Selective Mutism and Play Therapy: Helping Children to Talk

By

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout my college career, I gained techniques and strategies on how to get students to settle down. My biggest fear was not knowing how to manage my classroom and having it look like one big, chaotic mess. Boy was I wrong! My biggest challenge has been exactly the opposite: trying to get a selectively mute child to talk.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

How can I help Michael (all names hereafter are pseudonyms), a first grade ESL student, overcome selective mutism? Related questions that I will attempt to answer are: 1) Is this selective mutism due to being limited English proficient or some other causes such as shyness or school anxiety? 2) What techniques and strategies will help this selectively mute child feel comfortable speaking in the school setting?

SITUATING THE PROBLEM

Selective mutism is a term that refers to speech that occurs only in the presence of selected or restricted people or environments. Selective mutism is a rare disorder that occurs in less than 1% of all mental health referrals (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). This disorder usually occurs when a child initially enters school and is between five to seven-years-old. In addition,

selective mutism occurs more often in females than in males. Researchers say that children with selective mutism have been described as shy, anxious, controlling, socially withdrawn, having unpleasant temperaments, and being poor school performers (Atlas, 1993). Lesser-Katz (1986) describes selectively mute children as having a strong attachment to their mother, being extremely insecure in the presence of strangers, easily frightened, overly sensitive, and passive yet often negativistic. These children also suffer from enuresis, nighttime bedwetting (Barlow & Strother, 1986).

For the past two years, I have had a selectively mute Hmong boy in my ESL class. He is selectively mute in both Hmong and English and fits the above description of selectively mute children. Michael comes from a family of six children. His dad speaks limited English, and his mother speaks very little English. Michael has an older ninth grade half-sister who speaks fluent English and has not had any reported problems with speaking. Michael's older brother Dan is eight-years-old and is in a cognitively disabled classroom in another school in the district. Michael also has a kindergarten age younger brother, Kyle, who is also selectively mute. The youngest child is Katie who is three. The mother says that Katie speaks at home, but since she has not had any schooling yet, I do not know if she will be selectively mute like her two older brothers. However, from the home visits that I have made and from the times I have seen her at school with her mother (for conferences or picking up her brothers), I have yet to hear Katie utter a sound.

When I first met Michael as a kindergartener, he was identified as Limited English Speaking (LES), and now, as a first grader, he is still LES. Michael is a very shy little boy who hardly shows emotions and sits with his hands in his lap most of the time. Because he does not ask to use the bathroom, Michael has a reoccurring problem of wetting his pants at school.

Since I only worked with Michael for thirty minutes a day, I spoke with Michael's classroom teacher to find out if Michael was mute in his kindergarten class, and she said that he was. After several weeks, I contacted Michael's mother about his mute behavior, and she assured me that he did know how to speak in both languages and spoke at home, but was probably too shy to speak at school. Feeling reassured, I decided to give Michael time to adjust to school without pressuring him to talk.

During Michael's kindergarten year, once my assistant and I knew that Michael was able to talk, but was deciding not to, we found ways to test Michael's comprehension nonverbally. We did this by having him point or write a response. We did not intervene with an action plan to motivate Michael to speak because we thought that the reason Michael was being selectively mute was due to his shyness and the anxiety of being in a new school environment surrounded by new teachers and many new classmates. We thought time would be the cure for his selective mutism. In addition, since he was able to perform nonverbally, we figured he understood what was being said in English.

After Christmas, he started speaking voluntarily and responding to us in very low whispers. We were thrilled and verbally praised him. Because he eventually

spoke to us on his own free will, we were convinced that Michael's mutism was due to shyness and school anxiety.

At the end of the kindergarten year, Michael's English proficiency level had stayed the same at LES. His end of the year kindergarten tests revealed that he could write his first name, count orally to six, recognize and sort objects to five, knew his basic shapes and colors and a few letters, but had no comprehension of letter sounds. Michael continued to speak in whispers when he wanted to.

When Michael came back to school as a first grader, he was selectively mute again. This year I worked with Michael one hour daily, thirty minutes for EIR (Early Intervention in Reading) and thirty minutes for ESL services. The reason we work with the first graders for EIR in addition to ESL is to help accelerate low literacy ESL children to become good readers.

Michael's first grade teacher and I noticed that he spoke with friends outside the school building, but would clam up as soon as an adult walked past. However, inside school, Michael neither spoke to adults nor his friends. Since I worked with Michael for EIR, I was becoming extremely frustrated because Michael refused to verbalize letters, letter sounds and words. I felt that I could not teach this child how to read if he refused to make a sound. Each day I became more and more frustrated and seriously considered dropping him from my EIR group because he was not learning. Out of frustration, I punished him by rewarding the other children for doing what I had requested. The punishing has gone as far as keeping Michael in for recess until he finished his work which required that he speak or at least repeat after me. Michael stayed inside dutifully

for two weeks, sitting at the table with his head lowered and his hands in his lap, but still would not utter a sound. It was a no win situation for me because he absolutely refused to speak and since we were getting no where, I gave in and let him go outside for recess.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term selective mutism used to be called elective mutism. The origin of this term came from the German term *freiwilligen schweigens* meaning "voluntary mutism" which was coined by Tramer in 1934 to keep with the Latin *aphasia voluntaria* used in 1877 by Kussmaul who was probably the first person to study the condition (as cited in Lesser-Katz, 1986).

Researchers have come up with various names to identify and label specific subgroups of children with selective mutism. Hayden (1980) developed a classification system for the subgroups describing four types of selective mutism. The first type is symbiotic mutism which is the most common. Children with this type of mutism display a strong symbiotic relationship with their mother. Symbiotic mutes are not withdrawn although they appear to be inhibited and sensitive. In actuality, symbiotic mutes can be very controlling of adults and negativistic. Symbiotic mutes usually have a mother who is very dominant and verbal and is constantly meeting their needs, and a father who is usually nonaggressive, passive, or absent.

A second subgroup of selective mutism is the passive-aggressive mute. Children of this type of selective mutism are often expressionless and use silence as a weapon. Refusing to speak is an act of hostility. These children have often been raised in a pathogenic environment where they have been the family's scapegoat. Therefore, their mutism is their way of controlling their environment. Misch's study supports this categorization by Hayden. He says that selectively mute children use their silence to punish their mother. By being selectively mute, the children are creating an atmosphere of anxiety in the family which puts the mute child in a position of power because the family will do whatever the child wants to get his or her cooperation (as cited in Lesser-Katz, 1985).

The third subgroup of mutism is speech phobic mutes. These children are afraid of hearing their own voices. According to Hayden, this group of mutes is the most motivated to acquire speech and to respond better to behavior modification techniques. This is the least common of the four subgroups.

The last type is reactive or traumatic mutism which is a reaction to traumatic events that the child has experienced. Examples of traumatic events are rape, mouth or throat injuries or being told to "shut up and never open your mouth again" (Hayden, 1980, p. 125). Children in this subgroup show symptoms of depression and appear to be genuinely withdrawn. In addition, they lack facial expressions and are socially incompetent.

Quite a number of treatment programs have been tried to help the selectively mute child speak, but many have failed. The one treatment program that has made progress with selective mutism is behavioral interventions which is an

approach to bringing about or changing a behavior that is undesired by using operant conditioning principles. Other treatments such as psychoanalysis, traditional psychotherapy, and hypnosis have proved to be disappointing (Richburg & Cobia, 1994).

Richburg and Cobia (1994) found that stimulus fading, and contingency management, which is an operant conditioning therapy that seeks to increase desirable behaviors by reinforcement and to decrease undesirable ones by punishment or withdrawal of rewards (Wortman & Loftus, 1988), was successful in working with selectively mute children. Richburg and Cobia's subject was five-year-old Mary who was referred for counseling because she refused to speak to her teacher and classmates. Because Mary's resource teacher had already been able to elicit speech from her in a small group setting in the resource room, the resource teacher used stimulus fading to introduce people that Mary would speak to into an environment where she would not speak (the classroom) with the hope that she would generalize speech to her classroom. In addition, the counselor used a combination of contingency management with positive reinforcement and stimulus fading to get Mary to talk by rewarding Mary with various forms of reinforcers such as stickers, verbal praise, and games. Stimulus fading was done by allowing Mary to choose one classmate to join her for her sessions with the counselor in the counselor's office where Mary spoke. More classmates were gradually added until the counselor felt that Mary was comfortable speaking in front of her peers in the counselor's office. Then the sessions were moved into

the classroom. By the end of this study, Mary was speaking in school as well as other social settings.

A second study done by Powell and Dalley (1995) also found that behavioral interventions were successful. In their study, Powell and Dalley (1995) were successful in using behavioral techniques such as shaping (a method in which the subject is systematically reinforced for displaying closer and closer approximations of the desired response (Wortman & Loftus, 1988)), desensitization (gradually presenting a feared stimulus to the subject to extinguish that fear), positive reinforcement (the strengthening of a conditioned response because the response is followed by a positive or pleasant stimulus (Wortman & Loftus, 1988)), and modeling (the process by which someone learns a new behavior by observing other people perform that behavior) in conjunction with play therapy and family involvement to help a six-year-old girl who had previously not spoken to anybody except her family members to exhibit "…speaking behaviors consistent with her peers" (p.122). The subject had been selectively mute since she entered a daycare program eight months before she started public school. Powell and Dalley used shaping, desensitization, and positive reinforcement by having the child's mother come into her classroom after school to talk with her. People were gradually being added into the classroom while the subject and her mother were talking. If the subject continued to talk when others entered the room, she received verbal praise. The school psychologist also used play therapy with the subject. At the end of kindergarten, the subject was speaking like an average kindergartner.

A third study by Masten, Stacks, Caldwell-Colbert, and Jackson (1996) found that using shaping and reinforcement of speech was successful in helping an eight-year-old Mexican-American boy to gradually go from speaking one-word responses to complete sentences. The treatment consisted of therapy sessions with the psychologist alone, with the classroom teacher and the psychologist, with this best friend and the psychologist, in a small assertiveness skills group, in a small group instruction of reading, and in the classroom. A reinforcement system was decided upon by the psychologist after consultation with the subject's mother: two cars for first choice and M&M's for second choice. If the subject spoke in response to a question, he earned one M&M. After he met the criteria of 10 responses, he was allowed to choose from a variety of toy cars. The criteria gradually changed as the subject made more progress. The subject's speech in school "…went from zero to answering questions and then to asking complete questions during the therapy sessions" (Masten, Stacks, Caldwell-Colbert & Jackson, 1996, p. 58). Although this intervention was successful with the subject in therapy sessions, speech did not generalize into the classroom.

A fourth study by Porjes (1992) used the learning theory perspective which says that selective mutism is a learned behavior that has been reinforced over time. Porjes came up with four stages of an intervention plan which are as follows: (a) an ecological analysis, (b) compilation of the reinforcement menus, (c) elicitation of initial speech, and (d) generalization of speech to new situations and new people. In the ecological analysis stage, cues found in the environment that help to maintain the child's mutism are examined. In the compilation of the

reinforcement menus stage, the researcher gathers reinforcers that are of value to the subject. These reinforcers can be intangible such as recess, playing with friends, riding a bike or tangible such as stickers, balloons, and candy. Reinforcers are used to get the subject to produce speech because "…gaining what was valued was contingent upon the production of speech or approximations thereof…not engaging in the verbal behavior, the child presumably lost access to what was valued" (Porjes, 1992, p. 372). The elicitation of initial speech stage is where a behavioral intervention plan is set up to try to elicit speech from the subject. In this study, Porjes used a combination of a contingency management system and shaping procedures to elicit speech. The contingency management system was used to let the subjects know that "when you do the behavior requested of you, you gain what you desire [but] when you do not do the behavior requested of you, you do not gain what you desire" (Porjes, 1992, p. 373) The last stage, generalization of speech to new situations and new people, is the most difficult stage for selectively mute children. Once the subject is producing speech consistently in one situation or with one individual, he/she is introduced to new settings/people to replicate his/her speech. If the subject performs the desired behavior, he/she will continue to earn his/her reinforcer(s). By following his four stage intervention plan, Porjes helped two six-year-old subjects in the first grade speak at school.

INTERVENTION PLAN

An action team comprising of the school psychologist, first grade teacher,

social worker, principal, Michael's mother, my ESL assistant and myself met to consider Michael's mutism. Our school psychologist suggested that we try what she called an "odd group" play therapy which would include Michael and a friend of his choice, Michael's fourth grade buddy Scott (to whom he does speak) and a friend of Scott's, Michael's kindergarten brother Kyle and a friend of Kyle's. This odd group met in her office every Friday for half an hour to play fun games. By participating in this group, each boy could earn an incentive reward from the school psychologist for participating in the group and later on, for meeting his goal. The school psychologist wanted to first create a safe and fun atmosphere for Michael where he was surrounded by his friends and had no pressures to talk. Once he felt safe, she would then begin to have him reach certain verbal goals in order to receive his incentive reward.

Following the recommendation of the school psychologist, Michael's classroom teacher and I put him on a behavioral modification system where he earned an incentive reward at first by just pointing or nodding his head. After that, he had to utter one simple word once a week (such as "no" or "yes") to earn his reward and gradually the number of words he needed to utter and times he uttered those words in a week increased so he would have to work harder to earn his reward. Each of my first graders had a calendar in my room so I put one smiley face sticker for every occurrence of the desired behavior on his calendar on the dates that the behavior occurred. By using his calendar in this manner, Michael was able to see and monitor his own progress.

FINDINGS

Before I implemented the intervention plan, I explained the plan to Michael so he knew what was expected of him. I began the intervention the last week of October. During the first two weeks, I put a smiley face sticker on Michael's calendar every time he responded to me by nodding or pointing. After he had earned two smiley faces for that week, Michael was able to choose from my prize box. Michael responded very well to this. During the first week, he earned six smiley faces and during the second week he earned ten smiley faces. Then I explained to Michael that he would have to say either "yes" or "no" when he was asked a question to earn a smiley face and after he had earned one smiley face, he could choose from my prize box. Nothing verbal happened for two weeks although my assistant and I had encouraged speech.

During the first week of December, I gave the annual ESL language proficiency test. When I tested Michael on the morning of December 3, he did not respond verbally at all. After the group had been tested, I asked my assistant to test Michael to see if he would perform differently for her while I worked with the rest of the group. To our amazement, Michael responded verbally to my assistant in whispers. After the testing, I asked my assistant what she had done to get him to speak and she said that after asking him the test items and getting no response, she told him it was all right to whisper his responses and he did. This surprised both my assistant and myself because this had not been the first time we had told Michael he could whisper to us. We had been giving Michael permission to whisper all along, but it had not helped in the production of speech until now.

This act by Michael had reassured us that Michael was very capable of speech. Michael was a child who obviously could speak in complete and sometimes grammatically correct sentences, but was choosing not to. For example, one part of the ESL test had the child listen to a story while looking at picture cues and then asked the child to retell the story in his own words while looking at the picture cues. Michael was able to retell the story by looking at the picture cues and said: "The snowman was cold. The snowman wanted to get on the wagon. The snowman want to get inside. The snowman melt. "

That afternoon when we saw Michael again, I asked each of the students to tell me about the drawing that they had made. When it was Michael's turn, he didn't say anything so I asked him if he would tell it to the girl sitting next to him and then she could tell me and he nodded. He leaned over and whispered his response to his peer's ear, but she couldn't quite understand him. "What?" she asked. Again, Michael leaned over and whispered to her clearer so that she was able to tell me what he had said. This was the first time in my room that Michael spoke to any of his classmates in a group setting. Over the next few days, Michael continued speaking through his peers when he was asked a question.

On December 9th , Michael spoke to me (an adult) for the first time in a group setting. We worked on rhyming with the song "A Hunting We Will Go". After brainstorming several examples of rhyming words, each child choose a pair to fill in their song. I asked Michael which words he was going to write and he whispered "fox and box." December 9th seemed to have been the turning point for Michael in my classroom in terms of speaking to adults in a group setting

because after that day, Michael responded to my assistant and me in whispers when he was spoken to. Michael's verbal progress skyrocketed and he was speaking like any other first grader before the Christmas break.

Before implementing the odd group play therapy plan, the school psychologist brought Michael and Michael's friend Andy to her office during recess for fifteen minutes to play games while she pretended to be busy working on the computer or some paper work. She did this hoping to hear Michael speak and find out if he had any speech problems. She brought the boys to her office for three play sessions like this, but made no progress. She told me that Michael and Andy played together nicely and that Andy spoke quite a bit to Michael, but Michael responded only by nodding and gesturing. The school psychologist then implemented the odd group on October 23. During these sessions, the group started out with an ice breaker activity where each person was to respond to the school psychologist's question when he was thrown the ball. This activity was followed by games such as Jenga or team building activities such as two boys working together to put a ball in the garbage by using one person's elbow and the other person's knee. Except for the ice breaker, all the activities were structured in such a way that each person had to participate.

During the first session Michael was completely nonverbal although he participated in the activities. During the second session, while waiting in the kindergarten room with the school psychologist for his brother Kyle, Michael walked up to the school psychologist and said, "My brother Kyle is here." Even though he spoke to the school psychologist, he continued to be nonverbal in the

group setting. This pattern of speaking to the school psychologist alone, but not participating verbally in a group setting continued for two more weeks.

During the fifth session (December 4th), while waiting for his brother in the kindergarten room, Michael said, “The hamster looks sick.” A conversation between Michael and the school psychologist followed as to why the hamster was sick. The school psychologist then said, “Why don’t you tell the kindergarten teacher that the hamster looks sick?” Michael walked up to the kindergarten teacher and told her what he had told the school psychologist and they had a similar conversation as to why the hamster was sick. This was the first time Michael spoke to another adult besides the school psychologist with voluntary information. Michael had spoken to my assistant the previous day in the ESL room, but only in response to test questions.

During the sixth session, Michael talked in the group and behaved like any other child in the group. He even talked out of turn and answered for his younger brother Kyle. The school psychologist had the boys choose a goal to work on for the following week. This goal was to be an attainable goal. Michael’s first goal was to respond to teacher questions in the ESL room one-on-one which he met easily. After this break-through, Michael continued to participate verbally in the group setting. After Christmas break, Michael started being naughty during the eighth session and his friend Andy and he left the group session before they were dismissed. During the ninth session (January 22nd), Michael and Andy had to split up because they were goofing around too much. The music specialist commented to the school psychologist on January 22nd that Michael used to be

completely nonverbally in music class, but was now singing solos. The play group met for four more sessions to work on meeting goals. Michael's goal for the last two weeks was to increase his volume which he met. Since all the boys met their goals, they had earned a pizza party which was the culminating activity for the play group. During the pizza party, Michael talked a lot. He even talked with pizza in his mouth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

By the end of this study, Michael had gone from speaking nothing at school to speaking as an average first grade child. He is indistinguishable from any other first grader in terms of speech. An outsider would not know by observing him that Michael used to be selectively mute.

Although I implemented the behavioral modification system with Michael, the behavioral modification intervention was not successful in eliciting speech from him. During the first two weeks of using the behavioral modification system, Michael complied with the system because all he had to do was nod, shake his head or point. After that, I told Michael he had to speak at least two words (e.g. "yes" or "no") in one week to be able to pick from my prize box. I thought it was a gradual shift from the nonverbal behaviors he had been successfully displaying for the past two weeks, but this move ceased all progress with Michael. He adamantly refused to speak and when I pushed him, he stopped performing the nonverbal behaviors as well. Michael did not talk in my room until December 3rd. I do not know for sure why he, all of a sudden, started talking to my assistant and

I, but his speaking in my room occurred after he had been speaking to the school psychologist alone for three weeks as she and Michael went to pick up his brother for group play therapy. After he spoke to us on December 3rd, Michael also spoke to the kindergarten teacher on December 4th at the suggestion of the school psychologist. This bit of evidence further strengthened my belief that, indeed, it was the group play therapy that was successful in eliciting speech from Michael.

I strongly believe that the present study provides convincing evidence that play therapy is effective in working with selectively mute children. A research by Barlow, Strother and Landreth (1986) supports our findings by showing that sibling play therapy was effective in eliciting speech from selective mutes. The reason play therapy is so successful in treating selective mutes is because "…play is the natural medium of self-expression for children" (Barlow, Strother & Landreth, 1986, p. 46) and that "…[selective mutes need] a therapeutic setting in which [they can] feel comfortable, a place where [they can] be in charge, within limits, of the relationship with an adult, and could communicate on [their] own terms without using words, as expected of [them] by other adults" (Barlow, Strother & Landreth, 1986, p. 46).

The school psychologist and I plan to continue this play therapy with Michael next year when he is in second grade if he comes back to school being selectively mute again although we believe that the likelihood of him returning to school selectively mute next year is very, very slim. We also plan to implement this play therapy group with Michael's brother Kyle in the fall to help him talk. I also plan

to share my findings with my ESL colleagues because there are at least three other ESL selectively mute boys in our district.

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Using Readers Workshop to Meet Individual Needs

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Action Research
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Overview of the Study

Statement of the Problem

The students in my second grade class have a large range of reading ability. I was looking for a reading program that met these individual reading needs while also allowing students to choose books that they were interested in. Readers Workshop had these two components while also focusing on comprehension and the child's creative side. It seemed like a perfect fit!

Attempt to Solve the Problem

In order to implement Readers Workshop I observed a classroom teacher that uses this approach. After watching his class I couldn't wait to implement the program. I got my materials ready that night and started the next day. I worked with my students going through the steps involved in the process and modeled it. Off they went!

Results of the Study

I completely eliminated the reading series from my reading instruction. I scheduled about 45 minutes to an hour of Readers Workshop every day. My students love the freedom that Readers Workshop gives them in choosing their own books and they especially love creating projects when they have completed a book. I like the fact that each child is working within their own ability level and at their own pace.

Future Interventions

I will continue to use Readers Workshop next year when I teach third grade. It pleases me to see and hear my students enjoying reading so much. I will continue to evaluate Readers Workshop with each class of students that I have so I can make necessary changes to ensure that students' individual needs are being met.

Sequence of the Study

November

Identified the problem and possible topics

December

Chose Readers Workshop as my topic
Finalized my question
Began to organize my plan for Readers Workshop
Started my literature review
Administered the STAR Reading Test

January

Observation of Readers Workshop in other classroom
Gather materials needed to implement Readers Workshop
Students take Hollistic Assessment

February

Introduce Readers Workshop
Make classroom poster for the Readers Workshop process
Students journal their thoughts about Readers Workshop

March

Continue evaluation of Readers Workshop
Changes that are recommended by the students are made

April

Second grade classes are given the STAR test again
Class takes the Hollistic Assessment
Information is gathered and progress is assessed

May

Final Paper is written
Presentation is prepared
Readers Workshop continues to be evaluated

Statement of the Problem

Because of the large range of students' reading ability in my classroom I felt that I was not meeting the needs of all my students by using the second grade reading series. I could see that my high readers were not being challenged while my low readers were feeling frustrated. I was very concerned that my students were not enjoying reading as much as I would like. I wanted to implement a reading program that was individualized and that was comfortably challenging for all. I wanted students to be able to choose reading materials that held their interest, and I wanted them to have more personal experiences with comprehension and story retelling. I also felt it was very important that my students enjoy reading. I decided that Readers Workshop was the program I wanted to implement.

Situating the Problem

A challenge for most teachers today is designing a classroom that meets the academic and emotional needs of all students. As a teacher, this struggle is always on my mind. How do I create an environment that challenges everyone without frustrating anyone? It is a thin line to walk because no one wants to compromise the needs of one group in order to meet the needs of another.

My classroom this year isn't very different from any other classroom in the Fox Valley. I have 3 students who are identified as Gifted and Talented. I have 6 students who are part of the REACH reading program and I have 2 students who are in the Learning Disabilities program. The remaining 10 students are typical 2nd grade learners.

There is a large range of ability in my classroom. I didn't realize how large the reading range was until I had my students take the S.T.A.R Reading Range test (Appendix A), which assesses each student's reading comprehension and vocabulary skills. The test identifies the range of materials that a student can read independently. I had one student who read at the first grade level and another student reading at the fourth/fifth grade level. Becoming aware of this fact made me realize I wasn't meeting everyone's instructional needs by having everyone read the same stories

together. I felt that by using the second grade reading series I was cheating my higher students and frustrating my emergent readers.

I decided that I needed to try something that was more individualized so I tried Literature Circles. I had a hard time managing them and I felt that they were very contrived. I was also feeling that I was basically ability grouping my students and I wanted to avoid that. I also didn't see my students enjoying this experience. I spoke with our Reading Specialist and she recommended that I look into Readers Workshop. From her description, this program sounded as though it would meet my goals: it was individualized; it focused on comprehension; students were given the opportunity to choose their own books; and most of all, it tapped into their creativity and promoted thinking.

What Others Are Saying About Readers Workshop

Tony Holz, a third grade teacher in a community school, says that when students are in charge of their own learning they are more likely to have ownership over what they learn. That is why Tony strongly believes in using Readers Workshop as his primary reading curriculum. He feels that this reading program encourages his students to be responsible for their learning and it allows them to choose reading materials that are of interest to them.

Tony has a hard time understanding why so many teachers allow textbook companies to dictate what students will read, with no regard to their personal interest or their reading level. Others educators agree with Tony. Michael O'Donnell and Margo Wood (1992) studied changes in teaching reading. In Education Digest they stated that "when using the basal as the sole source of reading instruction, students are expected to read stories that are unpredictable, simplistic, and not well made. Skills are taught in isolation". I think this leaves many students feeling that reading is something they have to do, not something they choose to do.

One of the most appealing aspects of Readers Workshop is that students choose their own reading material based on their interest and their reading level. Maribeth Carmichael (1998), a high school English teacher

and graduate student at James Madison University says this about Readers Workshop, “The major benefit of using a reading workshop is that it personalizes the English class for each student. What is interesting to one student may not be interesting to another. Reading workshop allows students a choice in what they read and provides time for independent reading.” She goes on to say, “By giving students the freedom to choose a book that is interesting to them, the teacher encourages students’ reading for pleasure.” I think that the goal of many educators is to make lifelong learners out of our students. An important aspect of that is students’ learning to read for enjoyment.

> With classrooms so diverse in student ability a reading workshop allows students to work within their own reading range. Hewitt (1996) states, “Without an independent reading time where students can choose books of their own liking and levels, some students may exhibit frustration and others may not be challenged with the materials provided for them.” Reading workshop is beneficial to all abilities of readers. Students with low reading skills usually spend most of their reading time decoding words which causes them to lose much of the comprehension and fluency of the story. The reading workshop allows them to spend the amount of time they need to comprehend a book and read it with fluency.

Everything that I heard and read about Readers Workshop sounded right, but before attempting to implement the program I felt it was very important that I see first hand how other teachers were using Readers Workshop. I asked my principal if I could observe a teacher at another school and she encouraged me to do so. I selected Tony Holz’s class

because I knew that he has been very successful in implementing the approach. I also felt that his personal philosophies about education were congruent with mine, so I knew that he would have many ideas that would help me establish my own methods for using a reading workshop.

When I observed Tony's class I was impressed with how engaged each student was in their own reading. The reading time lasted about 45 minutes. During that time students were sprawled across the floor or snuggled up in their favorite nook, quietly reading a book. I appreciated that Tony let his students sit or lay down anywhere in the room so they could be comfortable while they were reading. Some students were working on projects while others were writing summaries of their books. One aspect of Tony's reading program that I really liked was the self-assessment. Students grade themselves every day on how they used their reading time. They set a goal each week for something to improve on. They also write down what they did well that week. When they have completed a project they self-assess their work.

When I left his classroom I couldn't wait to start my own reading workshop. To better organize the process of Readers Workshop I made a list of the specific components that I wanted to share with the students. They were:

1. Choose a book by reading the title, back and first page.
2. Write a summary that lists the major problem in the story and about 10 important events that led to the solution of the problem.
3. Choose a project out of the book of 75 projects and gather the materials needed.
4. Self-assess your project

5. Conference with Ms. Dacas about your summary, project and self-assessment.

I got everything ready that night so that I could start the next day.

Intervention

The first day that I implemented the reading workshop I modeled the process with The True Story of the Three Little Pigs. I went through the process of selecting a book and talking to the students about reading the back cover or the first few pages to see if this is a book you might be interested in. Then I read the story to the class and together we completed a summary of the story. We had to identify the setting, characters, and the major problem. Then we talked about the important events in the story that helped to solve the problem. We wrote these on the summary sheet and I told the students that when they completed a story they needed to do a summary.

After they complete a summary they can choose a project. I showed the students the book of 75 projects that they could choose from. I could tell that most of them couldn't wait to get their hands on that book to choose a project. When students finished a project, they graded themselves (on a scale from 1 to 5) on neatness, organization, following directions, effort and meeting their objective.

After a student finished their project they set up a conference with me. They brought their summary, completed project and self-assessment with them to the conference. We talked about why they gave themselves the grade they did and what they liked about the book. Then they repeated the cycle all over again with a new book.

We made a poster that listed the steps involved in Reading Workshop. The steps are displayed like this:

1. Choose a book
   - read the title, back and the 1st page to see if this is a book that might interest you.
2. When you come to an unknown word:
   - write it on you word power sheet AND
   - the sentence it was in AND
   - what you think it means AND
   - what the dictionary says it means
3. When you finish a book:
   - write the summary
   - choose a project
   - self-assess your project
   - conference with Ms. Dacas

In order to promote higher level thinking skills in reading my students use a Dialog Journal. Every Friday I pose a question to them about their story that asks them to do some analysis of the characters, setting or plot. They write a letter to me answering that question by relating it to the story they are currently reading. Then I write a letter back to them and we continue to write back and forth. My students have raved about the Dialog Journal. Many consider it to be their favorite part of Readers Workshop.

Intervention Evaluation

I am very pleased with the transition my class has made to Readers Workshop. We spend approximately 45 minutes a day doing Readers Workshop and during that time it is virtually silent in my room because the students are so engaged in what they are doing. I have noticed a difference in the attitudes of my low readers. Many of them are more willing to take risks and are less frightened about having to read in front of their peers. They seem to feel comfortable with the books they choose and writing the summaries has helped them with their story retelling skills and their overall comprehension. Since starting Readers Workshop in February, two of my very lowest readers have passed out of the Title 1 Reading Program. I've seen significant gains in their self-esteem as readers and they simply seem to enjoy reading more.

In order to assess the implementation of Readers Workshop there were three areas that were the most important to me:

*I wanted to assess my classes reading level to assure that they were moving along at an appropriate pace compared to other second grade classes.

*I wanted to monitor their reading comprehension skills to make sure that they were understanding what they were reading.

*I also wanted to assess my students' attitudes about Readers Workshop.

In order to assess the students reading ability I administered the STAR test to my class. The STAR test is a computer program that works with individual children to assess their reading level by having students complete reading samples. The program then gives each child's reading range of books they can read independently. The range is made up of a low number and a high number, which set boundaries for the child's reading range. For example, if a child's reading range is 2.7-3.7 that child can independently read books leveled from 2nd grade, seventh month through 3rd grade, seventh month. This helps guide the teacher and the child in selecting books that are appropriately challenging.

I gave the test individually to each child in April after they had been using Readers Workshop for about 3 months. Two other second grade teachers administered it to their students at about the same time. I used them as a control group because both these teachers use the reading basal as the focus of their reading program. I averaged the reading range of each class. Classroom A had an average reading range of 2.6-3.7 (Appendix C). Classroom B had an average reading range of 2.6-3.6 (Appendix D). The students in my classroom had an average reading range of 2.9-4.1 (Appendix E). According to the STAR program the students in the Readers Workshop classroom are reading about 3 months ahead of their grade level peers.

The next area that I wanted to assess was the comprehension skills of my class. The district encourages us to give the holistic reading test from our reading series, even if we are choosing not to use the reading series. The holistic test is a basic multiple choice comprehension test where the children read a passage and then answer implicit and explicit comprehension questions. I administered the test in December, before implementing Readers Workshop, and again in April after two and a half months of using Readers Workshop. I was hoping that I would see improvement over this time because the students had become used to writing summaries about the stories that they read during Readers Workshop. I was curious if this was helping their overall comprehension skills.

There are 16 points on the test and each child's final score classifies them into a range of reading proficiency. Here is the range :

15-16 points	Excellent Reader
13-14 points	Good Reader
11-12 points	Fair Reader
10 and below	Poor Reader

I averaged the classes' December test scores and the class average was 12.8 out of 16, putting them in the "Fair to Good" range. The average for their April test was significantly better. They averaged 15.3, placing them in the "Excellent Reader" category (Appendix F). After looking at the results it is clear to me that the summary writing is a key component of a successful Readers Workshop program.

The last area that I wanted to assess were my students attitudes about Readers Workshop. In their Dialog Journal, which they write in every Friday, they wrote about their ideas and feelings about Readers Workshop. I used this as an informal gauge of how they felt about this new reading program that I had implemented. Every student in my class made positive comments about Readers Workshop. Jacob said "I just love Readers Workshop because there are so many great activities. By the way, my favorite part is the reading part because I get to read so many great books." Katie stated, "I love Readers Workshop. There is not one single thing I don't like about Readers Workshop. I like that you get to read whatever you want. Also you can pick any project out of 75 of them. Everything is my favorite, I don't have a favorite part." Michael offered his opinion of Readers Workshop and gave me an idea of how I could make it better. He said, "I'm really happy about Readers Workshop and I'm happy that you got the Readers Workshop thing for us. One thing I don't like so much is all the paperwork but the rest I like." The class agreed with Michael and we reduced the amount of paperwork by eliminating the daily self-assessment. The class felt that because they do work so hard during this time and they were almost always giving themselves 5 (the highest) then we didn't need to self-assess every day. We agreed that as long as everyone was staying on task and used the time appropriately then we didn't need the daily assessment.

Conclusion

Since implementing Readers Workshop three months ago I have been very pleased with the progress I have seen. My students really dive into the work they are doing and it seems that the amount of time we spend doing Readers Workshop is never enough for them. There are always sighs of disappointment when I announce that Readers Workshop is over. My students are now use to self-selecting books that are appropriately challenging. They choose a large variety of book topics such as biographies, science books, books in a series, as well as books that cover math topics. Each one of them is choosing to integrate reading into other curriculum areas.

There are so many aspects of Readers Workshop that I really believe in but the key element to me is that my students enjoy reading. Reading in my classroom is no longer threatening to any child because they are in control of their own reading choices. No one feels bad or self-conscious about the way that they read and there is less anxiety about reading. Before starting Readers Workshop I had a parent comment to me that her child got

butterflies in her stomach throughout the entire reading lessons because she felt like she wasn't as good of a reader as everyone else. Even though I didn't force the child to read in front of the class she still noticed how different her reading ability was. This same child's mom told me at our recent conference that now her daughter brags to her mom about the project she's doing and the great books she's reading. This child's confidence as a reader has dramatically increased which has effected her overall confidence in everything she does. Last week she progressed out of the Chapter 1 reading program and I believe a lot of it has to do with her comfort level within the classroom. Readers Workshop has allowed her to move at her own pace and to re-read stories if she needs to. It has also made her focus on her comprehension by having her write a summary of the story. But I think that the biggest effect it had on her was it made her feel successful because she no longer had to compare herself to her peers.

Readers Workshop is a program that I will continue to use throughout my teaching career. I may make adjustments here or there but the underlying philosophies I strongly believe in.

Appendix A

December Reading Range

Student	ZPD Reading Range
#1	2.1-3.1
#2	2.8-4.0
#3	1.1-2.1
#4	3.0-4.2
#5	1.9-2.9
#6	1.7-2.7
#7	4.0-5.5
#8	2.2-3.2
#9	2.5-3.5
#10	2.6-3.7
#11	2.9-4.1
#12	2.3-3.3
#13	2.7-3.8
#14	1.7-2.7
#15	2.2-3.2
#16	2.9-4.1
#17	3.1-4.3
#18	2.9-4.1

Student	ZPD Reading Range
Average class reading range in December: 2.6-3.7	

Appendix B
Reading Range in Classroom A

Classroom A Student	ZPD Reading Range
#1	2.2-3.2
#2	3.3-4.6
#3	3.3-4.6
#4	3.9-5.4
#5	1.3-2.3
#6	2.3-3.3
#7	2.7-3.8
#8	2.7-3.8
#9	2.2-3.2
#10	2.7-3.8
#11	2.2-3.2
#12	2.9-4.1
#13	3.2-4.5
#14	2.5-3.5
#15	2.2-3.2

#16	1.7-2.7
#17	2.6-3.7
#18	2.8-4.0

Average Reading Range
In April: 2.6-3.7

Appendix C

Reading Range in Classroom B

Classroom B

Student	ZPD Reading Range
#1	3.3-4.6
#2	2.5-3.5
#3	2.6-3.6
#4	2.9-4.1
#5	2.2-3.2
#6	2.0-3.0
#7	3.3-4.6
#8	2.2-3.2
#9	2.8-4.0
#10	2.6-3.6
#11	2.4-3.4
#12	2.6-3.7
#13	2.4-3.4
#14	1.4-3.4

#15	2.6-3.6
#16	3.7-5.1

Average Reading Range
in April: 2.6-3.6

Appendix D

Reading Range in the Readers

Workshop Classroom

Classroom C

Student	**ZPD Reading Range**
#1	2.0-3.0
#2	3.2-4.5
#3	3.7-5.1
#4	2.1-3.1
#5	3.5-4.8
#6	2.3-3.3
#7	2.4-3.4
#8	4.5-6.2
#9	2.5-3.5
#10	2.7-3.8
#11	3.8-5.3

#12	3.1-4.3
#13	3.1-4.3
#14	2.7-3.8
#15	2.1-3.1
#16	2.7-3.8
#17	3.1-4.3
#18	3.4-4.7
#19	3.0-4.2

Average Reading Range
in April: 2.94-4.13

Appendix E

Grade 2 Holistic Assessment Scores

Grade 2 Holistic Reading Assessment

Student	December Score (before implementing Readers Workshop)	April Score (After 3 months of Readers Workshop)
#1	16	15
#2	14	15
#3	14	16
#4	12	15
#5	14	15
#6	14	16
#7	16	16
#8	14	16
#9	16	16

#19	15	16
#11	14	16
#12	6	14
#13	11	16
#14	14	16
#15	9	13
#16	12	15
#17	15	16
#18	6	13
Average	12.8	15.3