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Writing-Skills Intervention Programming and Its Being a Component of Response to Intervention

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Abstract

For a struggling writer, step-by-step instruction can be a helpful means to manage organizing and producing elaborate text. This mixed-methods project offered four struggling writers a mnemonic strategy called Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) in 45-minute sessions over 22 days. The second- and fourth-grade students attended a public school in the US Pacific Northwest. As a parallel component to the project, the students' teachers and intervention specialist met with the author for 4 one-hour sessions to discuss: 1) the children's intervention programming and progress, and 2) the paradigm of response to intervention (RTI) and their thoughts about its feasibility in classrooms. The end-of-project assessment data demonstrated that the children made progress with writing skills, but the teachers and intervention specialist felt that support personnel would be needed to manage RTI-type intervention programming in general education classrooms.

Keywords: *literacy, struggling writers, response to intervention*

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Introduction

Pre-referral intervention programming for children who struggle with writing, reading, and/or math is receiving renewed emphasis given the implementation of response to intervention (RTI; Gresham, 2002). RTI has been implemented to some extent in parts of all 50 US states (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009), Canada (Aylward, Farmer, & MacDonald, 2007), and Australia (Kraayenoord, 2007). Two key components of the intervention process are the teachers' providing strategy instruction and students' completion of progress-monitoring assessment data. School personnel can then use this curriculum-based measurement (CBM) data to consider learning-disability classification. In this study, the author sought to answer two central questions. First, would four struggling writers improve their story composition skills by using art media to illustrate their ideas as part of a Tier 2-type intervention with a mnemonic strategy named Ask, Reflect, Text (ART)? Its components included: a) students **Ask** themselves Graham and Harris' (1989) WWW, W=2, H=2 questions (e.g., Who? When? Where?); b) as students **Reflect** on the questions, they illustrate their answers using art media (e.g., making a painting with watercolors); c) using their illustrated story plan, the students can then generate sentences for their **Text**.

The second research question for this study was: what implementation strengths and challenges were associated with the program, as reported by staff in their conversations with the author? It was during these meetings that the author had the opportunity to describe the RTI paradigm and its rationale.

A renewed Emphasis on the Context for Intervention Programming: Response to Intervention (RTI)

Response to intervention focuses on evidence-based instructional practices and curriculum-based measurement (CBM) assessment data for two purposes: 1) to help students who struggle with reading, writing, and/or math improve; but if they do not, 2) use their CBM data as a basis for possible placement in special education (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). Three issues prompted its creation. First, since the 1960s when *learning disability* became a formal title, a large number of students have been identified for special education after fourth grade. It is possible that these students' academic need(s) may have been less severe for some of them if they had received intervention programming and possible identification for special education as early as kindergarten (Lyon, Fletcher, Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Torgesen, Wood, Schulte, & Olson, 2001). Second, as students demonstrate challenges with core skills such as writing, teachers in general education and special education should have more collegial opportunities (e.g. multidisciplinary teaming) in the design and application of intervention programming (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Third, there was a growing discontentment with the use of standardized tests for classifying students from diverse backgrounds for special education (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). IQ and academic achievement tests contain questions that can provoke racial/ethnic bias (e.g., asking a child from a diverse background a question such as: what does a US Senator do?) as well as conceptual bias (e.g., asking a child to read and demonstrate comprehension of a text when decoding itself is an issue). These tests also typically have an insufficient floor to assess early-elementary age children (Siegel, 1999). Schools should have an alternative to standardized assessment methods.

Tier 1

For general education instruction, RTI advocates (e.g., Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Gresham, 2002) suggest that teachers should first provide evidence-based core instruction. The National Center on Response to Intervention (2010) has a developing list of suggestions about curriculum options. Schools can also review the list of evidence-based resources as defined by What Works Clearinghouse (2012). Teachers then have all students in general education classrooms complete short CBM assessments of skills such as writing three times per year (e.g., September, January, and April). This is referred to as *universal screening*. The purpose is to help define students who are *dually discrepant* (i.e., low performing and making little or no progress over time; Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2007). For story writing, teachers can have children independently write a text about a black and white cartoon picture, as employed by other writing researchers (e.g., Reid & Lienemann, 1996; Saddler, Moran, Graham, & Harris, 2004). The teachers can then review the stories and assess them for content, quality, and, as a descriptive variable: number of words written.

The use of rubrics is an often-employed practice to assess writing content and quality (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998). Through comparing students' writing products to exemplars, teachers can note students' ability levels and progress over time (Stevens & Levi, 2005). As an additional type of data, counting the number of the words in a text can provide a descriptive sense of its length, which can then be graphed to see trends across time. Many current writing researchers have employed CBM

assessments such as rubrics and counting the *number of words written* (e.g., Saddler, Moran, Graham, & Harris, 2004; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006; Mason, Kubina, & Taft, 2011).

Deno (2003) created CBM in the late 1970s for the purpose of graphing students' progress over time. In applying CBM practices, teachers can make more informed decisions, student performance often increases, and students become more aware of their change in ability over time as they plot each score and generate their broken-line graph (Deno, Fuchs, Marston, & Shinn, 2001). Fuchs and Fuchs (2002) reviewed the CBM research literature and concluded that it: is psychometrically tenable, offers teachers various ways to manage instructional planning, has the potential to inform treatment effects, and help define children who fail to improve from otherwise effective instruction.

In this author's opinion, teachers should use professional judgment in day-to-day practice with students' CBM scores; universal-screening scores may vary due to various reasons. Sickness or a recent difficulty at home may impair students' abilities in the short term. An average score of three universal screenings, for example, across a few days or weeks may be appropriate.

As teachers review students' writing products, their voice and perspective is vital to the assessment and instructional process. Wising (2009) wrote about how she felt stifled as a writing teacher in focusing solely on the traditional curriculum and assessment tasks. To prompt a change in dynamics in her classroom, she joined a teachers-of-writing project group, associated with the National Writing Project. Through monthly meetings with other teachers, their discussions, and offering students multiple genre types from which to choose for writing tasks, Wising noted how students became more creative and energetic about writing and increased in overall knowledge. While teachers of writing can be change agents in their classrooms, they can also voice the challenges that often exist. Troia and Maddox (2004) found that the context of teachers' instruction for students has a significant impact on how they view their own capability and success in students' improvement in skills such as writing. When teachers face large amounts of topics to be covered, larger class sizes, or a wide range of diverse students' needs in their classrooms, teachers feel that their instructional processes are more challenged. This can have ramifications on individual students' needs being addressed in the general education classroom context.

If universal screening indicates that less than 80% of students in a given classroom are not at benchmark levels of ability, school personnel should review and address their classrooms' resources, practices, curriculum, and/or professional development routines before considering students' ability as the issue (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982). If classroom practices and curriculum materials do represent that of other schools across the nation which are performing well, then the assessment scores are likely more representative of children with an actual dual discrepancy.

Tier 2

Students who score low (e.g., bottom 30% of their class) in universal screenings should then participate in one or more phases of intervention programming (e.g., 8-12 weeks; 30-50 minutes per daily session; Haager, Klinger, & Vaughn, 2007). In this author's opinion, general education teachers could manage intervention programming with differentiated instructional practices: a teacher provides whole-group instruction to the class; while the class is doing follow-up activities, the teacher then meets with a small group(s) or individual children who need extra examples, teacher feedback, or guided practice (Blachman, Ball, Black, & Tangel, 2000; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Tomlinson, 2001; Yatvin, 2004).

This author suggests that the contents of the intervention's daily plans could be one of various models that RTI includes. The problem-solving model consists of a student-specific intervention designed by the school's multidisciplinary team (i.e., an in-school committee consisting of a general education teacher, special education teacher, school administrator, school psychologist, speech and language pathologist, etc.). The standard-protocol model has the student(s) participate in a publisher-created program (e.g., the writing components of Read 180 [Scholastic, Inc., n.d.]). The third option is some type of hybrid of the first two models.

Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton (2004) as well as the National Center for Response to Intervention (2012a) suggest that sufficient progress for a Tier 2 student could be: 1) improving to "just above baseline," 2) improving 150% above the baseline level (e.g., if the student averaged level 1 during baseline scores on a 0-7 scale, then level 1.5 or higher would be the end goal during the intervention phase[s]), or 3) attaining the goal line of the student's age-appropriate grade level standards. The underlying rationale for defining progress is that if a student can even make a small gain in rate and/or amount of achievement, then continued improvement should be possible and the need for special education is not warranted (Fuchs et al., 2003). These choices along with where intervention is provided

and by whom (e.g., general education teacher in the classroom, paraprofessional in a resource room) remain questions for each school's multidisciplinary team to answer.

Gerber (2005) questioned whether managing this type of intervention programming is feasible for a general education teacher. With finite resources and time, the level of need that some students may demonstrate could represent a level of programming that does not exist in a typical classroom. Furthermore, intensive intervention may not be enough for some children to make progress. Torgesen (2000) found that some students who struggled with reading did not improve even after 100 or more hours of intensive intervention programming. Some children will have underlying processing and memory difficulties, which impede academic-skills progress. At the outset, however, when a student first demonstrates difficulty with writing, as one example, educators generally agree that intervention programming of some type is warranted as a means to try to address the child's difficulties.

If the student does progress in a first intervention phase, then the child can return to regular education classroom programming with monitoring and support as needed (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). If a student does not progress after a first intervention phase, the school's multidisciplinary team can reconvene, review the student's data, and configure a different intervention. This could be a reconfigured set of components for a second problem solving-model intervention, change to that of a standard-protocol format, or some type of hybrid.

Tier 3

What constitutes Tier 3 is a topic of much debate (Fuchs et al., 2003). Haager, Klingner, and Vaughn (2007) suggest that Tier 3 be a more intensive academic-skills intervention than Tier 2 (e.g., fewer children per group, more time per daily session). Fuchs and Kearns (2008) suggest that this tier could entail cognitive-skills instruction (e.g., activities to help children improve memory and processing skills). A third option is that Tier 3 be a timeframe for diagnostic assessment and placement in special education. However configured, RTI is intended to be a process of increasingly-intensive interventions and to determine which students should be considered for special education should they not make progress after one or more phases of focused instruction (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007).

Overview of this Study

The research processes of this study represented a mixed-methods design (Check & Schutt, 2012), which included students' quantitative (CBM) assessment data and qualitative interviews with every participant in the project (Briggs, 1986; Hendricks, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). As a means to quantitatively monitor the children's change in story content and quality scores over time, students completed periodic story-writing CBM probes (i.e., write a story about a simple cartoon picture). Each student participant first demonstrated writing ability during three baseline sessions, then received training with ART, and finally during the intervention phase; each student demonstrated a change in ability after having learned the ART mnemonic strategy. These data sources provided for a means to compare a child's scores between phases, and contrast different students at each phase.

Also during the timeline of the project, the author met with the four teachers and intervention specialist for 4 one-hour sessions to discuss RTI, its components, their perspectives about its components being implemented in the school district, and how their students were progressing as the daily sessions progressed. The author asked the teachers and intervention specialist to read and be prepared to discuss one of four texts about RTI (Dunn, 2011; Dunn & Mabry, 2011; Fuchs et al., 2003; Lyon et al., 2001) before each discussion session.

By the end of the project's timeline, the students, teachers, and intervention specialist all provided qualitative interview data. Each child had offered their initial perspectives at the beginning of the study about writing and then later how they felt about the ART mnemonic strategy in an end-of-project interview. The students' post-intervention questions were: 1) Did you like learning the story-writing strategies? 2) Were they helpful in your writing? 3) Did you use the strategies for writing tasks in your classroom or outside of school? 4) Do you think the strategies could help other children be better writers? 5) Is there any part of the activities that you would change? Students' answers were brief, even with follow-up questions, audio recorded, and noted verbatim at the time of each interview.

The teachers and intervention specialist's interview questions included: 1) what are your thoughts about the RTI-type intervention and CBM assessment processes as they pertained to your student(s) with the help of the intervention specialist? 2) do you see these RTI practices as feasible for continuation after the end of this study? why or why not? Their answers were audio recorded for later transcription. For the purposes of participant validation, the author provided each interviewee with the opportunity to offer feedback or clarification of each transcript (Silverman, 2000). The author then

reviewed the data multiple times and coded the qualitative data by noting keywords (e.g., resources, personnel). These were then condensed into key themes. The author then chose example quotes to help illustrate each theme—and outliers, if any were applicable.

Setting

The study took place at a suburban elementary school in a Pacific Northwest US state during October-December of 2011. The racial demographics for the school were 75% White, 10% African American, 10% Hispanic, and the remaining 5% of other races. A total of 55.8% of the student population participated in the school's free or reduced lunch program. The district employed a constructivist philosophy (Dewey, 1938) but was beginning to implement, in a piecemeal fashion, the concepts and practices of response to intervention such as universal screening (e.g., a district-created literacy assessment administered at the beginning of the school year) and data-based decision making about teachers' instructional choices (RTI; Gresham, 2002).

The author asked the school's principal to inquire with the second- to fourth-grade general education teachers about participating in 4 one-hour discussion sessions about RTI and having some struggling writers receive intervention programming. One fourth-grade and three second-grade general education teachers agreed to participate. Their professional experience ranged from 12-20 years ($M=14.6$ years). They each devoted 90 minutes per day for literacy (45-75 minutes specifically for writing; $M=60$ minutes). The teachers used *Step up to Writing* (Auman, 2002), *First Steps in Writing* (Remedial Publications, 2011), Fletcher and Portalupi's (2001) *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*, using the writing process (plan, rough draft, revise, edit, final draft), the Six Traits of Writing from Education Northwest (2012), and Calkins, Martinelli, Kessler, and Gillette's (2006) *Units of Study for Teaching Writing* which included writing practices such as teacher modeling (e.g., prewriting (rehearse/brainstorm), rough draft, make revisions and edits for the publishable copy), minilessons, and student conferencing. I completed two 40-minute observations of each teacher's writing instruction so as to see the teachers' instruction in action as well as helping to verify that the Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) mnemonic strategy was not part of the general education program.

Student Participants

The 1 fourth-grade (White male) and 3 second-grade (2 White males, 1 African-American female) participants were proficient in oral English. In cooperation with the general education teachers, the author selected these students based on their universal screening assessment results (e.g., little text and/or no story line) of writing a story about a simple black and white cartoon picture using any strategy(ies) that they had previously learned. The general education teachers stated that the selected participants also had low-writing ability as demonstrated in classroom activities: being in the bottom 30% of their class for writing skills, needing intervention programming, and possibly in need of special education services in the future. Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, Small, Pratt, Chen, et al. (1996) had used this criteria for a similar type of intervention study.

Component Options to Address the Needs of Struggling Writers

For composing stories, struggling writers such as the participants in this study may have challenges with choosing a topic, organizing their ideas, spelling words, composing simple phrases, descriptive and elaborate sentences, and the physical-motor integration process for putting thoughts on paper (Baker, Chard, Ketterlin-Geller, Apichatabutra, & Doabler, 2009; Donovan & Smolkin, 2006; Polloway, Patton, & Serna, 2005). The result is that struggling writers often tend to have shorter text with few ideas and little progression of thought. If asked to write a story about where to take a trip, the student could list names of states and cities but with few, if any, details connecting the reasoning or events from one place to the next. The narrative would appear as a list of places. The child's handwriting is often hard to read and not within the lines as well as having misspelled words.

Based on the characteristics of struggling writers as just described, the author reviewed with the teachers and intervention specialist, Erica, what the professional literature states about the topic and then incorporated those features into the components of the Tier 2-type daily lesson plans. For a writing intervention, the components often include methods of the general education classroom but with more explicit examples from the teacher, frequent feedback, and student practice (Foorman, 2008). The following are some research-based intervention activity examples: reviewing published authors' texts for analysis and discussion (Shaywitz, 2003); the writers' workshop model for generating a first draft, reviewing and discussing it with others, making revisions, and publishing a final copy (Calkins, & Martinelli, Kessler, & Gillette, 2006; Fletcher, & Portalupi, 1998; Graves, 1983); practicing spelling (Hargett & Anderson, n.d.; Powell & Aram, 2006); doing sentence-making activities and adding descriptive words to make them more elaborate (Saddler, Behforooz, & Asaro, 2008); and incorporating

art media as a means to represent and plan story ideas (Ernst, 1993; Olshansky, 1994).

Noting ideas as symbols other than letters and words can be an effective means to help struggling writers with story planning. Moss (2011) observed that struggling writers often have an affinity for the arts. Creating an artistic representation of their story idea is a realistic task for them to do and results in a unique product for each child. Kirby and Kuykendall (1991) commented that illustrating, “slows the act of seeing, allowing time for new insights to develop” (p. 105). Blecher and Jafee (1998) suggested that these new insights can help prompt more questions and thoughts, which render even more elaborate story ideas. Using art as a means to note story ideas can be an effective component to a mnemonic strategy for writing.

Graham and Perin’s (2007a, 2007b) meta-analyses of mnemonic strategy instruction concluded that it is a highly effective for its purpose. Self-regulated strategy development (SRSD; Graham & Harris, 2005) is a means for teaching a mnemonic strategy typically across four training sessions. Prior to the first session, the teacher should review the student’s assessment and academic information to determine if learning a given strategy would be appropriate. If a student is performing in the bottom 30% of the class for writing skills based on universal assessments for writing, for example, and the child’s stories do not demonstrate good organization, spelling, elaborate sentences, and a progressive story line, then mnemonic-strategy instruction (i.e., a step-by-step process to manage a task) would likely be beneficial. Step two (during session 1 of 4 for training) has the teacher or intervention provider meet the student(s) and explain the mnemonic strategy and why it would be beneficial for them. For example, the students could be told that when using Ask, Reflect, Text (ART; Dunn, 2011, Dunn, 2012; Dunn & Finley, 2008, Dunn, Tudor, Scattergood, & Closson, 2010), they can Ask key questions (e.g., who? when? where? what happened?), Reflect on their answers by illustrating a picture, and then write their Text. The third step (session 2 of training) is to have students review the mnemonic strategy with the teacher and attain memorization of an acrostic and the associated words or phrases associated with each letter (e.g., ART = Ask, Reflect, Text;). In step four (session 3 of training), the teacher or intervention provider presents additional examples of the mnemonic strategy and involves the student(s) in adding to the dialogue and content of the created stories. In step five (session 4 of 4 for training), students apply the strategy on their own and ways to generalize it for other associated writing tasks in their schoolwork. Hopefully in the sessions that follow, students progress-monitoring data (e.g., writing a story about a black and white cartoon picture and noting the number of WWW, W=2, H=2 questions answered, a score for content, quality, and the number of words written) taken once or twice a week will demonstrate that they are no longer considered as being dually discrepant after one or a few phases of Tier-2 type intervention programming; some children may persist to struggle with story writing. These students may then move to Tier 3.

Instructional Routines of this Study

With funding from a university campus minigrant, the author hired and trained Erica, a recent university education graduate, as the intervention specialist to instruct the struggling writers during the 22-session project. She had been the intervention specialist for a previous year’s project about writing. Erica and the author met twice just before this project started to review this project’s instructional and assessment components. The intervention’s format represented a hybrid model as there were consistent components for each daily session but each student’s writing needs varied within the daily sessions.

Erica met each student in the literacy resource center near the children’s general education classrooms during the child’s assigned 45-minute instructional block. The daily sessions’ components reflected those typically employed in RTI-type projects: general instruction activities to help with basic writing skills (e.g., spelling words from a published story, creating simple sentences) during both baseline and intervention phases, students’ learning the focus component of the project (i.e. ART) during the training phase, and an intervention phase where the children would continue with basic writing skills as well as practice using ART. Offering basic writing skills practice in both the baseline phase as well as intervention (where students applied ART) would provide a means to assess the added impact of this mnemonic strategy. To become a better writer, students should be reviewing published texts, practicing spelling, and working to improve elaborate sentence writing. Having comparison phases (i.e., baseline phase without ART, intervention phase with ART) helped to control for this.

Baseline phase

At the beginning of each daily session (one child per 45-minute block), students would arrive and have a few minutes to converse with Erica. Students would review a published story representing their instructional level for the first seven minutes; students chose the books for this activity from the library’s collection. The children could review the cover picture as well as other images throughout the story and then state prediction questions. Students and Erica then read the story, discussed whether their predictions had been true or false, and developed an oral summary and reflection about the text (e.g.,

did the students like the story? what made it a good story? etc.).

During the next 10 minutes, students practiced spelling words from the story, writing a short sentence about an image from a picture book, and combining two simple sentences into one using conjunction words (e.g., *and*, *but*, *or*). As a spelling activity, Erica chose three words from the story, wrote them on a whiteboard hidden from the children, and dictated the words to the students. They wrote them in their notebook. Erica then turned the whiteboard so that the children could see the words. The students corrected their misspelled words, if any. For sentence creation about a picture, Erica asked the students to generate a first and second sentence, which she then wrote on the whiteboard. She then reviewed the sentences with the children and asked for suggestions of descriptive words (e.g., adjectives and adverbs) to make each phrase more elaborate. The students then wrote the sentences into their notebooks. To combine simple sentences into one elaborate sentence, the intervention specialist composed two pairs of simple sentences on the whiteboard, and showed the students the phrases. The children made suggestions of how to use *and*, *but*, *or* to combine the two sentences and then wrote them in their notebook.

In the final 25 minutes of each session of the baseline phase, students wrote connected text. The genre depended on the phase. Students wrote non-story type texts such as directions (e.g., how to get from A to B) or a recipe to make a dinner meal.

Training phase

This phase was unique in that all 45 minutes during the four sessions were devoted to presenting, modeling, and students' development in proficient use of ART based on the processes of self-regulated strategy development (SRS; Graham & Harris, 2005), as described earlier. It is standard practice in writing interventions of this type to offer children about four sessions to learn a mnemonic strategy such as ART so as to demonstrate mastery.

Intervention phase

During the intervention phase, students applied the Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) mnemonic strategy in writing their own stories. The author completed eight observations of Erica's intervention programming (more than 33%) of the project's 22 sessions; she completed them with 99% fidelity of implementation.

Assessing for Story-Writing Ability during the Timeline of the Project

To assess for students' change in story content and quality as well as *number of words written* over the 25 sessions, participants completed story probes everyday in baseline and every few days during the intervention phase so as to have data both before and after their learning the ART mnemonic strategy. Probes consisted of students' reviewing a black and white cartoon picture and then writing a story about the picture. They also had paper available to plan their texts. After 10 minutes to plan their story, students had 15 minutes to write. Art media materials (e.g., pencil crayons, paints) were available for them to use if they wanted to illustrate their ideas. At the end of each daily session, the intervention specialist made a digital image of each student's work, transcribed the students' texts, and later emailed the files to me to score the stories for content and quality on a 0-7 scale (e.g., WWW, W=2, H=2 [Graham & Harris, 1989] has seven questions). Two recent university graduates, who were not part of this study, scored for story content (0-7 scale) based on students' answers to these questions. They scored for quality (also with a 0-7 scale) based on a research-validated rubric resulting from this author's previous studies (2008, 2010, 2011, 2012; see Appendix A), Harris and Graham's (1996) *Making the writing process work: Strategies for composition and self-regulation* book, and the 6+1 Traits of Writing (Education Northwest, 2011). After first independently scoring the stories, the two raters discussed students' texts to attain 100% agreement. WORD (2010) provided the *number of words written* totals for each story. This author's hypothesis was that students' story content, quality, and *number of words written* scores would noticeably improve after learning ART.

Students' Change in Story-Writing Ability over Time

The data resulting from the project consisted of an initial survey with each student about writing, their story data during the daily sessions, an exit interview about ART, and the general education teachers as well as intervention specialist's thoughts about RTI.

Students' initial thoughts about Writing

At a small table in the media center of the library, this project's intervention specialist, Erica, sat with each student participant to ask some questions as a short survey about writing (Rhodes, 1993).

Erica (intervention specialist): What is writing? What do you think of when you hear the word "writing"?

Obadiah: You get to write things that sometimes are fake or not.
Timothy: Mostly just thinking about what you are doing and having fun.
Jane: Writing is making a story.
Carter: Thinking about words, putting them on paper, and having them make sense.
Erica: Are you a good writer?
Obadiah: Yes, because I write a lot--sometimes three pages at home.
Timothy: Yes, because I write to have fun and not always get everything perfect.
Jane: I do not know.
Carter: Sometimes, but my stories do not always make sense.
Erica: What would you like to improve about your writing?
Obadiah: Sometimes it does not make sense, but sometimes it does.
Timothy: My handwriting.
Jane: Ahh....not sure.
Carter: Better spelling and writing.

In this dialogue, students indicated either a positive or ambivalent attitude about writing. Most of the children could also identify aspects of their writing that they could improve.

Students' Story Data and Example Art Products

Table 1 illustrates participants' scores for story content and quality during the timeline of the project.

Table 1
 Participants' story content (SC) and quality (SQ) ART data during the project's timeline

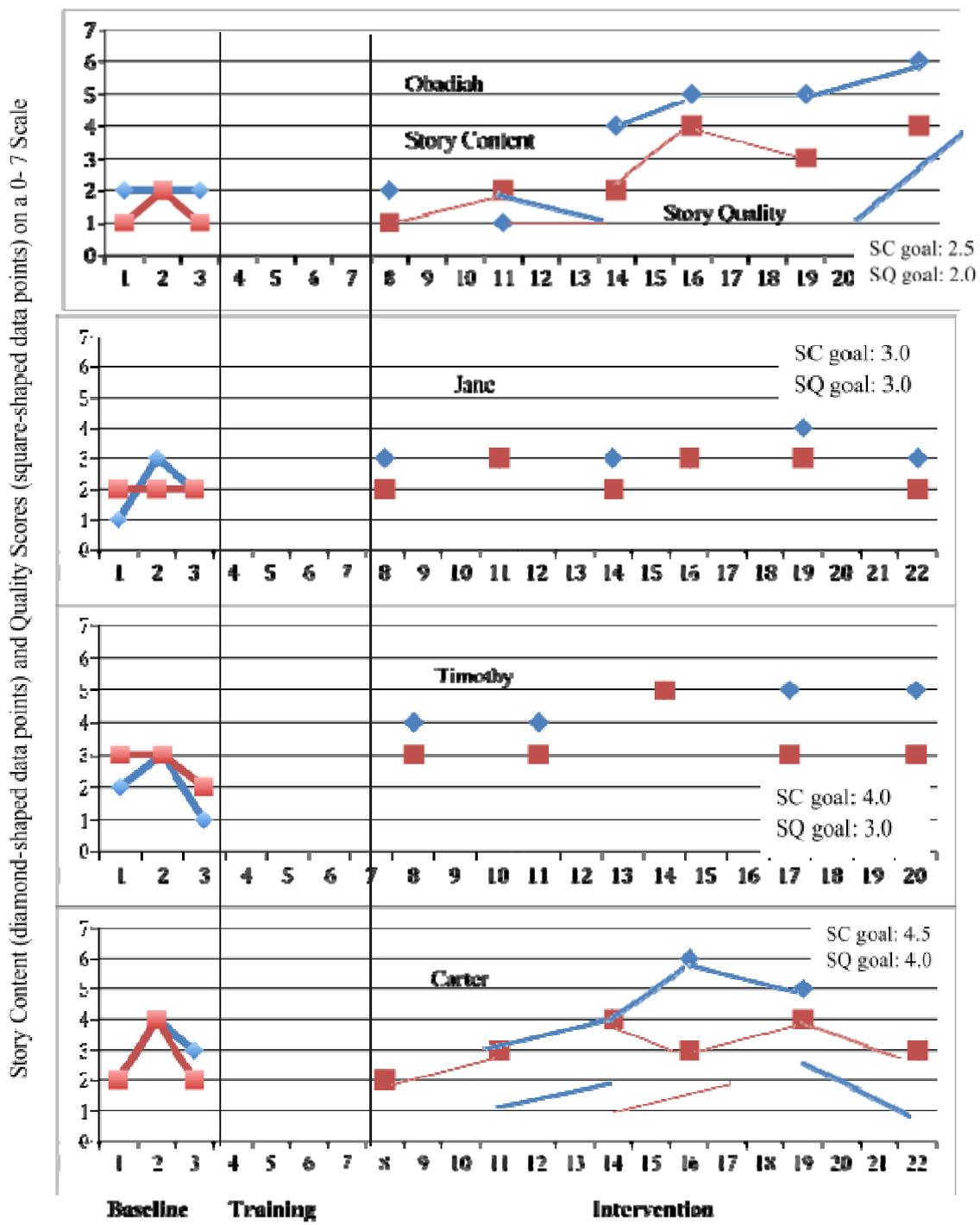


Table 2 provides students' mean scores for number of words written during baseline and intervention phases, after they learned the Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) mnemonic strategy.

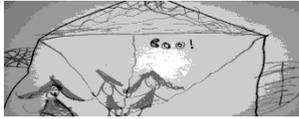
Table 2. *Baseline and Intervention Number of Words Written (NWW) Scores*

Student	Mean NWW Score during Baseline	Mean NWW Score during Intervention
Obadiah	12	23
Jane	15	20
Timothy	20	24
Carter	39	32

Obadiah, Jane, and Timothy met or exceeded the 150% above baseline story-writing content goal by the end of the intervention phase after learning ART. Carter made some progress with story content but could not sustain it, however. His teacher had commented that he was one of the lowest performing writers in the class and had difficulty staying on task. Although his *number of words written* decreased by seven in comparing baseline to intervention phases, Carter demonstrated that he could use fewer words to make his prose more targeted to the content purpose of story writing. Jane demonstrated enough progress to meet her story-content goal, but her story quality did not. Tables 1 and 2 indicate that Obadiah made the most progress in all three story-writing variables in this study (i.e., story content, quality, and *number of words written*). Timothy managed to maintain higher-than-baseline story content scores during the intervention phase and met his story quality goal.

Table 3 provides examples of student art and their associated story text. Because the children sometimes chose to color and add to the story prompt (black and white cartoon picture) in lieu of making their own original art, Table 3 provides the last training-phase story created by the participants as ART examples.

Table 3. *Student examples of ART Stories as of Session 7*

	<u>Ask</u>	<u>Reflect</u>	<u>Text</u>
Obadiah	Who? When?		There were 61 people and they were guys. They had a lot of weapons. A big fat monster was trying to kill the monster. They threw weapons at the monster. They were in the jungle. In was in the daytime. They ate the monster. The characters felt stuffed.
Jane	Where? What happens?		For Halloween I was a dancer. I went trick or treating. My mom was a cat. My sister was a butterfly. We went to a scary house. I was happy. Somebody said, "Boo!" We went home. Then we played. We were happy.
Timothy	What happens next? How did the story end?		On a hot, hot day, Solomon and Dad played in the park. Solomon slid down the slide and did a somersault. "Want to play soccer?" Solomon said, "Yes!" They had fun in the park.
Carter	How did the main character feel; how did the other characters feel?		One day, my family and me went to the dunes. My brother fell down so we had to go back to the house. A helicopter came. We were sad and mad because we had to go home.

In reviewing the story data, I found that students made their own art during only a few sessions. The children frequently colored in the black and white cartoon picture instead of drawing their own; training days had not exemplified this as Erica had stated at the beginning of each probe that they could make their own art using the paper and media provided. As demonstrated in Table 3, students followed the sequence of the Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) mnemonic strategy steps. They addressed Graham and Harris' (1989) WWW, W=2, H=2 questions by illustrating characters, time of day (e.g., sun), the scene of the main event, and how the characters felt. Given that these students were writing only a few words

or two sentences during baseline, their art and texts in Table 3 illustrate that they improved in their writing skills, likely in part thanks to learning ART.

Students and Teachers' Voices about ART, RTI, and the Children's Writing over Time

Students' Theme: ART helped Students with Writing Stories

Students felt ART helped them. "With ART, I know what to write about at first and to add more words. I can finish a story and may have enough ideas for another one too" (Obadiah, 12/6/2011). Timothy stated that ART helped him with components like "'when did the story take place?' At first I did not know. Then I thought about it, and the answer poofed into my brain" (12/8/2011). Jane liked that, "...she could write about the picture" (12/6/2011). Carter made a similar comment; "by seeing an illustration, you can get ideas from your picture" (12/5/2011). The students expressed that ART could help other children too.

Teachers and Intervention Specialists' Theme 1: The Promises of ART and Intervention Programming

Teachers stated that the ART mnemonic strategy appeared to help their students. "I think they do much better when they can actually draw it first and then write about it afterwards. ART sparked more interest in the writing" (Kate, second-grade teacher, 12/6/2011). Students' initiative and know-how improved with ART. "They were more confident, I noticed, as writers themselves. They were more apt to get started right away working on anything that was asked of them in writing. So I think the key thing was that their self-confidence has improved" (Samantha, fourth-grade teacher, 12/12/2011).

The structured approach too of drawing and thinking, rather than just drawing a picture, gave them scaffolding to come up with first their plan and then get going with the writing. The Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) mnemonic strategy may not have been a cure all for everything, but it actually gave them some really good tools. My student was able to verbalize ART and its components in the classroom (Tonya, second-grade teacher, 12/12/2011).

Kyle, a second-grade teacher, commented, "I can see that [Jane] now is able to write more than she was previously. Her handwriting even looks better even though that really is not necessarily a component of what we are working on, but she is able to make a beginning, middle, and end to her stories. She is adding more details to her texts. She often has trouble figuring out what she is going to write" (12/12/2011).

Teachers and Intervention Specialists' Theme 1: The Possible Pitfalls of RTI

This project's aim was to provide RTI-type intervention programming to a small group of struggling writers and have their teachers learn about and reflect on RTI during the study. While the teachers saw value in RTI processes, they also expressed concerns. "RTI was a very supportive kind of a program where the students could not fail. The intervention programming was really positive and growing from where they were" (Tonya, second-grade teacher, 12/12/2011). All four teachers and the intervention specialist voiced the need to have some type of assistance in the classroom (e.g., paraprofessional, student teacher) in order to manage the class as a whole and individual programming.

As the only teacher in the classroom, I do not see myself being able to spend that amount of time with two or three at-risk children during the school day because my students at this age are just not independent enough to do it. I do not believe it would be fair to spend all that time with those kids because I have a lot of needs in my classroom. If I had a student teacher, which I will in January, that might look a little bit different. While she is teaching, as long as they are not missing core instruction, I could see myself pulling those students out and maybe doing something like that. But without that extra help, I think it is really hard. (Kate, second-grade teacher, 12/6/2011).

RTI provided a format and components for intervention programming, but managing this with just one teacher would likely prove challenging. Resource personnel would be needed to help.

Reflections about Response to Intervention for Story-Writing Skills

While many schools across the United States, Canada, and Australia are implementing response to intervention, little, if any, research focuses in applying a Tier-2 type intervention for writing instruction and where general education teachers can see and learn about RTI's components and manner of possible implementation. The findings from this project result from these two parallel and associated aspects of providing intervention programming in schools. The first research question of this study asked whether the four struggling writers would progress with story-writing skills with learning and applying the Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) mnemonic strategy. Based on the *150% above baseline* criterion, student participants did make progress with story content as well as quality (except for Carter) by the end of the intervention's timeline. This supports the research literature in that mnemonic strategies can be a means to address the needs of children who struggle with academic skills such as writing (Graham

& Perin, 2007a and b). However, in this study, students' story quality scores were often lower in comparison to content.

One phase may not be enough for other children to make an end-of-intervention goal for story quality. The writing process involves a wide variety of skills (e.g., idea creation, spelling, sentence formulation, story progression). While the ART mnemonic strategy and the daily sessions' components (e.g., reading a published story, sentence combining) offered what struggling writers often need, additional phases (e.g., another 22 sessions) or an alternate mnemonic strategy may help promote more story-quality progress. The standard practice in RTI-type intervention writing projects is to have students use a consistent method for curriculum-based assessment (e.g., black and white cartoon pictures as the story topic). However, having the children generate their own story topic and art may have rendered better results. These ideas, as examples, in a subsequent phase of intervention programming may have helped the struggling writers to improve more or sooner.

Even with multiple phases and component strategies, intervention programming may not provide for every child's improvement (Torgesen, 2000). There are some children, albeit a likely very small portion, who can have great difficulty with the underlying process of language tasks such as processing speed and memory which can make it very difficult to improve in the areas of reading and writing. The ongoing challenge for RTI advocates is to help define what methods, strategies, assessments, and tools can manage this process in an expedient fashion. One of the reasons for RTI's creation was to help define dually discrepant children in early-elementary grades and begin receiving the long-term help (e.g., special education programming) that they should have.

The second question of this study focused on the intervention specialist and teachers' perspectives about response to intervention (RTI) as classroom practice. They expressed that while portions of RTI intervention programming could be managed in a piecemeal fashion, all of the components provided in this study would be a challenge—as Gerber (2005) expressed. To help address this concern, schools can review the resources they have across their building and consider ways that may help teachers to have smaller groups for portions of each school day to work with children, such as those who struggle with writing. The teachers in this project suggested student teachers as one example. Partnering with area university schools of education as a means to offer volunteer opportunities with pre-service teachers or recent graduates would help offer them some experience and build their network in schools while also providing for the needs of struggling writers. The teachers could hold an after-school workshop for the school community and specifically invite the parents/guardians of these children to learn about activities represented in intervention programming which could be done at home. If confidentiality can be assured, parent volunteers or people generally (e.g., retirees) could be trained and help to provide intervention programming. It is an ongoing challenge in many communities for the amount of funding to meet the level of student need. Devising ways to help make intervention happen is the place to start.

Final Thoughts

The components of the ART intervention sessions (e.g., reading published stories, discussing them; sentence-writing practice) represent what other researchers have found to be helpful in story-writing instruction (e.g., Calkins et al., 2006; Fletcher, & Portalupi, 1998; Graves, 1983; Shaywitz, 2003). Students in this project managed to improve in some areas over time; more practice may help the students make further and more consistent gains. The concept of RTI probes in how they periodically have students plan and write a story within 25 minutes provides insight into what they can do on their own; however, they do not reflect the typical process for story writing that successful authors employ (Nagin, 2006; Overmeyer, 2009). To this end within a general education classroom setting, teachers may have students do probes across days (not 25 minutes) and intervention timelines across months (not weeks). Students' story-writing data could be viewed in terms of progress with a text that has been generated through multiple drafts—a time-involved process for a struggling writer.

To provide more time, teachers can view intervention programming as integrating story writing with other subjects such as social studies. This can help provide opportunities for students to read, discuss, and analyze texts, which struggling writers can then use as models for their own writing (Yatvin, 2004). Differentiated instructional practices can also help facilitate programming for struggling writers (Tomlinson, 2001). Thinking of classroom programming as large group, small group, and individual group activities for children who struggle with a skill such as story writing provides a framework for managing even a small portion of time each day to help struggling writers.

Limitations

Four limitations should be noted. First, the number of participants (N=8) limits the generalization of the results to the larger population of struggling writers. Case examples provide

illustrations of how students learn and apply mnemonic-strategy instruction, but larger sample sizes often render results with more causal relationships.

Second, writing is a multifaceted process both to manage as well as decipher which aspect(s) provoke a student to struggle, when that happens. A student needs to concurrently manage idea generation, spelling, and story progress (to name a few examples) to produce a story product. The inclusion of spelling and sentence writing activities during baseline provided a means to help illustrate participants' basic writing skills before the application of the Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) mnemonic strategy during the intervention phase. Adding writing processes one phase at a time (i.e., first with spelling and sentence writing during baseline; then, ART added in the intervention phase) helped provide a means to control for the various components involved in story writing. However, how each child interpreted and applied ART and the writing processes is a difficult system to define at length by each student, the author, the teachers, and the intervention specialist.

Third, struggling writers tend to also be struggling readers (Shaywitz, 2003). Participants in this project had at least a beginning first-grade level of reading ability; challenges with reading may have impeded writing performance.

Fourth, the concept of a struggling writer can be a subjective term given the many components that comprise the process; interpretations by Erica, the teachers, the raters of the story data, and this author about the students' intervention sessions, story product scores, and interview data likely varied to some extent.

Future Research

As a follow-up study, a researcher could observe teachers' application of intervention-component strategies similar to this study within the general education classroom context. The teachers could assess their students' writing skills and define a small group of struggling writers for intervention programming. After teaching the Ask, Reflect, Text (ART) mnemonic strategy, the teachers could then provide these students with story-writing practice even in a piecemeal fashion across the school day.

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Appendix Table

Story Quality Rubric

0	<blank>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No text
1	John go fishing. Happy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very short or no text
2	The egg is fit to crack. The egg is beside the tree. The grass is green. The dots is black. It is black lines. It is with stuff. People is with them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simply describes the picture prompt. • No sense of story line. • Uses simple sentences. • Short amount of text.
3	There is a house. The people in the house are looking out. There is a space thing. It landed in the people's yard. So the people are looking out. One person is looking out of the door. The other is looking out the window. They are wondering what it is doing there. They are wondering if it will go away. There are stairs and someone is coming out. It looks like there is a door too. There is a window on it too. And it was going to have to go sometime.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simply describes the picture prompt. • No sense of story line. • Uses simple sentences.
4	Me and my friend was watching TV. Then I heard a noise. I looked out the door. My friend looked out the window. We both saw a little spaceship and the little door opened and some stairs came down. On the grass and four little aliens came down the stairs and they was making noise. They came down off the grass and on my porch. They saw someone coming. They thought I was their dad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides some sense of a story line/story structure, but lacks a clear intro and conclusion. • Grammatical and syntactical errors evident.
5	It was winter break, and Jack, Peter, and I were having fun. We had just gotten out of school. We were headed for the hills to go sledding. We had our sleds grasped in our hands. We knew we were going to have fun. We were bundled up in scarves, sock hats, mittens, socks, and snow boots. It was really cold outside. We started sledding down the icy hill. Lucy went up the hill, but didn't make it far. She went down the hill backwards. Carlos and Suzanne ran after her to catch her. After Lucy hits a tree she said it was fun. We ran and played in the snow for hours.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some evidence of an introduction, main event, and conclusion. • No use of paragraphs. • No use of voice. • Grammar and punctuation mostly correct.
6	On Saturday, while walking at the park, Paul found a strange egg. "This is huge!" He said. The next day, he went back to check on the egg. Before his very eyes, the egg hatched. Out came a baby dinosaur! He fed and watered it every day. He fed it some meat scraps from dinner. Later, he found a map. It showed a buried treasure! He quickly rode his bike there. He went inside a cave. He slowly proceeded with caution. He found a spade and started to dig around. After a while, He found an iron chest plated with copper. It asked Sharp Tooth, my dinosaur, to open the chest. He did. Inside was a magnificent emerald gem. It started glowing. Suddenly, his pet dinosaur, Sharp Tooth, started growing and sprouting wings. He flew Paul and his bike back home. Then Sharp Tooth flew off to a distant land. Paul hurried home to find a magnificent sapphire gem. He grinned. He went to the local gem trader and priced the gem. It was worth millions! Of course, he sold it and became a happy rich man.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction, main event, and conclusion are evident. • May employ some use of paragraphing. • Some use of voice. • Grammar and punctuation mostly correct.

7 Jack's Trip to the Fair

For his tenth birthday, Jack wanted to invite two of his friends, Ben and Larry, to go to the fair that coming Saturday. With his mother's help, Jack wrote the words and made the illustrations on the cards. He took them to school the next day to give to his friends. Ben and Larry told Jack the next day that their parents were ok with them going to the fair.

On Saturday morning, Jack ran outside to check the weather and was relieved to see a bright blue sky. His mother said, "Well, it looks like a perfect day for a day at the fair. After breakfast, we can drive to your friends' homes to pick them up."

As Jack and his mother drove to the Ben and Larry's street, Jack noticed some dark clouds forming in the sky. "Oh, I hope it isn't going to rain," he said, remembering that the fair was no fun last year when it rained.

The rain and wind began as Jack and his mom pulled into Ben's driveway, he and Larry got in the car. By the time they arrived at the fair, it was sprinkling but the clouds were passing and sunshine was in sight.

"Get your tickets to enter the fair here!" a man yelled as he pointed to the entrance gate. Jack's mother gave him a hug and said, "I am so pleased that the rain has ended and the sunshine is back. I know how much you wanted to come to the fair today with Larry and Ben."

After passing through the entrance gate, Jack saw four more of his friends gathered at the ice cream tent. When they spotted Jack, they cheered and began to sing "Happy Birthday." Jack, Ben, and Larry ran to greet their classmates. Jack was surprised to find a table with an ice cream cake and some presents. After eating some hot dogs and some cake, the boys began going on some of the rides and visiting the animal barns.

Jack had a great day with all of his friends! "I love going to the fair," Jack told them. "We do too!" They all agreed that they wanted to come back another time someday.

- Clear introduction, main event, and conclusion.
- Use of paragraphs.
- Use of voice.
- Almost completely correct use of grammar and syntax.