

Review of “Reading is FAME” Adolescent Literacy Intervention Program

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The “Reading is FAME” program began at the Boys Town Juvenal Facility in 1990. Boys Town, located in Nebraska, helps young men and women who are considered “at risk”, both emotionally and socially. Usually these young people have experienced years of chronic neglect or abuse. Additionally, these students have a history of academic failure and arrive at the facility reading two to six years below grade level. Boys Town decided to call upon two experts to help them design their program. Two reading specialists, Dr. Mary Beth Curtis, a professor of education at Harvard University, and Dr. Ann Marie Longo, also from Harvard, were consulted and work immediately began to design the program. Curtis states that Boys Town recognized that they needed a program that “would help students at several different points along a continuum of reading development” (1). They also realized that they needed a curriculum that would have “huge results” in a short period of time; the average length of stay at Boys Town is 18-22 months.

With this daunting task before them, Curtis and Longo, the directors of the Boys Town Reading Center, knew that instruction had to have a framework that used students' strengths so that they could build on their personal needs. A one-size fits all approach would not work. Also, Curtis and Longo knew from previous work done at Harvard that the learning had to take place in stages. They also recognized that the teaching materials and techniques would need to appeal to young adults. Experience also helped the educators to realize that simplicity was a major goal in developing the courses. Exercises and assignments needed to be challenging yet straightforward and easy to comprehend. In order to keep interest levels high, teachers would have to keep things moving with simple prompts and instructions. In Terry Hyland’s article,

“Reader’s Play Catch-Up and Win!” Boys Town teacher Linn McCart says that, “It’s [the program] very structured. I think a key element in the success of the classes is that the week is set up so the kids know what is coming. They know what to expect. They feel safe with that. Yet there’s enough variety so that it’s not repetitious” (2).

Curtis and Longo consulted the research work of Jeanne Chall as they were designing their program. Chall’s Stages of Reading Development are as follows:

Stages		Characteristics
Stage 0	<i>Prereading</i>	Story can be retold while looking at book previously read; letters of alphabet can be named; name can be written; some signs can be recognized
Stage 1	<i>Decoding</i>	Relationships between letters and sounds, and between printed and spoken words are being learned; simple texts with predictable words can be sounded out
Stage 2	<i>Confirmation</i>	Stories and short selections are read with increasing fluency; “ungluing” from print is taking place
Stage 3	<i>Learning to Read</i>	Reading is used to learn new information; new ideas; new words and concepts
Stage 4	<i>Multiple Viewpoints</i>	Wide reading from a broad range of complex materials is occurring; a wide variety of perspectives and attitudes are being experienced
Stage 5	<i>Construction</i>	Reading occurs rapidly and efficiently; reading is used for personal and professional needs

From Chall, J.S. Stages of Reading Development. New York: HBJ, 1996

According to Chall, reading is a process that changes as the reader becomes more able and proficient. She suggests that, in the beginning stages of learning to read, students learn how to recognize and sound out words by developing graphophonic cuing systems like phonics. With practice, their reading becomes more fluent and automatic. This increases their ease in dealing with texts that use concepts and themes that are already within their experiences. According to Chall, at this point, students have learned how to read. The challenge they face next is acquiring the ability to use reading as a tool for learning. This involves working with texts that go beyond

what they already know, thereby increasing their vocabulary as well as their ability to think critically about what they read (Chall 1996).

Armed with this information, Curtis and Longo decided to design the Boys Town curriculum into four courses that would each last for 16 weeks. Ideally, every course should meet for 45 minutes a day, 5 days a week. Students would be assessed in order to decide what course the student was to begin his/her studies. The first round of assessment indicated that about 40 percent scored more than two years below their school grade placement in knowledge of word meanings. About 30 percent were two years or more behind their grade level in comprehension, 15 to 20 percent scored more than two years behind their grade level in oral reading, and only about 5 to 10 percent were able to read fast enough to understand and comprehend what they were reading (Hyland 4). These results convinced Curtis and Longo that they were heading in the right direction

The first course, called “Foundations,” is intended for young adults reading below the fourth grade level. This corresponds with Chall's Stage 1 of reading development. The goals of this class are to teach common letter-sound correspondences, and to provide opportunities to apply this knowledge while reading books aloud. In addition to reading aloud, the students work in pairs on spelling software that focuses on phonics rules for ten minutes per session.

Additionally, word based games like *Concentration* or *Wheel of Fortune* are played. Students learn very quickly that time is limited, and they know the more they are on-task, the more fun they will have. The remainder of class is spent in a small group reading aloud from a novel. Novels are at a high enough level to provide practice in applying the phonics rules being learned, and interesting enough to make the effort it takes to do so worthwhile. Since the reading is done collaboratively, with students and teacher taking turns reading and passing back and forth at

unexpected times, everyone knows that they need to be engaged so that they can follow along. If a student doesn't know a word, the teacher supplies the pronunciation when necessary, while still encouraging students to attempt to identify unfamiliar words. The session concluded with informal discussions about the novels that help to increase comprehension levels.

The second course, "Adventures", corresponds to Chall's Stage 2 of reading development. It is intended for those reading between the fourth and sixth grade levels. The goals in this course are to improve students' ability to recognize words and their meanings, and to increase oral reading fluency. In this course, students work in pairs for about ten minutes each day, on computer software customized to improve their reading vocabulary. They spend about ten minutes each day in small groups playing games that provide practice with the words, like *Password* and *Jeopardy*. Curtis and Longo state that "Oral reading is part of Adventures for the same reason we use it in Foundations: students need informed practice as they learn to read. We use the same procedure for oral reading in this class as in Foundations, and the emphasis continues to be on application and enjoyment during reading" (4). Fluency rather than accuracy is the focus of the reading circles in this course. This increases the learners' reading speed and practices the skill of a quick internalization of content. The homework for "Adventures" is varied: crossword puzzles, cloze sentences, and analogies providing additional practice in comprehension and recognizing site words.

The third course relates to Chall's Stage 3 of reading development. Curtis and Longo named this course "Mastery." It is designed for those who are assessed to be reading between the sixth and eighth grade levels. The goal of this course is to build up knowledge of word meanings to improve comprehension. The design of the activities and materials in the Mastery class are

based on five principles of effective vocabulary instruction drawn from the research of McKeown & Curtis conducted in 1987:

- students get numerous opportunities to learn a word's meaning
- words are presented in a variety of contexts;
- students are asked to process words in active, generative ways
- distinctions as well as similarities among words' meanings are stressed
- improvement in students' ability to use words in speaking and writing, as well as to recognize their meanings, is emphasized (as cited in Curtis and Longo 5).

Students introduced to reading expository text in this course. Curtis and Longo state that, “Because students are now making the transition from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn,’ much of the reading is done silently (6). A typical homework assignment from the Mastery course includes writing assignments that target vocabulary words, along with cloze passages and sentence completions.

The final course in the Boys Town curriculum, designed to correspond to Chall's fourth stage of reading development, is called “Explorations.” Intended for those reading at a minimum of an eighth grade level, the goal in Explorations is to increase the ability to read and write in such a way that the new information will be effectively integrated. Exploration class members learn and practice strategic study skills like note taking and summarizing in the context of materials taken from problematic content areas. Students practice using study skills when they work on problem-solving software and participate in a in class activity called the “Explorations Board.” The board’s purpose is to practice writing responses to short-answer and essay questions. Homework assignments in this class encourage the utilization of reading and writing as tools for learning. Many activities can be used for homework in this final course.

Curtis and Longo argue that their program is quite effective. There are several assessments built into the first three courses. Students take weekly pre- and post-tests on targeted skills and are given weekly writing assignments that are scored by the instructors with rubrics. Standardized test results indicate that for students who complete the first two courses, reading levels increase on an average of two grade levels or more for every 36 weeks of instruction. For students completing the last two courses, the average gain is about one and one-half years over the same period. Students who have taken all four courses have increased their ability to identify and define words from the fourth- to the eighth-grade level and beyond (Hyland 6).

Following several successful years of usage at Boys Town, the Reading Center decided to share their successful program with the general public. This public program, called “Reading is F.A.M.E.” (**F**oundations, **A**dventures, **M**astery, **E**xplorations) is currently being used in 30 different school systems. The program is proving to be successful in mainstream schools as well. “Progress is at a higher level than I had hoped for,” says Jerry Wilks, principal of Northeast High School in Lincoln, Nebraska, the first school outside Boys Town to implement the reading program (cited in Hyland 6). If a school wants to implement the program, teachers must become certified as “Reading is FAME” instructors. The reading program requires specialized teacher preparation. The teachers attend a workshop where they receive two to four days of training in the goals, materials, and activities of the four courses. They also are trained in the components of the Boys Town teaching model. Once in the classroom, consultants from the Boys Town Reading Program observe the instructors and meet with them regularly to discuss teaching methods and materials. “Consultation is really one of the key elements of the program,” says Ann Marie Longo, associate director of the Reading Center. “Consultation gives teachers a chance to discuss students’ reactions to the materials, in terms of both interest and level of

difficulty. Consultation also gives us the chance to assist teachers in determining how the needs of individual students can be met within group instruction” (qtd. in Farber 4).

Americans appear to be concerned about the illiteracy of their children; the general public clamors for accountability and results from public schools on a regular basis. Due to the time demanding instruction that is required while a child is learning to read, effective resources, both people and material, are difficult to find. Perhaps it is a greater sorrow to realize that many educators believe that reading failure in older adolescents and adults is viewed as failure “too late” to overcome. The Boys Town Reading Curriculum has effectively reversed reading failure in young adults. This success would not have been possible without the cooperation and help of the teachers and students for whom the curriculum is designed. Curtis and Longo state that, “this [cooperation] is what really makes the curriculum work. It was developed in vivo rather than in vitro, keeping us continually aware of the needs of the teachers and the students we were seeking to help” (7). If more schools are made aware of this program and are willing to follow the suggested guidelines, perhaps teenage illiteracy can be obliterated in the next generation.

Works Cited

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