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Middle School Students with Autism Learn to Read Fluently

An Interview with Pam Joseph, Special Education Interrelated Teacher
Memorial Middle School; Rockdale County Schools; Conyers, GA

School Profile: 785 Students; Grades 6-8; 55% disadvantaged; 70% African American; Title 1

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My self-contained class consists of 6th, 7th and 8th grade students with diverse exceptionalities. Reading gains made by the first student placed on the program four years ago convinced me to expand the program. Since then, seven autistic students have worked on My Reading Coach.

Based on research findings, experts recommend computer instruction for students with autism. This MindPlay program exceeded our expectations. When our seven autistic students put on their headphones, they tuned out the noise and other distractions going on around them. They remained very focused and calm as they worked on the computer. Most learned to read more fluently.

Autistic Students Excel on My Reading Coach

My seven autistic students liked working on My Reading Coach. The positive reinforcement motivated them. They got immediate feedback and liked being able to type their answers. In addition, the repetition within the program was a plus for them.

They spent one hour each day on My Reading Coach five days a week and one-half hour on other reading activities. Their success enabled them to read in front of the class. They picked out and read library books that interested them. Also, they loved writing stories, telling people what was on their minds.

Three students with exceptional results:

One student really got into MRC full force in the seventh grade, but she started it in 6th grade. She was an intelligent, high functioning student with Asperger's. At the beginning of 7th grade she scored level 4 on the STAR test; by the end she scored level 12. We could not believe it. She completed 51 lessons and improved 8 reading levels in one year!

One student with severe autism and average intelligence started MRC in the middle of his 6th grade year, but he really got into the program in 7th and 8th grades. He was reading below third grade level when he started the program. He finished the program in two years (lesson 61), which put him at about a 10th grade reading level. We chose not to test him on the STAR or MRC review because of his severe autism. It took him two years to finish because comprehension was a challenge for him (a common problem for students with autism). We changed the spelling words to give him more variety and keep him motivated. He improved almost 8 reading levels on MRC in two years!

A current seventh grader started MRC in the sixth grade as a non-reader. He would get very frustrated with things and start to scream if he could not do something. The computer program calms him down and keeps him very focused. When he puts on the headphones, talks into the microphone and hears his voice, he drowns out noise and distractions. Now he is reading at a 6th grade level based on his completing lesson 35. In addition, he loves to work on MRC and requests it.

Tips for Teachers

The first student I had on My Reading Coach was a non-reader. He was doing so well learning to read that I gave him my personal computer to take home so he could work on the program over the summer months. If students can use the program at home over the summer, they will hold on to their reading gains.

In my classroom I have a long bar graph listing all of the My Reading Coach lessons—1 to 61. I make the bar graph out of plain white bulletin board paper and stretch it across one wall of my room. Each student is given a different color. When they pass a lesson, I color in the appropriate block. Students like seeing where they are on the wall; others can see it, too. They not only see their progress, but compare themselves to others. This mild competition makes it fun. It motivates the ones falling behind to pick it up.

Even though a student might be low overall, there is usually one thing in which s/he excels. I stand in front of the class and announce who is doing well on a specific skill: I might say this person did great on comprehension or this person showed great improvement on direct objects. They thrive on the individual attention the spotlight gives them.

When students hear the difference in their reading audio tapes, they just beam. I tape them reading aloud when they begin My Reading Coach, at key intervals and at the end of the program. Students cannot believe the differences they hear. This is a huge win for them and helps their self-esteem. I play these recordings at their IEP meetings.

Autistic students stay calm and focused while they master reading skills on My Reading Coach. This enables me to work with students individually. In a classroom where I have all levels of classification in all subjects, this is extremely important. This program has made my job easier and student results have been amazing!

My Reading Coach and FLRT Contribute to Student Reading Gains

An Interview with Philip Deardorff, Ed.D, Superintendent

Flatrock-Hawcreek School District; Indiana

District Profile: 954 students; 40% disadvantaged; 20% Special Education

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My Reading Coach and FLRT – a fluent reading trainer are helping our Title 1 students, special education students and struggling readers improve their reading scores. These programs also helped us meet our AYP goal last year. We assess approximately 210 kindergarteners through second graders. In addition, we have about 60 third through sixth graders using My Reading Coach at Hope Intermediate. My Reading Coach and FLRT as well as the RAPS 360 assessment make it easier for us to track each student's reading improvement.

Cross Cliff Primary: First and second graders' reading skills are assessed at the beginning of each fall semester; kindergarteners' skills at the start of the second semester. Those who qualify for Title 1 services and special education have top priority to participate in the MRC and FLRT programs. They are followed by struggling readers. Our objective is to get students ready for our ISTEP state assessment in third grade. Cross Cliff Primary is into its second year using MRC and FLRT along with RAPS 360. We use a combination of three reading assessment tools to track results: RAPS 360, STAR and DIBELS. Prior to working on MRC and FLRT, second grade scores ranged from .5 to 3 reading levels based on RAPS 360.

Hope Intermediate: MRC alone is used with our special needs students and struggling readers, grades 3 through 6. Hope Intermediate is reaching its one year anniversary using MRC and RAPS 360. We plan to expand and include FLRT in the near future. We use RAPS 360, STAR and the ISTEP state assessment to identify the students who are having difficulties with language arts standards. Based on the STAR test and RAPS 360, initial scores for our special needs students ranged from 1.4 to 6.3 reading levels.

Students in both schools work on MRC or MRC/FLRT for 30 minutes a day, five days a week. I see all student reports with their time on task and their level of achievement. Students who spend more time on the program achieve a higher growth level.

Measuring Success

Students' reading scores indicated up to two years reading growth after the first year.

When a student gets a zero on a daily report, it could represent a student just having a bad day. However, with repeated assessments from several different sources, I get a good indication that the program is working for certain students.

ISTEP scores (our state report card) and making AYP tell me that My Reading Coach is an important tool in raising

reading scores. Before adding My Reading Coach, additional help for students and ISTEP tutoring sessions, we were struggling to make our AYP for special education students.

Examples of Achievement

A fifth grader scored at the 2.1 reading level on the STAR test in August, 2008. He jumped to 4.1 by the end of the year (two years growth; 21 MRC computer hours). He was assessed again in August, 2009, and had a 34% jump in reading achievement based on the MRC assessment.

A sixth grader had a 60% reading level improvement on the MRC assessment (39 lessons; 12 MRC computer hours).

Another sixth grader scored at the 3 reading level on the STAR test in August, 2008. By the end of the school year, he moved to level 4 (one year growth). From May to August, he jumped another full grade to level 5.2 based on the MRC assessment (20 lessons; total of 18 MRC computer hours).

MindPlay Programs Work

Teachers like the individualized instruction with My Reading Coach and FLRT and the ability to reassess reading skills and monitor student progress. The principals like to compare the ISTEP and STAR test with RAPS 360. The integrated results confirm that we are on track.

I walk around the classroom and watch students working. I can't hear what is going on, but I can watch the computer screen and see the lips of the "tutor" as he is working on various sounds with a specific student. If I were to hire a person to do the same thing, it would cost me a lot more money.

I like that I can quickly get students' progress reports from their teachers. I am also able to compare RAPS 360 with STAR, DIBELS and ISTEP. As a researcher, I question the validity and reliability of one assessment. When I see consistent positive growth in a variety of assessments, I can make some good generalizations and predictions.

I encourage teachers to have their students spend at least 30 to 40 minutes a day on My Reading Coach and FLRT. I realize that younger students may need only 20 minutes a day. I remind teachers that attention is a great motivator. As I walk around the classroom, I might tap a student on the shoulder and give him/her a "thumbs up." I encourage the principals and teachers to sit and have lunch with a student or praise a student in front of his/her parents for a job well done.

My Reading Coach and FLRT contribute to our students making strong academic improvements. All the programs and assessments we use to improve reading are starting to fit together, and our students are becoming fluent readers.

Happy Holidays from MindPlay!

Tip to share in the newsletter? Want to brag about your students? Have a question about the program?

Send your comments and questions to mail@mindplay.com