# Drop Everything and Read *Aloud*

## *To Become Fluent Readers, Students Need a Good Model and Lots of Oral Reading Practice (Not Silent Reading)*

By Jan Hasbrouck

After more than 20 years as the neglected goal of reading instruction (Allington, 1983; NICHD, 2000), fluency has finally become *the* hot topic among reading researchers, professional development providers, and teachers. These days it is rare to pick up a reading journal, attend a professional conference, or sit in a faculty staff room at a school without hearing someone discussing reading fluency. Surely most every educator has heard the message that if students aren't sufficiently fluent in their reading, they won't have sufficient comprehension. Given this clear statement—supported by a strong consensus of high-quality research studies—teachers and administrators everywhere are searching for ideas to help their students become fluent readers.

As someone who has been conducting research on fluency for the past two decades, I find the current buzz both promising and troubling. As I will explain, fluency is a vital reading skill, but the buzz around fluency is reaching deafening levels—and crucial details from the research are being overlooked. As a result, schools across the country are putting significant amounts of time and effort into two instructional strategies for improving fluency that the research does not support: silent reading and Round Robin Reading (RRR). Developing fluency among struggling readers takes more intensive, carefully guided practice than either of these strategies can deliver. Let's take a quick look at how these ineffective strategies became so popular and move on to an in-depth discussion of what reading fluency really is and how teachers can help their struggling students.

Marilyn Jager Adams (1990) stated in her noteworthy synthesis of reading research that "if we want children to read well, we must find a way to induce them to read lots" (p. 5). Many educators took this statement to heart and made the leap to the idea that one great way to help students do a lot of reading would be to have them read in the classroom. Methods labeled "sustained silent reading" (SSR) or "drop everything and read" (DEAR) became commonplace in schools across the country. Some schools encouraged teachers to spend significant amounts of classroom time having the students—and often the teacher as well—read silently up to 30 minutes a day, plus an additional 15 minutes in writing personal reflections on what was read (Sierra-Perry, 1996). What some SSR and DEAR proponents may have missed is Adams's follow-up statement: "if we want to induce children to read lots, we must also teach them to read well" (1990, p. 5).

Of course, not all educators got swept up in the excitement around SSR and DEAR; some questioned if devoting this much time to unassisted, independent reading and writing could really be beneficial for all students. What about those students who struggle with basic reading skills and who may not use their silent reading time well—either wasting time by doing little to no reading or writing, or trying to read materials that cause frustration because they are too difficult? As it turns out, such concerns are justified. The National Reading Panel* (NRP) concluded there is insufficient support from empirical research to suggest that independent, silent reading can be used to help students improve their fluency (NICHD, 2000). (Note that the NRP did not say that it has no benefits, just that silent reading does not build fluency. So, if a teacher has

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*In 1997, the United States Congress asked the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to convene a group of experts to assess the effectiveness of different approaches used to teach children to read. This group, called the National Reading Panel (NRP), spent more than two years reviewing research; their resulting report, completed in 2000, is widely considered the single best source for information on how—and how not—to teach reading.

ILLUSTRATED BY BARBARA KIWAK

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just a handful of students with fluency problems, she could have most of her class reading silently while she engages the struggling students in activities that will build their fluency.)

Instead of independent silent reading, the NRP (NICHD, 2000) concluded that teachers should provide opportunities for students to read aloud with some guidance and feedback. One way some teachers have provided this kind of oral reading practice in their classrooms is to revive a method that has long been used in classrooms: Round Robin Reading. RRR involves having individual students in a group take turns reading aloud from text. While RRR can be used to read narrative passages, it is also frequently employed by content area teachers by having students take turns reading aloud all or part of a chapter in a social studies or science textbook.

A common rationale for using RRR in a classroom—along with providing the oral guided reading recommended by the NRP—is that in some classes there are students who would not be able or motivated to read a literature passage or a chapter from their textbook by themselves. RRR is seen as a way for a teacher to ensure that every student is in fact reading, and if there are some difficult words or concepts, the teacher is available to provide support.

Despite the popularity and longevity of RRR, upon reflection there are clearly several downsides to using this method. Perhaps the most obvious concern is how the requirement to read aloud to classmates can put students—especially those who struggle with reading—in a position of being humiliated and demoralized by displaying their weak skills in front of their peers. Their more skilled peers may feel uncomfortable as well, and are subjected to listening to poor examples of reading. Another concern about RRR is the very minimal practice provided by this method. If there are more than a small number of students in the group, each individual student is only reading for a very short period of time, which is clearly insufficient to make any difference in fluency. In addition, it is questionable as to whether or not the students who are not reading aloud are actually paying attention. RRR can be most accurately viewed as a way to "cover" written text, but it is difficult to justify its use given these considerable weaknesses.

Since the importance of fluency has become widely recognized, teachers have been doing their best to improve students' fluency. But, as we have just seen, sometimes the information they have to work with is incomplete and, therefore, leads them down the wrong path. Silent reading *seems* like a good idea since it gives students additional practice. Round Robin *seems* like a good idea since it focuses the class on oral reading. But increasing fluency requires more practice, more support, and more guided oral reading than either of these strategies can deliver.

Let's cut through the buzz around fluency and review what reading fluency is, why it is essential to ensure that our students have sufficient fluency, how fluency should be assessed, and how to best provide fluency practice and support for our students. We'll start by defining fluency.

## I. Understanding and Assessing Fluency

While the National Reading Panel's definition of fluency as the ability to read text with accuracy, appropriate rate, and good expression (NICHD, 2000) is widely accepted among fluency researchers, these experts continue to debate the more subtle aspects of fluency (Stecker, Roser, and Martinez, 1998; Wolf and Katzir-Cohen, 2001). However it is defined, this much is certain: Fluency is necessary, but not sufficient[†], for understanding the meaning of text. When children read too slowly or haltingly, the text devolves into a broken string of words and/or phrases; it's a struggle just to remember what's been read, much less extract its meaning. So it's important that teachers determine if their students' fluency is at grade level. If not, how should it be developed? If a student is appropriately fluent for her grade level, how does a teacher help maintain that student's fluency? And, how does a teacher make these determinations? This process begins with assessments of the

[†]Comprehension depends on reading skills (like decoding and fluency), but it also depends on vocabulary and background knowledge. To learn more about comprehension, see "Building Knowledge: The Case for Bringing Content into the Language Arts Block and for a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum Core for All Children" by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in the Spring 2006 issue of *American Educator,* **www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring06/index.htm**.

component pieces of fluency: prosody, accuracy, and rate.

The exact role of expression and phrasing—or prosody—in fluency and comprehension has not yet been determined, but it certainly is one element that signifies whether or not a student is truly a fluent reader. To measure the quality of a student's reading prosody, some educators rely on the four-level scale first developed for the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, and Oranje, 2005). This scale focuses on the level of skill a student demonstrates in phrasing and expression while reading aloud (see below). After listening to an individual student read aloud, the educator rates the student's reading according to the level that best describes the student's overall performance.

| **National Assessment of Educational Progress Fluency Scale** | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Fluent** | Level 4 | Reads primarily in larger, meaningful phrase groups. Although some regressions, repetitions, and deviations from text may be present, these do not appear to detract from the overall structure of the story. Preservation of the author's syntax is consistent. Some or most of the story is read with expressive interpretation. |
| | Level 3 | Reads primarily in three- or four-word phrase groups. Some small groupings may be present. However, the majority of phrasing seems appropriate and preserves the syntax of the author. Little or no expressive interpretation is present. |
| **Non-Fluent** | Level 2 | Reads primarily in two-word phrases with some three- or four-word groupings. Some word-by-word reading may be present. Word groupings may seem awkward and unrelated to larger context of sentence or passage. |
| | Level 1 | Reads primarily word-by-word. Occasional two-word or three-word phrases may occur—but these are infrequent and/or they do not preserve meaningful syntax. |

A checklist developed by Hudson, Lane and Pullen (2005, p. 707) provides a more detailed assessment of a student's prosody:

1. Student placed vocal emphasis on appropriate words.

2. Student's voice tone rose and fell at appropriate points in the text.

3. Student's inflection reflected the punctuation in the text (e.g., voice tone rose near the end of a question).

4. In narrative text with dialogue, student used appropriate vocal tone to represent characters' mental states, such as excitement, sadness, fear, or confidence.

5. Student used punctuation to pause appropriately at phrase boundaries.

6. Student used prepositional phrases to pause appropriately at phrase boundaries.

7. Student used subject–verb divisions to pause appropriately at phrase boundaries.

8. Student used conjunctions to pause appropriately at phrase boundaries.

Although most researchers consider prosody important, the subjectivity of judging students' prosody makes it a difficult component of fluency to study. Many researchers have focused on the more easily quantifiable components of fluency (rate and accuracy) and, therefore, some basic questions about prosody—like what should be expected in second grade versus sixth grade—have not been answered. Nevertheless, students' prosody is an extra piece of information for making instructional decisions. When students' speed and accuracy are on grade level, reading with proper phrasing, expression, and intonation should be the next goal.

To measure students' oral reading speed and accuracy, researchers have developed a simple and very brief procedure that uses regular classroom texts to determine the number of words that students can read correctly in one minute. To obtain a words-correct-per-minute (WCPM) score, students are assessed individually as they read aloud for one minute from an unpracticed passage of text.

To calculate the WCPM score, the examiner subtracts the total number of errors from the total number of words read in one minute. An error includes any word that is omitted, mispronounced, or substituted for another word. Words transposed in a phrase count as two errors (e.g., reading "laughed and played" instead of "played and laughed"). Each time a word is read incorrectly it is counted as an error. Words read correctly that are repeated more than once, errors self-corrected by the student, words inserted by the student that do not appear in the text, and words mispronounced due to dialect or speech impairments are not counted as errors. They do, however, impact the final score since they slow the student down and, therefore, reduce the number of words that are read correctly in one minute (Shinn, 1989).

If the passage is randomly selected from a text or trade book, an average score sould be taken from readings of two or three different passages to account for any text-based differences. If standardized passages are used (in which the text has been carefully controlled for difficulty), a score from a single passage may be sufficient (Hintze and Christ, 2004). Standardized passages can be found in the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills—DIBELS* (Good and Kaminski, 2002), the *Reading Fluency Progress Monitor* (Read Naturally, 2002), or Edformation's *AIMSWeb* materials.

To determine if the student's score is on target, the examiner compares it to the oral reading fluency norms presented on p. ##. My colleague Gerald Tindal and I (2006) developed these national norms for grades one to eight by analyzing data that were collected using the procedures just described with over 200,000 students from 23 states. It's critical to understand, as explained below and in the sidebar, (see page XX) that the

WCPM is an alarm bell, the canary in the coal mine. If WCPM is very low, the student is not sufficiently fluent and an intervention is merited. But the fluency weakness may be caused by weak fluency skills or *other reading weaknesses*, for example, in decoding, vocabulary, sight words, etc.—so a thorough diagnostic assessment is necessary to determine what type of intervention a student needs.

**The Canary in the Coal Mine**

With all the assessments schools are required to administer as a result of No Child Left Behind, Reading First, and numerous statewide and district initiatives, some educators are concerned about over-testing students. They ask: "How can we justify spending so much precious instructional time testing our students over and over again?" This concern is certainly legitimate. The purpose of having our students in school is to teach them, not to test them. However, as professional educators, it is imperative that we make decisions about the instruction we provide our students based on the best information available. The WCPM procedure just described is an extremely time-efficient and reliable way to track students' fluency—*and their overall reading ability*. While it may be surprising that a one-minute assessment can be so informative, WCPM has been shown, in both theoretical and empirical research, to serve as an accurate and powerful indicator of overall reading competence—especially through its strong correlation with comprehension. Its validity and reliability have been well established in a body of research extending over the past 25 years (Fuchs et al., 2001; Shinn, 1998). The relationship between WCPM and comprehension has been found to be stronger in the elementary and junior high grades than in older students (Fuchs et al., 2001), likely due to the fact that as a reader matures, competent reading involves more complex skills, vocabulary, and knowledge (and thus any single measure becomes less predictive of general reading competence as a student develops).

Teachers can and should use WCPM as their canary in the coal mine—their first indicator that all may not be well with their students' reading ability.[§] In first through fifth grade, WCPM should be used to *screen* all students, help to *diagnose* a possible cause of struggling students' problems, and to *monitor* the progress of struggling students who are receiving additional support. To learn how, see "Screening, Diagnosis, and Progress Monitoring: The Details" on p. #.

[§] Fluency is a key indicator of students' overall reading development—but it is not the only skill that should be assessed. As explained by Joseph Torgesen in the Fall 2004 issue of *American Educator*, in kindergarten, "assessment covers such early reading skills as letter-name knowledge, phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge, and vocabulary. After reading instruction begins in first grade, the best way to identify children who are falling behind in the ability to read words accurately and fluently is to measure that skill directly. Therefore, by the end of first grade, the assessments should also be measuring oral reading fluency." Torgesen recommends that fluency assessments continue in elementary school and that reading comprehension also be measured starting in second grade. Visit **www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall04/reading.htm**.

With our new understanding of what fluency is and how to assess it, let's turn to the questions that teachers are always most interested in: What should fluency instruction look like? And, what can I do to help my students who are far behind their peers?

## II. Developing Fluent Readers

Research over the past two decades has identified repeated reading as the key strategy for improving students' fluency skills (NICHD, 2000). Repeated reading has two essential elements: (1) Giving students the opportunity to read and then re-read the same text and (2) having students practice their reading orally with an opportunity to receive corrections and guidance (if necessary). Research has also determined that having students read aloud along with a model of well-paced, expressive reading and receiving specific feedback through systematic progress monitoring are also help improve students' fluency skills. So, what are the best methods to use in the classroom to help students become fluent? The answer depends on whether the student is just beginning to learn to read, has learned to read and is making adequate progress, or is struggling with reading. Let's start with beginning readers, those students in kindergarten and grade one.

**Teaching Beginning Readers to Become Fluent**

Because accuracy is a fundamental component of fluency, teachers who work with beginning readers must focus significant amounts of instructional time on basic word recognition and word analysis skills (Pikulski and Chard, 2005). To do this effectively, teachers should provide instruction that systematically presents daily opportunities for students to learn to read words accurately (Snow, Burns, and Griffith, 1998)—the important first step in becoming a skillful, proficient, and motivated reader. Pushing students to "read faster" too soon could cause some students to begin guessing or otherwise undermine their focus on reading carefully.

There is no guidance from empirical research about precisely when teachers should formally begin encouraging beginning readers to increase their speed, but teachers usually wait until about the middle of first grade. Fluency researchers Stahl and Kuhn (2002) recommend that students be given opportunities to re-read sentences and encouraged to make their reading "sound like talking" as soon as they are making good progress with basic decoding, demonstrating an understanding of the act of reading, and showing some degree of confidence—whether that happens in kindergarten or in first grade. Teachers and parents should also frequently model fluent reading, demonstrating (and sometimes explicitly pointing out) how accurate reading can be done at a reasonable rate and with good phrasing, intonation, and expression. In the classroom, the teacher can read aloud from large-format books so the students can follow along.

**Maintaining Reading Fluency for On-Level Readers**

What about students in grades two and higher who are making adequate progress with their reading? Three techniques can be used as often as once a day to help maintain and develop

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students' reading fluency: Choral reading, cloze reading, and partner reading. All of these procedures can be used with readers at any grade level, with small or large groups, and with fiction or content-heavy nonfiction materials. Two additional techniques can be considered for use **[JH: how often?]** readers' theater and poetry readings. Let's review each.

For choral reading, the teacher and students read aloud together, following the teacher's pace—so students get the benefit of a model while they practice reading aloud. The teacher can stop at any time to ask questions, comment on the text, discuss a vocabulary term, or remind the class that she expects everyone to be reading. If choral reading is used with heterogeneously grouped students, it is possible that the lowest performing students may have difficulty keeping up with even a moderate pace. However, they can follow along, participating when they can, and still hear the text being read accurately and with good pacing and phrasing. Choral reading works best if the teacher directs all students—regardless of age or ability level—to use a marker or finger to follow along in the text as they read.

Cloze reading is similar to choral reading, except the teacher does most of the oral reading while the students read along silently. Once or twice every few sentences, the teacher omits an important vocabulary or context word, not a simple sight word, and the students' job is to read it aloud as a class . Notice that with cloze reading, as opposed to choral, students spend less time practicing oral reading. Therefore, cloze reading is best thought of as an alternative to Round Robin Reading. Cloze reading allows teachers to cover text and keeps students engaged while avoiding the pitfalls of subjecting the class to examples of poor reading and embarrassing struggling students. As with choral reading, it is likely that the lowest performing readers will be unable to keep up or to correctly read every omitted word, but they will not be singled out—and will be provided with examples of skillful reading.

Another method for improving fluency is to have students read aloud to a partner. This procedure works best when students are taught some techniques for giving feedback and managing their time and when the partners have been selected by the teacher. One technique for assigning partners is for teachers to first rank the students from the strongest reader in the class to the weakest (making judgments subjectively or from assessment data) and then consider whether there are students whose reading ability is so low that partner reading may be inappropriate. (These students could meet with the teacher for more direct instruction or closely supported partner reading while the other students do independent partner reading.) The teacher then divides the remaining students in half, forming pairs such that the strongest reader is paired with a mid-level reader, and so on, ensuring that each pair has a slightly stronger reader, but that the difference in the students' ability is not so large as to cause embarrassment or confusion.

At times, the stronger reader may be directed to read first, providing a model of fluent reading. Then the less fluent reader reads the same text aloud. The stronger student can help with word recognition and give feedback and encouragement to the less fluent partner. Another effective technique pairs students who read at the same level and asks them to re-read a story on which they have already received instruction from the teacher (Osborn and Lehr, 2004).

Readers' Theater and poetry readings—both of which engage students in a reading performance—have become popular over the last few years. Much has been written about Readers' Theater in particular, and about the apparent value of having students participate in dramatic readings (Rasinski, 2006). These kinds of activities provide students with an opportunity to read text that is enjoyable—and provides a clear incentive for students to read, and re-read, their assigned parts or poem. However, while these techniques are motivating, teachers should not assume that Readers' Theater could possibly provide as much practice for the whole class as choral or partner reading, much less anything close to the amount of instruction and practice necessary for struggling students to improve their fluency.

**Improving Struggling Readers' Fluency: Suggestions for Intervention**

The research literature provides some clear directions on what to do with struggling readers: Interventions must combine the

*(Continued on page 30)*

# Screening, Diagnosis, and Progress Monitoring: The Details

Screening, diagnosing, and progress monitoring are essential to making sure that all students become fluent readers—and the words-correct-per-minute (WCPM) procedure (see p. #) can work for all three.* Screening with WCPM means doing a quick checkup to see which students are reading at expected levels and if any have fallen behind.

To use WCPM for screening, diagnosing, and progress monitoring, the only aspect of the procedure that has to change is the difficulty level of the text. For *screening*, passages are selected from text at the student's *grade level*. For *diagnosing*, passages are selected at the student's *instructional level* (which may be lower than her grade level). In this context, instructional level text is challenging but manageable, with the reader making errors on no more than one in ten words (i.e., the reader is successful with 90 percent of the text) (Partnership for Reading, 2001). For *progress monitoring* decisions, passages are selected at a student's individually determined *goal level*. For example, if an 8th-grade student's instructional level is at the 5th-grade level, the teacher may conduct the progress monitoring assessments using passages at the 6th-grade level.

**Screening**

Because empirical research clearly indicates the urgent need to provide high quality, intensive instructional interventions to students at risk of reading difficulty as soon as possible (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998), schools should administer screening measures to every student through the 5th grade.

To determine if students are at the expected levels in their reading fluency, my colleague Gerald Tindal and I (2006) suggest comparing students' WCPM scores to the 50th percentile score on the norms table, given the students' grade placement and the approximate time of year in which the assessment was conducted. A score falling more than 10 words below the 50th percentile should raise a concern; the student may need additional assistance, and further assessments may be needed to diagnose the source of the below-average performance. Depending on the age of the student and any concerns about reading performance noted by the teacher or parents, such additional testing might include assessments of oral language development, phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, and/or comprehension.

**Diagnosing**

If a student scores poorly on a fluency screening, or if the teacher has some other cause for concern such as poor performance in class or on another assessment, the teacher should take a more

## Example of a Diagnosis

Andrew, an eighth-grader, recently moved to a different town where he entered a new school in March.* It soon became evident to his teachers that Andrew was having difficulty with his academic work. At a weekly meeting during which teachers discuss any concerns about their students, several teachers brought samples of Andrew's work to share. The teachers agreed that the school's reading specialist should determine if reading problems were contributing to Andrew's struggle with his assignments in several classes. The reading specialist conducted an IRI (Informal Reading Intervention) and planned to follow up with additional assessments if Andrew's performance on the IRI indicated possible deficits in phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, vocabulary, and/or comprehension. The specialist built a fluency assessment into the initial IRI by using a stopwatch to determine how many words Andrew could read in the first 60 seconds of each IRI passage.

The reading specialist began the IRI using a sixth-grade passage, two years below Andrew's grade. The passage was at a frustration level for him: He had difficulty with decoding, phrasing, and expression, and was only able to correctly answer four of the eight comprehension questions. But instead of calculating Andrew's WCPM on this passage, the specialist repeated the assessment using a fifth-grade passage; Andrew was able to read it with 94 percent accuracy and correctly answer six of the eight comprehension questions.

Because Andrew's score on the fifth-grade passage represented his instructional reading level, the specialist calculated Andrew's WCPM score at this level. The specialist compared Andrew's score, 131 WCPM, to the norms for fifth-graders in the spring (Hasbrouck and Tindal, 2006). The 50th percentile in the spring of fifth grade is 139 WCPM. Because Andrew's score fell less than 10 words below it, his fluency is within the expected range for fifth-grade readers in the spring.

The reading specialist's conclusion was that Andrew appears to be reading approximately three years below grade level, but that his fluency skill level appears to be appropriate for his overall reading level. Before designing Andrew's reading program, however, the specialist will need to administer a diagnostic assessment focused on phonics and decoding, and a more comprehensive assessment of vocabulary and comprehension. The intervention will likely include fluency instruction and practice in Andrew's supplementary lessons, but she suspects at this point that there may be some underlying weaknesses in Andrew's decoding skills contributing to his delay in overall reading development.

* Andrew is a pseudonym.

careful look at the student's strengths and needs. The student could be deficient in a variety of reading skills or in related areas like vocabulary and background knowledge, so administering a comprehensive diagnostic assessment is critical for designing effective instruction, providing evidence of the need for a reading specialist, or referring the student for further evaluation. Typically, if a weak reader's fluency level is below his other reading levels (word attack, sight words, etc.), fluency is a weakness and deserves special intervention; other weaknesses may also require intervention. If the weak reader's fluency level is at the same level or above other skills (even if it is below his grade level), the low WCMP is the result—not the of other reading weaknesses and other interventions are called for. (See example, below left.)

**Oral Reading Fluency Norms Grades 1-8**

| PERCENTILE | FALL WCPM | WINTER WCPM | SPRING WCPM | AWI | PERCENTILE | FALL WCPM | WINTER WCPM | SPRING WCPM | AWI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **GRADE 1** | | | | | **GRADE 5** | | | | |
| *90* | — | 81 | 111 | 1.9 | *90* | 166 | 182 | 194 | 0.9 |
| *75* | — | 47 | 82 | 2.2 | *75* | 139 | 156 | 168 | 0.9 |
| *50* | — | 23 | 53 | 1.9 | *50* | 110 | 127 | 139 | 0.9 |
| *25* | — | 12 | 28 | 1.0 | *25* | 85 | 99 | 109 | 0.8 |
| *10* | — | 6 | 15 | 0.6 | *10* | 61 | 74 | 83 | 0.7 |
| **GRADE 2** | | | | | **GRADE 6** | | | | |
| *90* | 106 | 125 | 142 | 1.1 | *90* | 177 | 195 | 204 | 0.8 |
| *75* | 79 | 100 | 117 | 1.2 | *75* | 153 | 167 | 177 | 0.8 |
| *50* | 51 | 72 | 89 | 1.2 | *50* | 127 | 140 | 150 | 0.7 |
| *25* | 25 | 42 | 61 | 1.1 | *25* | 98 | 111 | 122 | 0.8 |
| *10* | 11 | 18 | 31 | 0.6 | *10* | 68 | 82 | 93 | 0.8 |
| **GRADE 3** | | | | | **GRADE 7** | | | | |
| *90* | 128 | 146 | 162 | 1.1 | *90* | 180 | 192 | 202 | 0.7 |
| *75* | 99 | 120 | 137 | 1.2 | *75* | 156 | 165 | 177 | 0.7 |
| *50* | 71 | 92 | 107 | 1.1 | *50* | 128 | 136 | 150 | 0.7 |
| *25* | 44 | 62 | 78 | 1.1 | *25* | 102 | 109 | 123 | 0.7 |
| *10* | 21 | 36 | 48 | 0.8 | *10* | 79 | 88 | 98 | 0.6 |
| **GRADE 4** | | | | | **GRADE 8** | | | | |
| *90* | 145 | 166 | 180 | 1.1 | *90* | 185 | 199 | 199 | 0.4 |
| *75* | 119 | 139 | 152 | 1.0 | *75* | 161 | 173 | 177 | 0.5 |
| *50* | 94 | 112 | 123 | 0.9 | *50* | 133 | 146 | 151 | 0.6 |
| *25* | 68 | 87 | 98 | 0.9 | *25* | 106 | 115 | 127 | 0.6 |
| *10* | 45 | 61 | 72 | 0.8 | *10* | 77 | 84 | 97 | 0.6 |

*WCPM: Words Correct Per Minute*
*AWI: Average Weekly Improvement*

*Hasbrouck and Tindal, 2006*

**Monitoring Student Progress**

If a student's diagnosis reveals problems with fluency, additional, targeted instruction in fluency should begin right away and the WCPM procedures can be used to track each student's progress. Many educators have found WCPM to be a better tool for monitoring students' progress than traditional standardized measures that typically are time-consuming, expensive, only administered infrequently, and of limited instructional utility (Good, Simmons, and Kame'enui, 2001; Tindal and Marston, 1990). For students reading six to 12 months below grade level, progress monitoring should be done frequently, perhaps once or twice monthly for as long as students require supplemental instruction. Progress monitoring should be done as often as once per week for students who are reading more than one year below level and receiving intensive intervention services, including special education. This regular monitoring assures that if the intervention is not working well, it can be modified.

When monitoring the progress of these struggling readers, the standard procedures are expanded by graphing the student's WCPM scores. A progress-monitoring graph, for perhaps a grading period or a trimester, is created for each student. Teachers can use the average weekly improvement data in the norms table to select an ambitious, yet reasonalbe, instructional goal; for example, a fourth-grader's goal could be to improve by 15 WCPM over 10 weeks of instruction. An aim line is placed on the graph to represent the progress a student must make to achieve a preset fluency goal. Each time the student is assessed, that score is added to the graph. If three or more consecutive scores fall below the aim line, the teacher must consider adjusting the instructional program (Hasbrouck et al., 1999). Teachers should also consider having the students record their own WCPM scores on their graphs—it increases their motivation and investment in their reading progress (Shinn, 1998). [**JH: Read Natually has a little different approach to progress monitoring: students graph every practiced passage and there is no aimline. Can you add a sentence or 2 to reconcile them?**]

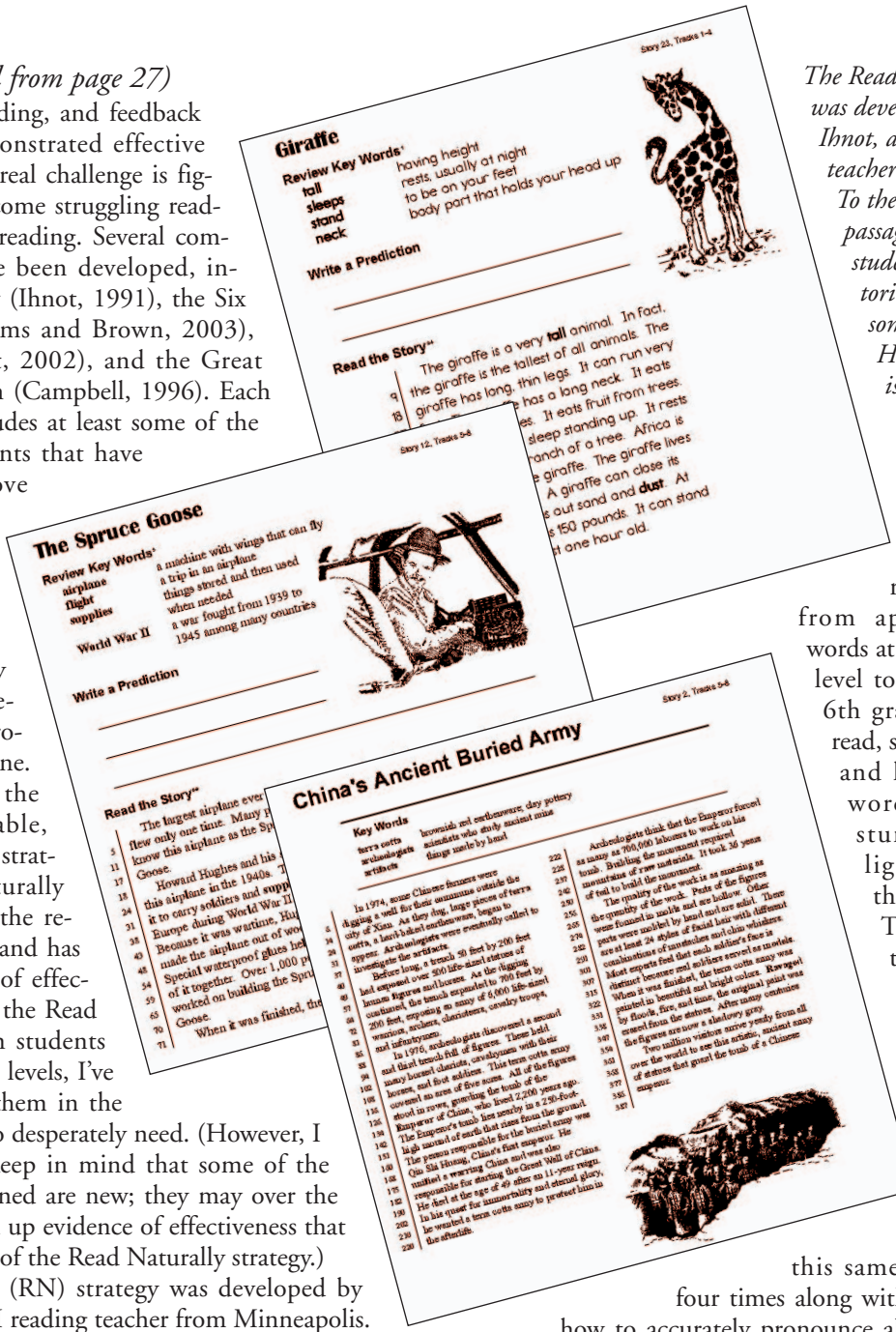
These procedures for screening, diagnosing, and progress monitoring have been available for many years, but have not been widely used in schools (Hasbrouck, et al., 1999). This situation will likely change as educators become more aware of the importance of preventing reading difficulties and for pro-

* The increased use of this terminology has created some confusion due to a lack of accepted clear definitions. Screenings are sometimes referred to as benchmark assessments, and their repeated use in the winter and spring is sometimes referred to as progress monitoring. In this article the term screening is used for universal assessments done two to three times per year and progress monitoring is reserved for frequent formative assessments for students receiving an intervention.

** There are also screening assessments that can be administered as early as kindergarten, to determine if students are on track for reading achievement. To learn more, see "Preventing Early Reading Failure" in the Fall 2004 issue of American Educator, **www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall04/reading.htm**.

*(Continued from page 27)*

modeling, repeated reading, and feedback that research has demonstrated effective (Shaywitz, 2003). The real challenge is figuring out how to overcome struggling readers' tendency to avoid reading. Several commercial programs have been developed, including Read Naturally (Ihnot, 1991), the Six Minute Solution (Adams and Brown, 2003), Quick Reads (Heibert, 2002), and the Great Leaps Reading program (Campbell, 1996). Each of these programs includes at least some of the instructional components that have been shown to improve students' reading fluency and has its own approach to student engagement.




*The Read Natually strategy was developed by Candyce Ihnot, a Title I reading teacher from Minneapolis. To the left are sample RN passages. To the right is a student's progress monitoring chart. SH: add something about Henri? Grade? What is level 1.8????????*

Unfortunately, research that directly compares the effectiveness of these various programs has yet to be done. In my own review of the research that is available, I've concluded that the strategy used by Read Naturally makes the best use of the research base on fluency and has the strongest evidence of effectiveness. And, in using the Read Naturally strategy with students in many different grade levels, I've found that it engages them in the repeated reading they so desperately need. (However, I encourage readers to keep in mind that some of the other programs mentioned are new; they may over the next several years, build up evidence of effectiveness that equals or surpasses that of the Read Naturally strategy.)

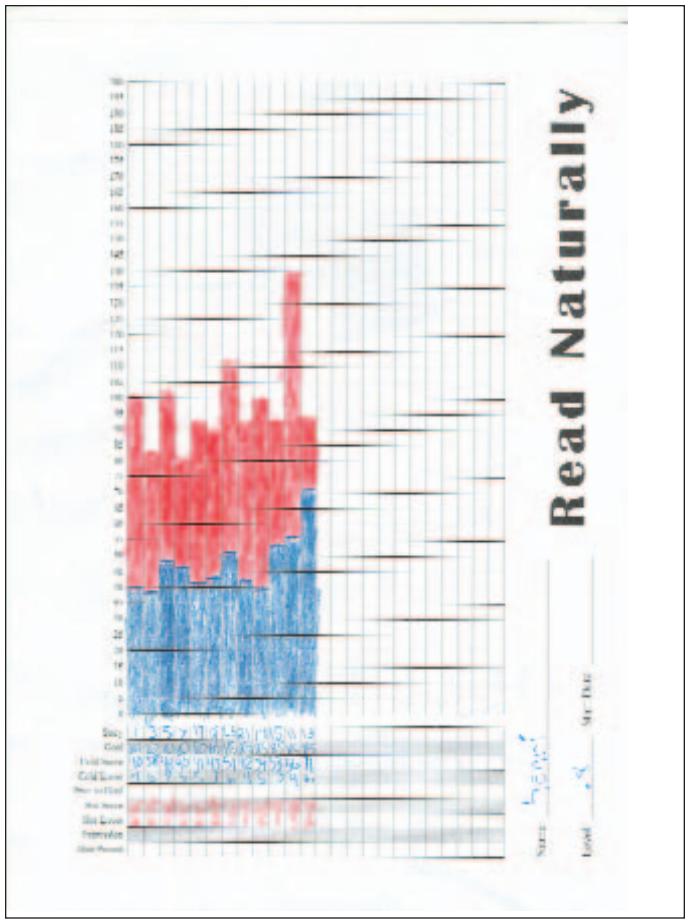
The Read Naturally (RN) strategy was developed by Candyce Ihnot, a Title I reading teacher from Minneapolis. Candyce developed and tested it in 1989 as part of her master's thesis in special education. After finding that her approach was effective with struggling students in her school, Candyce and her husband, Tom Ihnot, developed a set of instructional materials that are commercially available from their company, Read Naturally, Inc.

To implement the RN strategy, students' fluency levels (WCPM) are assessed to place students at an appropriate instructional level (40-60 WCPM in primary grades, and up to 60-80 or 80-100 WCPM in upper elementary grades). The teacher then helps each student set a reasonable, achievable fluency goal (approximately 80-90 WCPM for primary students or older students reading at a primary level; from 90-120 WCPM for upper elementary students).

Instruction begins with an unpracticed, "cold reading" of a student-selected passage from the targeted level. Passages may range in length from approximately 50 words at the mid-first grade level to 350 words at the 6th grade level. As they read, students use a timer and keep track of the words they skip or stumble over (by lightly underlining the problem word). They then calculate their WCPM and graph this first, unpracticed WCPM score on a bar graph (see example, above right).

In step two, students practice reading this same passage three to four times along with a model to learn how to accurately pronounce all the words in the text. This step is not timed, and the students read the entire passage. The modeled reading can come from a recording or a person trained to read the passage at a rate that is comfortable for the student. The key here is that a student does not just listen to the model, but actually reads aloud (softly) with the narrator's voice, giving full attention to the text. Encouraging students to point to the text being read and informing them that they will be responsible for answering a set of comprehension questions after completing all the steps in the strategy helps students stay focused.

Once students feel comfortable with the text, they begin step three in which they read the text independently, again aloud, but softly. Students set a timer for one minute and read the text several times until they are comfortably reaching their predetermined goal level—and are ready to be checked by the teacher. (Having some kind of silent signal for the teacher such




as a flag or colored card at the students' desk can help manage this step.) Students keep practicing the passage until the teacher can meet with them because this maximizes their engaged practice time—a key to improved skills in low-performing students (Brophy, 1988).

In the final step, the student reads for the teacher, who then calculates the WCPM score. The student "passes" if four criteria are met: (1) the WCPM score meets or exceeds the predetermined goal, (2) three or fewer errors are made, (3) the student reads the passage with correct phrasing and attention to punctuation, and (4) the student can correctly answer a few comprehension questions. When students do not pass, they continue practicing this same text. When they do pass, they graph their new score onto same bar with their initial, unpracticed score, using a different color pencil or marker. This graph gives tangible evidence to the students that they are improving—and keeps motivation high by showing them that their own effort makes the difference.

Students repeat these steps until they complete 10-12 passages of equivalent difficulty. At that point the student and teacher collaboratively examine the data on the student's graph to decide what step to take next. If the student is making steady progress in the current level, but is not yet approaching his goal level on the first, unpracticed reading, he should stay in that same level for another 10-12 passages. If the student's first unpracticed readings are occasionally meeting or approaching the goal, the teacher and student may decide to move the student up to the next level of difficulty with the same goal, or stay in the current level of difficulty and raise the "pass" goal a bit higher. Of course, if at any time the student is having difficulty reading at the goal level after the practice readings, the decision can be made to move the student down to an easier level or make a downward adjustment in the WCPM goal.

In addition to requiring the students to answer a set of comprehension questions at the end of each passage, some teachers have added other comprehension activities to this process such as having students write a sentence or two before reading a passage to indicate their prior knowledge of the topic or having the students write a five-minute re-tell response after each passage. Including some comprehension-related activities is important to remind students that the ultimate goal of their fluency training is better understanding.

Using the RN strategy for 20-30 minutes per day, for three or more days per week, can have a significant impact on improving students' reading fluency. In two studies reported on by Hasbrouck, Ihnot, and Rogers (1999), second- and third-grade Title I students, as well as sixth-grade special education students, showed significant improvement in their fluency. The second- and third-graders received, on average, 32 weeks of RN instruction. From fall to spring, the second-graders' average WCPM increased from 17.9 to 71.6, meaning that they moved from well below the 25th percentile to well above it; they showed an average gain of 1.68 WCPM per week, much greater than the 1.2 WCPM per week gain that second-graders typically make. Third-grade students had similar results. From fall to spring, their average WCPM increased from 42 to 93, meaning that they moved from just below the 25th percentile to well above it; they gained 1.60 WCPM per week, as compared to the typical growth of 1.1 WCPM per week. The study of sixth-grade special education students also found significant improvements. These students were reading at levels ranging from grade 1.5 to 4.0. They received RN instruction in a special education class for 20 to 32 weeks and improved their fluency by an average of 1.4 WCPM per week, which is double the 0.7 words per week that sixth-graders typically gain.

* * *

I would like to add two caveats regarding reading fluency. First, as this skill has recently garnered greater attention, and awareness of the link between fluency and comprehension has grown, there appears to be a tendency for some to believe that raising a student's fluency score is *the* main goal of reading instruction. As important as fluency is, and as valuable as the information obtained from fluency-based assessments can be for instructional decision-making, I want to caution teachers and administrators to keep fluency and fluency-based assessment scores in perspective. The ability to read text accurately, at a reasonable rate, and with appropriate expression and phrasing is certainly a key factor in being able to understand what has been read and to enjoy the process of reading. Nonetheless, fluency is only one of the key components of reading. I urge teachers to use the 50th percentile as a reasonable level of proficiency for students, and keep in mind that it is appropriate and expected for students to adjust their rate when reading

texts of varying difficulty and for varied purposes. Pushing every student to the 90th percentile is simply not necessary and, for students at or above the expected level in fluency, the instructional time could be better spent by enhancing other critical aspects of reading, such as increasing their vocabulary and becoming better at monitoring their comprehension.

The second caveat is that we still have much to learn about fluency. Ongoing debates in the research community include questions regarding the value of reading lists of words vs. sentences and paragraphs, repeated reading of the same passage vs. reading several different passages that have lots of the same vocabulary, the nature of the text in which students would benefit most for fluency practice (i.e., narrative or expository, randomly selected or highly controlled passages), the exact role of silent reading in a comprehensive reading instructional program, the role of prosody in the impact of fluency on text comprehension, etc. For example, we know that the ability to instantaneously recognize high-frequency sight words is an essential element of fluent reading. Researchers continue to explore whether or not practicing with word lists or passages is the more efficient way to develop this automaticity. Until researchers have a definitive answer, passages seem more beneficial because of the added opportunity to work on prosody and comprehension. Likewise, we know that repeated reading of a single passage is highly effective, but it is not clear whether a set a passages on a single topic that is carefully written so as to repeat many words could be equally or even more effective. If reading a set of passages turns out to be as effective as re-reading a single passage, the set could be used to enhance students' fluency, vocabulary, and domain knowledge simultaneously.

We will leave researchers to continue to their valuable efforts to address these important but yet-to-be answered questions. However, this article should help practitioners feel confident that there is sufficient guidance from research to support the use of fluency-based assessments in their professional data-collection procedures, and to respond to the instructional needs of both those students who are on-track and those who are struggling to develop the essential skill of reading fluency. □

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viding intensive intervention as soon as a concern is noted. Using fluency norms to set appropriate goals for student improvement and to measure progress toward those goals can be a powerful and efficient tool to help educators make well-informed and timely decisions about the instructional needs of their students, particularly the lowest performing, struggling readers.

—J.H.