. Austin's favorite foods are tacos, hamburgers, French toast, and ice cream. He has three cats, but he would like to get a miniature Doberman Pincher or a German Sheppard someday. For family chores, he does his own laundry, takes out the trash, and dusts and cleans his bedroom.

Austin has a reading time at home right after school. During this time, he likes to read survival and adventure books such as *Hatchet* and others from Gary Paulsen's Brian's saga (1987-2003). He also likes mystery books. A couple recent books that he has read were *Weasel* (DeFelice, 1990) and *Bringing Ezra Back* (DeFelice, 2006). He said that he gets his books from the community library, school library, and sometimes from Barnes and Noble. Austin likes hands-on science such as a unit on electricity. He dislikes social studies, but is looking forward to learning about world studies in seventh grade. His class does not have reading groups. He gets to read for about an hour for independent reading time, and overall, he enjoys reading. He said that he reads to see what is going to happen, and that he decides about what to read after listening to someone give a book talk. Austin would like to be able to read at a faster pace in order to keep up with his classmates and to be able to remember more of what he reads so that he can be successful with classroom assignments.

During my first meeting with Austin, it was vital to establish rapport and find some common ground from which to build our relationship. Gathering the background information was a means to reach this goal, and learning about his family life gave me valuable information that I used to select culturally relevant reading material and related interventions for him. Austin mentioned that he wanted to be able to read faster and to remember more of what he read, so I told him that these were areas that I would assist him with. I asked him if there was anything else that I could support him with and he said that he needed help with his schoolwork assignments, so I told him to bring his assignments with him to our meetings, and that I would set aside time to aid him. Teaching is about relationship building (Sears, n.d.), especially with a student who struggles academically and has probably felt like a failure for years. I wanted to support and encourage Austin however I could and I aimed to convey this message to him.

Austin's literature autobiography bag. When Austin presented his Literature Autobiography Bag (Weih, 2006), I could tell that he felt much more comfortable than he did during our first meeting. He knew what was going to happen and why, and he had a part in making the plans and following through with them. From his bag, he pulled out the *Transall Saga* (Paulsen, 1998), and discussed his enjoyment of reading about the wilderness. His personal choices in literature also related to his interest and experiences in camping and fishing with his family. He said that he read this book last year while in fifth grade. He shared more books related to the topics of survival, the wilderness, wildlife, and coming of age. He shared *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987) which he said he read three times, with the first time being in fourth grade. He shared *The River* (Paulsen, 1991) and said that he read the whole series along with *Brian's Winter* (Paulsen, 1996) all in fourth grade. He presented *Weasel* (DeFelice, 1990) and *Bringing Ezra Back* (DeFelice, 2006) which he read in fifth grade. It is important to note that he did not

have his own copies of any of these books, but instead had checked them out from the school library before our meeting together. He had very few books that he actually owned. During his presentation I asked him simple questions such as why he selected it and what he liked about it. It was not my purpose to quiz his comprehension, but instead to understand what he likes to read. Knowing this information contributed to the selection and creation of more personalized assessments and interventions for him.

Austin discussed that he was presently reading a sales catalog called *Dan's Comp: The Best in BMX and CCS Skateboards Catalog*. He likes to read about accessories that he could use for "tricking-out" his bike and skateboard. In conjunction with reading these catalogs, he talks about the items in them while he works on his bike and skateboard with his best friend. He also introduced a book titled *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005), that he received as a Christmas gift and that a friend is reading the book, too. Austin was proud to mention that the book has 498 pages in it, making it the longest book he has ever read. He said that he would like to read a novel titled *Island* (Korman, 2001) in the future. He was presently reading a classroom assigned novel titled *Stepping on the Cracks* (Hahn, 1991), but he did not bring it to share.

Encouraging and allowing Austin to discuss literature that he felt was important to him gave me a clearer and more complete picture of him as a reader and the role that literacy played in his life. Modeling my own Literature Autobiography Bag (Weih, 2006) first set the stage for Austin to have some ideas as to what to bring and what to say about it. This helped him to feel confident that I was going to accept him as reader. In the literature selections that I presented, I made sure to include different genres and different formats of literature so that he might think of the multiple literacies in *his* life beyond school-based literacies (Dunsmore, Ordonez-Jasis, & Herrera, 2013), which, in the past, have been a source of failure for him (classroom teacher's reflection).

Evaluating the Results of Austin's Background and Literacy Behaviors

Austin said that he wanted to read faster and remember more of what he read. These were his personal goals, so I wanted to make sure that I included work on them in the interventions that I developed for him. Thinking about his reading background that he shared with me, it appeared that he primarily read books that were part of his classroom work, and he owned very few books himself. These are two separate areas to consider. First of all, the books that he did present were done so with enthusiasm. I could tell by the tone of his voice and the look on his face, that he enjoyed the books and the topics-both of which were guided choices by his classroom teachers in connection with classroom curriculum. I suspected that he may not know how to find books he likes on his own, so this is something I needed to address as an intervention. The second area that emerged from his Literature Autobiography Bag (Weih, 2006), was that he owned very few books himself. This could be attributed to an economic issue. The best way to overcome this area is to consider how to help him find the books he wants to read at the school and local library. Fortunately, his school has a well-stocked library, and his family lives close to a large public library, but for those students who do not-this becomes an ever increasing issue. The move from print reading material to digital, adds to this issue by requiring the purchase of the technology in order to read online, therefore setting up a further divide between the students who have financial means and those who do not.

Judging from his family life, time spent together is valued. He plays games with his family and does outdoor activities such as fishing and camping, which also connects to the topics

he likes to read about. School is valued in his family life as evidenced by having a set time every afternoon after school for reading and doing homework. The time spent with his friends connects to his reading about bikes and skateboards, as well as other shared reading such as the *Twilight* book (Meyer, 2005), that he mentioned. From this information, I can consider that the books that I recommend for him need to be related to these interests and some need to be books that he could use in some way for his life activities—something beyond the scope of just reading for the sake of enjoyment, e.g., reading to learn how to modify his bike and skateboard. At this point in the evaluation process for Austin, I saw many strengths: his motivation to read, connecting what he reads to his life, his desire to improve in his reading, his relationships with his family and friends, and his close physical proximity to securing free reading material. Using the information that Austin provided helped me to make choices regarding which reading assessments to give to him, types of literature to recommend, and kinds of reading strategies to develop and teach to him.

Assessment and Evaluation of Austin’s Reading Abilities

Following the assessment and evaluation of Austin’s background and literacy behaviors, I assessed and evaluated his reading abilities using an informal reading inventory called the *Qualitative Reading Inventory-5* (Leslie & Caldwell, 2011). This inventory assesses reading fluency and comprehension with different types of reading material such as stories and the reading he would find in his textbooks. According to the results of this assessment, his reading fluency and comprehension were commensurate with his grade level and age. How he performed on this reading assessment did not align with what he claimed about himself in being a slow reader and not being able to remember much about what he read. Neither did these results align with what his classroom teacher reported to me. My evaluation and reflection about these discrepancies are that while working one-on-one with me on the reading ability assessments, Austin was trying his best and stayed completely focused. He paid close attention during all of our sessions; however, it was only the two of us with hardly any distractions. It is a much different situation in a classroom with peers and friends. His teacher has had him in her classroom for almost an entire year, during which time she has been able to observe his reading behavior over a long period of time in many different situations, therefore, she is able to lend a more holistic view of his reading abilities.

I decided, based on the above assumptions, the best way to help Austin would be to see for myself how he performed with reading material assigned in his classroom, so I asked him to bring to our sessions his assigned schoolwork, which consisted of social studies, science, math, spelling, and reading assignments from the novel being taught in his class, *Stepping on the Cracks* (Hahn, 1991). After working with him on these assignments, which is what he initially requested, I was in complete agreement with his teacher and could see the same areas of need that she reported. Therefore, based upon his classroom teacher’s evaluation and my assessment and evaluation, and along with his own expressed wishes, I developed and taught to him reading interventions that he could independently implement within the context of completing his school work. The work we did together is described in the following sections.

Intervention Development and Instruction with Austin

After assessing Austin's background information and reading abilities, two main goals surfaced. The first was helping him to become successful with his school assignments, and the second was to help him become established as a life-long reader. For the sake of developing interventions that would lead him to accomplishing these goals, I needed information from both his background and his reading abilities. Many times the background information about a student is ignored and not part of the intervention process and this becomes a serious mistake. Both areas, background and reading ability, work together to inform the creation of interventions that the student can really learn on his own and make use of in his life.

Increase Reading Comprehension

I developed and taught to him a study guide based on how to answer questions over his reading material whether they are from stories like his novel or from his other subject areas like science and social studies. Frequently classroom teachers at the middle level assign readings from subject areas along with answering a set of questions over that reading material. There becomes a problem if the student does not understand the relationship between the questions and the text, and this was the case with Austin. The intervention strategy that I selected and modified for him (see Appendix D) was based upon the Question-Answer-Relationship (QAR) strategy (Raphael, 1982). I taught this intervention strategy to Austin within the context of helping him with his schoolwork assignments (per our agreement), which helped him to internalize the strategy into his daily study and work habits.

Making Connections While Reading

If a reading topic, whether it be from an assessment or for a school assignment is highly interesting to the student, or if he already possesses background knowledge about the topic, the more likely he will succeed in comprehending the reading, however, what if the reading material does not fall into either of these areas? This was the case that I found with Austin. If he liked the topic and had some background knowledge about it, then he did well with comprehension, but if he did not, then he performed poorly. In order to help him understand and remember more of what he read, I developed an intervention (see Appendix E) that was based upon Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1978). In addition, following this guide, we were able to have meaningful discussions over his reading material.

Spelling

Austin asked for help with his spelling words. Frequently, teachers, parents, and students measure literacy success through spelling performance. Austin was concerned about his spelling and asked me to help him. I created a study guide for him to follow (see Appendix F). We worked with this guide within the context of his classroom-assigned spelling words until he was able to independently apply the strategy.

Life-Long Reader

Finally, after developing and teaching reading intervention strategies to Austin to assist him in becoming more successful in his subject areas at school, I wanted to lay the foundation that would help guide him in becoming a life-long reader, and at the same time, enhance his reading fluency. Using all of the assessment and evaluation information, including his teacher's reflection, I developed a list of 37 titles based on his reading level (some below, some at his level, and some above in order to continue to develop fluency and also to challenge him), interests, and culture. Austin did not know how to find books that he liked and that he could also read independently—two very important ingredients for developing reading fluency. He relied on his classroom teachers to assign books related to curriculum units, but when these units and books did not match his reading tastes, he almost stopped reading altogether, which is what was occurring in his present classroom. Austin could use the list that I developed for him as a springboard into finding books on his own at local libraries, and his family could also use this list to select books as gifts for him.

Preparing Intervention Materials

The intervention materials that were developed for Austin were intended for him to use on his own after guided practice with me in the context of his current schoolwork. With this in mind, the materials were created with only the most important key words needed, and were printed on durable cardstock and placed into clear sheet protectors to withstand repeated use. His classroom teacher reported to me that she saw him get these guides out during class and studying them for the sake of completing his schoolwork. This observation served as validation that he found the interventions immediately useful.

Discussion

Assessment results are most useful when they can be used to improve the life of a student. My first principal, a very wise man, once told me that students will work for you if they know that you care about them personally, not because of the lessons you prepare or what you do in the classroom (B. Mevey, personal communication, 1987). In reflecting upon this concept, it is crucial to put the relationship with the student first, and the assessments, second. Before I worked with Austin, I did not have a predetermined assessment and intervention plan or agenda, but instead, collaborated with him to select and create materials that were best suited to meet his needs. This put the focus on the student and not on a scripted program that I was trying to plug him into. “The notion of equity as sameness only makes sense when all students are exactly the same” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 33). Austin was unique, and he needed to know that I was there for him, not for me.

Creating a sense of confidence in Austin was a primary concern for me. To advance his awareness of himself as a successful literate person, it was imperative for me to acknowledge and accept his home literacy, and this was done through the interviews and following interventions built upon this background information. When I first started to gather knowledge about him, Austin did not view himself as a good reader. He thought he read too slow and did not comprehend what he read. However, contrastingly, through our work together he appeared

very motivated to read and enjoyed to read books, but only the ones he could connect to his own life and culture.

I did not re-test Austin's reading abilities following our three months together. He needed more time to internalize the new study habits through the reading interventions. He was a middle school student who was experiencing failure in reading which had impacted his success in his subject area assignments. The reading interventions that he learned were not a quick fix, but instead, guides that he could apply immediately on his own, and overtime, hopefully he would begin to see self-improvement. Our sessions together were meaningful and successful, and through mutual collaboration, we had developed interventions that were academically and culturally relevant for his life at the present, and for building life-long learning practices for his future.

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About the Author

Timothy G. Weih is a retired elementary teacher who currently teaches literacy and literature methods courses to students majoring in elementary education at the University of Northern Iowa, USA.

Appendix A

Literature Autobiography Bag

“We carry within us a collection of all the texts we’ve ever read—the sum total of our literary experience—which mediates our reading of all future texts” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 286). The purpose of this activity is to help build a bond between you and the student that you are working with, based upon shared literacy experiences. Assemble a small collection of literature that held special, personal meaning in your life. Recount your literate life by gathering literature from your primary, intermediate, middle school, and high school years along with what you are now reading. This literature should chronicle and play an important part of your literacy experiences throughout your life. This should not be an inventory of literature, but rather only those pieces that impacted your life somehow. Place the literature in a backpack, sports bag, or other bag of your choice, which could also be significant to you in some way. Write notes to yourself on index cards about each piece to demonstrate the importance of writing to the student you are working with.

Share this bag of literature with your student and invite him to put together a bag of literature that holds special meaning to him and to share this literature with you during your next session together. Ask the student to write an index card for each piece of literature explaining why he chose it and what meaning it holds. The following list will help you think of things to include: books, letters, personal cards, personal notes, news clippings, journals, diaries, photo journals, and magazines. These items could include self-made books.

Appendix B

Family Culture Interview

1. Who lives at home with you?
2. What are some things that you and your family do together?
3. What holidays are special to your family?
4. What are your family's favorite foods?
5. Does your family attend a place of worship? If so, do you know the name of it?
6. What languages do your parents and grandparents speak? Do you know what country your ancestors came from?
7. What are some of your favorite TV shows?
8. What are some of your favorite movies and videos?
9. What kinds of music do you like?
10. What are some of your favorite songs?
11. Who are your favorite actors?
12. Singers?
13. Do you like sports? If yes:
14. What is your favorite sport?
15. What is your favorite team?
16. Who is your favorite sports star?
17. What sports do you play?
18. Do you have any pets? What kinds?
19. Do you have any chores to do at home?
20. Who are your friends in school?
21. What do you like to do with your friends?
22. What clubs do you belong to?
23. What lessons do you take?
24. What do you want to do when you grow up and finish school?

Appendix C

Personal Literacy Interview

1. Do you like reading? Why or Why not?
2. What are some of your favorite things to read?
3. Where or how do you get things to read?
4. Do you read at home?
5. Did or does someone read aloud to you at home?
6. What is your favorite subject in school?
7. What are some subjects you don't like?
8. What are the names of some things you are reading in school?
9. What happens in your class during reading time?
10. Do you have reading groups, or does the whole class read together?
11. If you could change one thing about your reading class, what would it be?
12. What kind of homework do you get?
13. Why do you think people read?
14. Who is the best reader you know?
15. What makes this person such a good reader?
16. If you could change something about your reading what would it be?

Appendix D Answering Questions Covering Reading Material

Use this study guide anytime you are answering questions covering your reading material whether it is science, social studies, math, reading book, or a novel you are reading.

1. **Step One:** read the questions first (several times each), **BEFORE** you read the chapter or section.
2. **Step Two:** decide what type of question each one is and **LABEL IT** either on your answer sheet or in a notebook that you are using for writing (a journal).

Here are your labels for types of questions:

The first two types are answered from information SEEN right IN the reading material.

RT - stands for **right there**, meaning the answer can be seen right in the reading, you could point to the words that answer the question. The question may start with the words: who, what, where, when, or how.

TS – stands for **think and search**, meaning the answer can be seen right in the reading, you could point to the words that answer the question, but the words are located **in more than one place**, for example, they could be within several paragraphs. The question may begin with the words: list, compare, contrast, find two examples, or summarize.

The next two types of questions are answered from your thinking about what you are reading.

AM – stands for **author and me**, meaning the answer is a combination of what the **author has told you** and what you understand to be true. The question may start with the words: explain, develop, caused, or effect.

OMO – stands for **on my own**, meaning the answer is more about **what you are thinking** in connection to what you have read. The question may start with the words: predict, create, prove, think, thoughts, feelings, opinion, or apply.

3. **Step Three:** read the chapter or section with the questions in your mind. Answer the questions when you are done reading and **look back** to check your answers by finding some of the words from the questions repeated in the chapter or section.

Appendix E

Making Connections to Your Reading Material

Use this study guide anytime you are going to read something to help you remember it.

3. **Step One:** read the title, back cover, table of contents, or other information you can find about the reading material and ask yourself this question: What do I already know about this? (use prior knowledge)
4. **Step Two:** Decide how fast to read the material: informational reading from textbooks-read slowly; fiction stories-read fast. (adjust your reading speed)

There are three types of connections to discuss with yourself while reading (thoughts in your head):

While reading the material have a conversation with yourself in your head by making the following connections:

(The word TEXT stands for all reading material as well as what you are listening to while someone else is reading or speaking such as in a video or online)

1. **Self-to-Text:** Personal - Make a connection to your personal life: Say to yourself-This reminds me of something that I have experienced before (and think about what it is in your head).
2. **Text-to-Text:** Literary - Make a connection to something else you have read, heard, or seen before: Say to yourself- This reminds me of... (and think about what it is in your head).
3. **Text-to-World:** World – Make a connection to something in your community or somewhere you have visited: Say to yourself-This reminds me of... (and think about what that is in your head).

If possible, talk about what you are reading or what you listened to, with someone else, such as: a friend, teacher, parents, or grandparents. This will help you remember what you have read for longer periods of time.

Appendix F

Spelling Practice Study Guide

First, someone should read the words aloud to you, and you repeat each one after it is said, then, follow the steps below:

1. Say the word aloud (this can be in a whisper voice) **four times** while looking at it
2. Close your eyes, try to see the word in your mind, say it, then spell the word out loud, and then say it again
3. Open your eyes and look at the written word to see if you spelled it correctly
4. Look at the word, say it, cover it, then write it, and then say it again
5. Check to see if you got it right, if you did, go to the next word, if not, repeat the above steps until you have it correct
6. Do all these steps for each word and move to the next word as you get each one correct