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Insights From a Literacy Tutor: A Case Study of Critical Reading and Writing Instruction With a Struggling Reader



Abstract

This article shares the insights of a tutor as she works with a fourth-grade African American girl. For this case study, the authors use interactive read-alouds and writing samples to document the reading and writing events of this yearlong tutorial experience. They report on the power of critical literacy to engage a developing reader and improve her comprehension. These findings suggest that taking a critical literacy lens encourages struggling readers to use their strongest assets—the power of listening and speaking. This research also provides insights for teachers in helping students of all ages experience success as they attempt to improve their reading skills.

Keywords: upper elementary, tutoring, reading and writing instruction, listening and speaking, critical literacy

Students who struggle to learn to read and write in the early grades find themselves experiencing little success in school for years to come (Duke & Block, 2012; Graves, Juel, Graves, & Dewitz, 2014). This is particularly alarming for students who reach fourth grade and still cannot read. Opportunities to listen to read-alouds by the teacher and to speak about what they are reading tend to decrease so that teachers can cover more content. Developing readers are often unable to get the gist of the story or ask frequent clarifying questions as they listen. They can no longer just speak about what they know. For the most part, they are expected to silently read and then respond through writing. While teachers do attempt to come to the aid of developing readers later in the elementary grades, it is difficult to provide extended literacy interventions to keep struggling readers on pace with their peers.

In Texas, third grade students take the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exam to show initial reading mastery. For some students, this is a time to shine; for other students, this experience can be devastating. In some cases, this is the first time that parents experience failure too.

The reality is that parental involvement has a fundamental role in student achievement on standardized tests (Bus, van Ijzendoor, & Pelligrini, 1995), so teachers need to begin to build partnerships

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with parents from the first day of school—especially when teachers notice a student struggling to read and write. In classrooms where teachers have created a supportive partnership with parents, it becomes easier to discuss negative results. Unfortunately, this is the first time some parents learn that their children are not reading on grade level. In response to this news, some parents seek outside tutors or professionals who have working knowledge of reading and ask them to mediate the needs of their kids.

In this article, we discuss the case of Shelby (a pseudonym), a fourth grader, who did not pass the third grade STAAR test and was two years behind in reading comprehension in comparison to her counterparts. Shelby's mom was one of those parents who searched for help beyond the school setting. Shelby's mom knew the first author is a reading professor, so she took the initiative to contact her. After several conversations, the professor volunteered and became Shelby's tutor for the summer. This intervention evolved into an ongoing project from the summer of 2013 to the present.

What the Research Says About Critical Literacy

Critical literacy (Freire, 1970; Luke, 1997) is an instructional approach that provides teachers and their students an opportunity to engage in conversations and analysis about what they are reading beyond the printed word. Engaging in this approach incites readers to make connections between the text they are reading and real-world issues they are seeing themselves. Since this approach emphasizes conversations, not decoding skills, it allows students who are struggling to read academic avenues that focus on skills they can do.

What the Research Says About Reading Instruction and Assessment

Many years ago, the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) identified five essential elements of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. They found that students benefited most when these elements were delivered in a balanced literacy approach—a comprehensive literacy approach that provides explicit instruction, guided practice, collaborative learning, and independent reading and writing (Tompkins, 2014).

Literacy researchers (Allington, 2002; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000; Turner, 1995) recognized, too, that in order for students to become successful readers and writers, it was necessary to go beyond the five elements of reading—all students need a strong reading and literacy background to be successful in life. The Reading Next report (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004) offers 15 recommendations for providing instruction of the essential elements. While most of them are pertinent to a teacher in a classroom, seven of them pertain to the tutoring sessions reviewed in this case study (i.e., direct, explicit comprehension instruction, effective instructional principles embedded in content, strategic tutoring, diverse texts, intensive writing, a technology component, and ongoing formative assessment of students).

The teacher reported that Shelby had trouble learning new concepts but was always able to express her thoughts and feelings through speech. Over time we realized that implementing a critical literacy stance could allow Shelby to take advantage of her conversational stance. Ultimately, this realization guided us to choose books that prompted Shelby to make connections and ask questions.

In response to the research discussed above and because of our professional experiences using this material with undergraduate students, we decided to use the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI; Leslie & Caldwell, 2011). This informal reading inventory provides a comprehensive test that evaluates phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and fluency.

To focus the conversation, the following questions will guide this article:

1. What can we learn from the insights of a tutor to help teachers as they work with developing readers?
2. What are the effects of using a critical literacy lens through listening and speaking with a struggling reader?

Methodology

Case studies (Creswell, 2008; Yin, 1994) are appropriate for the purposes of studying after school tutoring sessions because they require “an intensive, holistic approach of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 1988, p. 16). This descriptive non-experimental design (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1988) provides teachers, tutors, and researchers a way to further understand the complex issue of assessment in order to extend and strengthen what is already known.

Setting

The sessions took place in the tutor's home in a suburban middle-class community in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. This home was chosen because of its proximity to Shelby. The dining room where the tutoring sessions took place had direct access to computers, printers, and school supplies. This setting was also selected because it provided a non-academic, home environment. In addition to working in the dining room, the tutor took Shelby

Table 1
School Characteristics
 Source: Texas Education Agency, 2013-2014

Group	Harmon School (Percentage)
White	76
Hispanic	10
Black	4
Asian/Pacific Islander	6
Two or More Races	4
Limited English Proficient	1

Table 2
Third Grade STAAR Results
 Source: Texas Education Agency, 2013-2014

Group	Harmon School Passing Rate (Percentage)
White	96
Hispanic	100
Black	60
Asian/Pacific Islander	NA
Limited English Proficient	NA
All Students	95

to the nearby public library. Shelby looked forward to visits to the library because she could check out books and take them home. The library also provided another setting that was more casual than school and afforded many opportunities for building literacy skills. For context, we include the school characteristics in Table 1 and the STAAR third grade results in Table 2. For confidentiality, the school is referred to with a pseudonym.

These tables illustrate that Harmon Elementary School is predominantly white and experiences high passing success rates with the STAAR test. It also illustrates that there is a small percentage of Black students and they are the subgroup struggling to obtain passing rates.

Participant

Shelby is a nine-year-old African American girl. She is the youngest in a family of four. At home she helps around the house and aids mom when she is with her at work. At school the teacher reported that Shelby is confident, sweet, and kind and is willing to lend a helping hand. She is a leader and is always able to express her feeling and thoughts through conversations. She sometimes struggles with organization and staying on task. She has had difficulty learning new concepts, especially during math time. During tutoring sessions, Shelby was very talkative and participatory. She loved to act out vocabulary word meanings and the stories we read together as a form of retelling.

Data Collection

The types of data collected during this study were observational notes, one student journal, informal reading inventories assessments, one researcher reflexive journal, 25 lesson plans, eight writing passages completed during sessions, and ongoing conversations with parent and student. The first author observed and assessed and provided intervention from June 2013 through May 2014, and the second author provided assistance with instructional ideas and data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred throughout the study. Assessment results include a vocabulary study, writing responses, Quick Writes, and reading comprehension strategies. We analyzed the following: (1) reading strategies that provided support for comprehending skills, (2) the reading opportunities that improved fluency, (3) the writing passages that aligned with the fourth grade Texas Essential Skills and Knowledge (TEKS) guidelines, and (4) the literacy activities that improved confidence with literacy, according to Shelby and Shelby’s mom. We read lesson plans, researcher notes, student observational notes, student assessments, and student work multiple times to gain an understanding of the data set. We focused on the specific variables that can influence, enhance, or inform the improvement in Shelby’s literacy skills.

Findings: Critical Participants at Work

We never imagined this experience would still be ongoing. We figured this intervention would last for one summer. We planned to assess Shelby, deliver reading interventions, and then provide Shelby with some tools that she could take with her to fourth grade. What we found, though, was that Shelby was struggling across all language and literacy domains. She was an emerging reader and writer who struggled with basic phonics concepts, fluency, and comprehension. She was appreciative and knew she needed help, but she did not have the reading stamina or basic literacy skills to independently read on her own. She said she had few positive writing experiences and had never really composed anything in school. The teacher reported that Shelby had trouble learning new concepts but was always able to express her thoughts and feelings through speech. Over time we realized that implementing a critical literacy stance could allow Shelby to take advantage of her conversational stance. Ultimately, this realization guided us to choose books that prompted Shelby to make connections and ask questions.

A Typical Tutoring Session

We soon learned that Shelby wanted to start the tutoring sessions by sharing what was going on in her life. After a few sessions, the tutor allowed that to happen and then transitioned to an interactive read-aloud. The purpose of the read-aloud was to provide

positive reading opportunities for Shelby where she experienced success. The tutor selected books that mirrored Shelby's cultural experiences and later in the study (after March 2014) provided room for critical literacy conversations. These books helped Shelby experience academic success, maintain cultural integrity, and gain a critical consciousness, which Ladson-Billings (1995) refers to as culturally relevant pedagogy. The read-alouds were followed by discussions about grade-appropriate skills like making inferences and visualizing. The skills minilessons targeted Shelby's spelling needs, as determined by the primary qualitative reading inventory (Bear, 2000). Periodically the minilesson was followed by an informal reading inventory to gauge Shelby's progress. The sessions typically ended with a writing activity. At the beginning of tutoring, these activities targeted writing practice, but their purpose evolved into oral activities that helped Shelby evoke a sense of exploration and make connections between what she was reading and what was going on around her. Critical literacy was particularly appropriate for Shelby because it encouraged her to use her most effective skills—conversation and talk—to make these personal connections. For example, during the interactive read-aloud of *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2004), Shelby was able to talk about similarities and differences between Lonnie (the central character) and herself. She was also able to develop empathy and understanding for Lonnie's predicament. After several sessions, we found that she was happy and most productive when she was sharing and making critical connections between what she was reading in books like *Locomotion* and what she was seeing and noticing in her personal life.

Shelby's Reading Events

We knew little about Shelby's reading ability when we started the sessions. Her mother shared a response to intervention assessment report given to them by the teacher at the end of third grade. It noted that Shelby was two years behind. Reading it over, we saw that the DRA2 reading level was reported to be 24. This indicated that Shelby was reading like a midyear second grader. Moreover, the teacher wrote that Shelby often failed to turn in homework or follow through on assignments. Also, there had been little communication between parents and teachers, which contributed to work not being returned from home.

A QRI (Qualitative Reading Inventory) confirmed that Shelby was two years behind. She struggled with reading fluency and did not remember much during retelling. This was worrisome considering she was headed to fourth grade. We periodically assessed Shelby's reading ability throughout the fourth grade year and found that she was improving but was still far below her counterparts. By the end of the year, she was reading like a third grader, but this was still two years behind since she was moving to fifth grade.

We planned multi-session activities that depended on home reading and focused on building vocabulary. During the tutoring sessions, Shelby was an active participant and contributed to the readings and conversations where possible; yet, we, too, experienced a lack of follow-through when it came to reading practice at home.

Most recently, Shelby and the first author began reading *The Mighty Miss Malone* (Curtis, 2012). This book provided the impetus for many critical conversations about poverty, race, and the unfair treatment African Americans had to endure. In this story, which takes place during the Depression, the main character's family cannot afford to throw away any food, even if there are bugs in the container. In one conversation after reading chapter seven, the tutor asked, "What would you do if you had to eat a buggy oatmeal?" Shelby said she would not like to eat oatmeal that had bugs in it; however, she felt like she would not let her family know that she was not eating it. After reading the text, Shelby could sense the importance of not throwing away the oatmeal; however, she said she still would not be able to eat the bugs. Shelby explained, "I would take the oatmeal and put it in my backpack. I could throw it away at school." The tutor continued, "And why would you do that?" Shelby replied, "So my mom would not know."

Shelby's Writing Events

When we started working with Shelby, she wrote like a first grader. Initially, writing took the form of a response journal—the tutor wrote "letters" that Shelby responded to at home (see Figures 1 through 5). We were hopeful that this strategy would allow her to make personal connections and help her take on a critical questioning stance about what she was noticing. Instead, after several sessions, we wondered (and asked) if her mom was helping Shelby write the responses. The reality was that Mom was more than helping—she was crafting, writing, and composing the critical responses for Shelby and therefore not allowing Shelby to explore her personal stance. While initially the focus was improving Shelby's reading comprehension, it became apparent that Shelby was also a developing writer and because writing is the main subject tested in Texas during the fourth grade, this became a pressing concern for us. Research (Spivey, 1990; Tierney & Pearson, 1983) has shown the connectedness between reading and writing. It is clear today that students who read extensively tend to be good writers and vice versa. To help Shelby become a proficient writer



Figure 1. Shelby sitting in the backyard drafting an essay during one of the tutoring sessions.

June 14, 2013

Dear Shelby,

I am so excited to work with you this summer! I love reading, and I hope that you will learn to enjoy it as much as I do. I would love to get to know you better too. Write me back and answer these questions:

1. What is your favorite color?
2. What do you like to do most at school?
3. Who are your best friends?
4. What do you enjoy after school?
5. Tell me about your family.

Please write a letter back to me answering these questions. Then, ask me a question and I will answer it in the next letter.

Dr. M

Figure 2. This is the first tutor entry in the reciprocal journal.

June 15, 2013

Dear, Dr. M

I am so gald that you do this summer because i needed a little help. Thank you for all your help. Do you know you are awesomebecause You Would not do this on your summer break?

1. What is your lastname?
2. How old is your job?
3. When were you born?
4. Do you like your job?
5. Is Dr. M your real name?

Can we plesed do this with me during the year and at the library?

Love, Shelby Sincerely.

Figure 3. This is Shelby's first reply in the reciprocal journal. Parents aided in the crafting of this response.

June 17, 2013

Dear Shelby,

I am happy to work with you this summer. You are a sweet girl. You ask great questions! My last name is M and I am a professor at a college. My birthday is November 9. I have more questions for you:

1. What sports do you like?
2. What do you want to learn about?
3. Where would you like to visit?

Dr. M (and yes, M is my real name)

Figure 4. This is the tutor's reply to Shelby's questions on June 16, 2013.

July 19, 2013

Dear Dr. M,

You are very sweet to. My new favorite sport is volley ball. I am beginning to like it a lot. I am enjoying my reading tutoring sessions but I like math. There are two places I would like to visit Europe and New Zealand.

Love Shelby

Figure 5. This is Shelby's second reply in the reciprocal journal. Parents aided in the crafting of this essay.

Me and my tutor

I got to have fun and work with Dr. M. The subject we work with is in reading. The Scool subject we work in is Chapter book reading so that means I like chapter book more.

Figure 6. The first page of a self-created book about Shelby's summer experience. Parents did not help in the creation of this book.

Chris sleeping

Chris is funny and cool. He likes going outside with no shoes on. He likes sleeping. He likes dogs. He's a smart teenager.

Figure 7. The second page of a self-created book. Parents did not help.

Cam and his favorite thing

Cam likes water balloons and basketball. His favorite sport is baseball. He likes playing mine craft. He loves his beats and Phone 6.

Figure 8. The third page of a self-created book about Shelby's summer experience. Parents did not help.

Tutoring House

This is where Dr. M Lives. I see ms 1 hour and 2 Day a week. It is in Middleton Village. My mom brings me.

Figure 9. The fourth page of a self-created book about Shelby's summer experience. Parents did not help.

and meet the fourth grade STAAR writing assessment standards, we decided to provide untimed writing opportunities for Shelby during the tutoring sessions instead of only assigning take-home practice. Although Shelby was able to write as long as she wanted to, she typically spent 15 to 20 minutes. The first tutor-mediated writing took place when Shelby responded to four picture cues (see Figures 6 through 9). It was the first time we noticed how far below Shelby really was compared to the typical fourth grader. While we did not officially score the book, we noticed that the organizational structure was basic, there was little progression and developments of ideas, the sentences were simplistic and awkward, and Shelby

had limited command of sentence structures and proper spelling. In STAAR terms, this book would score a 1 out of 4.

Shelby's Writing Strengths and Needs

Shelby's writing possessed strengths. She showed mastery using words, directionality, sentences, spacing, and pictures to convey meaning. She was able to write about what she knew and was able to, at least on the surface, consider the audience she was writing to. Figures 6 through 9 display an initial attempt to write a four-page picture book about her summer tutoring experience.

When we started the tutoring sessions, Shelby's writing was at the developing stage (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). The writing focused on stories, which contained a limited number of sentences; she was just beginning to develop ideas and was loosely connecting details about the topics she was writing about. Although Shelby was writing sentences, she did not address the mechanics of writing—she simply had a hard time knowing when to use capital letters, periods, or punctuation beyond the basics, as is evident in Figure 6.

February 12, 2014

Lonnie's parents died in a houses fire and his sister far far away

February 19, 2014

Someone new is class. Mrs. Edna is nice. He is missing mommy daddy lilly [heart symbol] sad.

February 26, 2014

Lonnie seeing his Lilly. He likes someone that goes to his school, and, Mrs. Marcus made the class to write abot things he always does not like writeing or thinking about

Figure 10. Shelby's writings about *Locomotion*.

4/15/2014

Baton twirling

I believe baton twirling would be an awesome sport for my tutor, Dr. M, to try. In baton, you need to know how to catch and throw a baton. Chris says "Mom needs help catching and throwing!" This is a fun way to learn a new sport.

Figure 11. The fourth draft of a self-selected topic about twirling.

Figure 10 demonstrates that Shelby was empathetic to Lonnie when he missed his sister, particularly since they were separated when their parents died. She could not help but to consider her own brother and how he protects her when she needs assistance. Shelby critically constructed her own response in writing after she and the first author discussed these topics and the challenges that Lonnie faced as an African American foster child.

By the final piece called "Baton twirling" (see Figure 11), Shelby had moved from a developing to a beginner writer with help of

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one-on-one mediation. She was able to write in general terms about twirling, uses simple sentences, and effectively use some conventions. Moving forward, Shelby needs to continue to think about the audience she is writing to, build on supporting details, consider words and choice, and explore a variety of sentence lengths to improve sentence fluency.

Figure 11 demonstrates that Shelby did make some writing strides from her first initial attempts in the summer. Nonetheless, the writing still lacks organization, ideas, use of language, and extended use of conventions. If we were to use the fourth grade STAAR rubric to grade "Baton twirling," this essay would score a 1 out of 4, which represents a limited writing performance.

Discussion

After working with Shelby for the past year and a half, we learned several practices that have helped us in the role of teachers and professors. Shelby wanted to engage in critical literacy conversations about what she was reading and in general, appeared to enjoy learning more within this instructional approach. Teachers should try to engage in these conversations as early as possible when they notice students struggling to read and write. We learned that the best way to incorporate research-based effective practices to help Shelby was to construct literacy instruction so it does not look like school. The use of the naturalistic settings helped Shelby feel much more comfortable and confident about her abilities. In the first session, Shelby confessed to her tutor that she would lay down her head when the teacher was talking and not pay attention to instruction. We determined that she initially needed to be recognized for her strengths. She also has an excellent memory and could recall stories and texts that we read together. Once she realized that we were honest about her abilities, and that we cared about her reading success, we began to gain her trust.

We learned that Shelby was a strong listener and speaker. And in general, she managed to use these two language domains to get through school. We needed to find ways to incorporate them in the activities. It was here that taking on a critical literacy lens made the lessons come alive for Shelby, as we saw with the

interactions during *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2004) and *The Mighty Miss Malone* (Curtis, 2012).

We also learned that although all parties have the best intentions in mind, it is difficult in reality to see noticeable literacy improvement when sessions happen intermittently and when a lack of communication exists between parents and teacher, tutor and student, and tutor and teacher.

Trust is a great factor, particularly with parents. Shelby's parents truly wanted to help but were unsure of how to do anything other than using traditional means of finding tutoring assistance. Beard and Brown (2008) explain that trust is an essential component in a relationship among school faculty, students, and parents. When people are working across cultural and/or racial borders, trust is especially critical. In order for trust to exist, all parties need to show an understanding and respect to the perspective of those different than themselves. "This is especially true for those students who have been identified and illuminated in the achievement gap" (Beard & Brown, 2008, p. 472). Researchers have recognized that trust is more challenging in situations of diversity because people are uncertain about the cultural norms of others (Kipnis, 1996). Many of the circumstances noted above are evident in the relationship with Shelby, her parents, and the school faculty.

Takeaways for Classroom Teachers

The following five ideas reflect what we have learned from our work with Shelby:

1. **Search for Culturally Relevant Material:** When teachers find and use books that are similar to the students they teach, they will gain trust and support from students and parents. Shelby was excited and eager to talk about characters who were similar to her culture. She was proud of her ability to answer questions and make any connections to the text.
2. **Allow for Personal Debriefing Time:** Some students perform better in classroom situations when they are able to share personal updates, family experiences, and interactions with friends. They are also able to refine their oral language abilities.
3. **Stay Current with Technology:** Because 21st-century students have access to multiple technologies and platforms, they appreciate teachers who are able to stay current with what they know and use at home. Encourage students to share the technology they use, and make an attempt to incorporate it into your routines.
4. **Encourage Interactive Retelling:** In addition to having students write a retelling of a story, encourage students to find unique ways to "show what they know!" Students may decide to act it out, create a small book, and write a song—the ideas are endless.

5. **Use Less Silent Reading, More Conversation:** Once students move into the upper elementary, they are expected to read silently more often. These shifts create fewer opportunities to engage in critical conversations about what they are reading. Conversations allow teachers to peek into what students understand.

In conclusion, we believe literacy educators should take opportunities and use critical literacy to explore the power of oral language across all grades and for multiple purposes. When we engaged Shelby in interactive read-alouds and conversations, she was able to clearly and succinctly discuss the story elements her own way and in her own style. This empowerment has the potential to instill the confidence and drive necessary to improve her skills.

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