A community volunteer tutorial that works

The Charlottesville (Virginia) Volunteer Tutorial is a one-on-one tutorial program that promotes the literacy development of young children and involves a wide range of community volunteers.

Schools are microcosms of the social, economic, and political context in which they exist. When money is scarce and the needs are great, school divisions face some tough choices. This is a story about one school division's response to such a predicament. It's a story of creativity, collaboration, community commitment, and making the most of what research has to say about early intervention.

Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, is a city of contradictions. It is simultaneously the academic village of Thomas Jefferson and the hub of social services for a five-county radius. One fourth of its population lives below the poverty level; two fifths of its children live in single-parent homes. Seventeen percent of its adult population hold graduate or professional degrees, while 25% have not graduated from high school. This sociological disparity is mirrored in the bimodal distribution of reading achievement in the schools. In 1994, 60% of the fourth-grade elementary population scored below the 50th percentile and 40% scored at or above the 50th percentile on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in reading achievement (Charlottesville City Schools, 1994).

To begin closing the gap between the high and low achievers as evidenced in fourth grade (the first year that the students are administered a standardized reading achievement test), the Charlottesville City Schools initiated an aggressive plan directed at first-grade intervention. After careful planning, the Charlottesville City Schools launched their divisionwide Reading Initiative. This comprehensive plan put literacy at the forefront of staff development for teachers and instructional assistants, varied formats for federal government-funded Title I services, and implemented student peer coaching (Weincek & O'Flahavan, 1994). Interested in the research on the effectiveness of one-on-one tutorials (Clay, 1985; Hiebert & Taylor, 1994; Slavin, Madden, & Karweit, 1989), school division personnel began exploring alternative forms of one-on-one intervention programs.

A partnership was thus formed between the Charlottesville City Schools, the McGuffey Reading Center of the University of Virginia, and the Charlottesville community. The Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial has become an integral part of the Charlottesville City Schools' long-range Reading Initiative. The goals of the Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial are (a) to improve the reading and writing skills of...
of at-risk children and (b) to establish and maintain the community’s involvement in and responsibility for the education of all children.

Program description
The Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial has several unique features. A volunteer recruiter solicits interested community members through the media, public meetings with community service groups, business associations, and personal contacts. Each tutor is trained by the authors in research-based methods three times a year during 2-hour training sessions. Each session incorporates video demonstration lessons of actual tutorials and a walk-through of the lesson plan. At each school, the reading coordinator provides ongoing training and support for the tutors by writing lesson plans, arranging materials for each lesson, and providing routine feedback regarding specific activities, techniques, and pacing. Each coordinator supervises 15 volunteer tutors and their respective tutees. Tutors instruct children twice weekly in 45-minute sessions.

Settings for the tutorials vary, depending on individual classroom teacher preferences. The majority of the tutorials are pull-outs occurring in separate classrooms designated as tutoring centers. Tutorials are scheduled during seatwork time or “specials” (e.g., music, art, library) to avoid conflicts with academic instruction in the classroom.

Parents, community volunteers, university students and faculty, and school personnel work together to provide tutorial services. During the 3 years of the program, we served 358 children in all six of the city’s elementary schools.

The Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial began as a local grant sponsored program in one pilot school. The first 3 years were funded by the Charlottesville City Schools and local and national grants awarded to the McGuffey Reading Center. In 1995–1996, the school division funded salaries paid to the reading coordinators and the volunteer recruiter, as well as expenses for books and materials. Significant in-kind contributions from school personnel and University of Virginia faculty and graduate students have continued to support the program from the outset.

The key triad
The heart of the Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial is a triad composed of the child, the volunteer tutor, and the reading coordinator. The coordinators, each of whom is a current or former graduate student in reading education, supervise the volunteers and provide ongoing support throughout the duration of the pro-

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coordinating the instructional program with the classroom teacher and Title I teacher through biweekly meetings; (d) writing individualized lesson plans to assure that the needs of each student are being met; and (e) documenting time, testing data, and anecdotal information regarding the program. Coordinators report the children's progress to parents through parent-teacher conferences and written correspondence. Coordinators work approximately 17 hours per week.

The tutors are primarily volunteers from the Charlottesville community. Females outnumber male volunteers by four to one. The majority of the community volunteers are Caucasian. The ages of the tutors are evenly split across the age brackets of 20–39, 40–59, and 60 years and above. The staying power of our volunteers is remarkable: 96% of the volunteer tutors complete the full school year, and 52% have tutored for 2 to 3 years.

Children who score poorly on the ERSI have little or no alphabet knowledge, no concept of word, and little or no phonemic awareness. First-grade children are served first. Some second graders are included, depending on the availability of resources. On the average, 60% are male, 40% are female; 68% are African American, 30% are Caucasian, and 2% are from other ethnic groups. Seventy percent of the children qualify for free lunch.

The volunteer recruiter matches the schedules and number of volunteers needed at each elementary school with the schedules of volunteers who are available during particular times. The reading coordinators are in constant communication with the volunteer recruiter as children move between schools in the division and as other children are added to their case loads.

**The tutoring lesson**

Instruction consists of reading, writing, and phonics. Tutors follow a sequence of core activities planned by the reading coordinators in a four-part lesson plan described in a volunteer tutoring manual by Johnston, Juel, and Invernizzi (1995). The tutoring lessons include (a) rereading familiar story books, (b) word study, (c) writing, and (d) reading a new book.

Each session begins with a warm-up consisting of the child rereading familiar books. The second component of the tutorial lesson consists of word study. The tutor harvests words from familiar texts for the child to identify, writes the words on cards to form a word bank, and later uses these word cards for phonics lessons. The third component of the lesson is writing. Tutors dictate sentences from familiar texts, or children compose their own pieces that relate to the books they have read. The fourth component consists of the tutor introducing a new book to the child. The tutor models for the child ways to anticipate the content and wording of the book using titles and picture clues. The tutor talks about vocabulary and key concepts and encourages the child to state predictions and/or observations about the story content.

The reading coordinators model instructional techniques, observe the tutors during sessions, and provide ongoing feedback to help tutors refine their techniques and to develop effective ways to interact with their children. A closer look at the lesson plan reveals

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**The tutoring lesson includes rereading familiar storybooks, word study, writing, and reading a new book.**

The volunteer tutors have several responsibilities. They attend formal training sessions two to three times a year to prepare them to work with their assigned child. They follow the instructional plan developed for each child by the reading coordinator, and they provide written evaluation regarding each tutorial. In addition, volunteer tutors meet informally with their reading coordinator weekly to give and receive feedback on their lessons. Regular communication is maintained through personal contacts, telephone conversations, and written exchanges.

The children are primarily first-grade students recommended for the program by their classroom teachers. Selection is determined by teacher referral and by the children's scores on an adaptation of Morris' Early Reading Screening Inventory (ERSI) (Morris, 1992).
many similarities between this volunteer tutorial and other one-on-one interventions that rely on highly trained reading specialists.

Rereading familiar books. The value of repeated readings has been well documented by educators and researchers from a variety of theoretical orientations. Rehearsal of the same text cultivates reading fluency and other benefits of repeated practice. Automaticity in word recognition (Samuels, 1979), improved comprehension (Dowhower, 1987; Rasinski, 1990), and improved prosodic reading expression (Schreiber, 1987) are other benefits from re-reading familiar stories. Children become comfortable reading in meaningful phrases rather than in a choppy, word-by-word fashion. Many educators espouse the benefits of warming up with repeated readings (Samuels, Schermer, & Reinking, 1992). The rereading of familiar story books has become a hallmark activity associated with Reading Recovery (Pinnell, 1989). Every Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial opens with the repeated reading of three or four familiar books followed by independent reading of the new book from the previous session. Books are retired from the warm-up routine as children become automatic in their reading. Children then move on to other books with which they are not yet fluent.

Word study. Word study is a unique aspect of this intervention program. Word study refers to the cultivation of a concept of word in print (Morris, 1981) and the pacing of instruction in alphabet, spelling, and phonics in accordance with the developmental word knowledge of the child (Bear, Invernizzi, & Templeton, 1996; Henderson & Beers, 1980; Henderson & Templeton, 1986; Templeton & Bear, 1992). Developmental word knowledge refers to what the child knows about written words: their letter formation, sound segments within words, letter–sound correspondences, spelling patterns, and meanings. Developmental spelling theory posits that what a child knows about words is revealed in spellings, which act as windows to their word knowledge. According to developmental spelling theory, an informed analysis of children's invented spellings can guide the content and pacing of instruction in word recognition, alphabet, spelling, and phonics. Rather than a preestablished scope and sequence of phonics and spelling features to be taught, word study instruction is differentiated according to what each learner knows (Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994).

Word study instruction uses a compare-and-contrast approach to word features, comparing words that start with b, for example, with words that start with m, r, or s. Instructional activities consist of sorting tasks, first with picture cards, then with word cards as words become known. These activities, known as word sorts, form the bulk of the word study component of the Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial (Barnes, 1989; Bloodgood, 1991; Morris, 1982). Sorting usually begins with the child sorting picture cards by beginning sounds, writing words for beginning sounds, and sorting word bank words by beginning sounds. As beginning sounds are learned, word study shifts to more complex features such as consonant blends and short vowels. Reading coordinators prepare the cards to be sorted and determine the categories for manipulation.

Writing. The writing component of the Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial is referred to as writing for sounds. We want children to learn how to segment their speech and to match letters to those segmented sounds. At the same time, we want to encourage children to use reading as a scaffold for their initial writing attempts (McGill-Franzen, Lanford, & Killian, 1994). Tutors are encouraged to dictate sentences from familiar texts, or children compose their own sentence(s) about the books they have read. Whenever possible, tutors guide children in writing a transformation in which the sentence varies from the original in only two or three words. For example, "In a dark, dark house, there was a dark, dark staircase" might become "In a dark, dark basement, there was a dark, dark closet." The tutor dictates the sentence and models the segmentation process by elongating the sounds in the words for children to match the letters to the sounds they hear. Children are encouraged to do their own elongating of sounds as needed.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the act of segmenting speech and matching letters to sounds is a rigorous exercise of phonics in and of itself (Blachman, 1992). Indeed, some researchers have used children's spellings as an indicator of phonemic awareness (Clay, 1985; Morris, 1992). Research has shown that writing in invented spellings enhances children's memory of words, at least
at the beginning stages (Ehri & Wilce, 1987). Spellings change as word knowledge grows, and word knowledge grows as exercise and instruction are paced to the child’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962).

The children in the Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial are encouraged to use their own knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and to produce “sound spellings” even if these are incorrect. Children are, however, held accountable for those features they have been taught during the word study component of the tutorial. Errors specifically related to features examined through word study are “negotiated toward correctness” (Clay, 1988). Those features not yet taught directly are allowed to stand as invented spellings.

*Introducing the new book.* A new book is introduced at the end of every tutorial. The tutor and the child first preview the book and talk about its content in think aloud fashion (Baumann, Seifert-Kessel, & Jones, 1992). Tutors are encouraged to point out items in the pictures that correspond to the words the child will later see in print and to talk about concepts or vocabulary entailed in the story. After the preview and discussion, children are encouraged to read the book independently. If the child appears to flounder, the tutor supports the child with choral and echo reading during the first attempt. If such support is necessary, a second, independent reading ensues.

**Program evaluation**

Program evaluation is conducted annually. The measures consist of pre- and postliteracy assessments, child and tutor surveys, and annual cost analyses. Information from these sources is analyzed at the end of each year to refine the program and to report back to the community.

*Pre- and posttesting.* Pre- and posttesting is used to measure growth, to guide instructional plans, and to make programmatic changes from one year to the next. The assessment includes (a) alphabet recognition (upper and lower) and production; (b) concept of word (speech-to-print tracking) in text; (c) phonemic awareness (sound sorting and spelling); and (d) word recognition using graded word lists, the Wide Range Achievement Test (1984), and the Diagnostic Survey (Clay, 1985). In addition, children are asked to read *Little Bear* (Minarik, 1957) at the end of the school year. Since *Little Bear* is considered a prototypical milestone for first-grade reading (Invernizzi, Juel, Rosemary, & Richards, 1994), the ability to read *Little Bear* with better than 90% accuracy unassisted has been adopted as a major criterion for success.

Each year pre- to posttest gain scores have shown statistically significant increases on measures of alphabet, phonemic awareness, and word recognition. Thus far, the third-year gain scores have been the strongest on all measures (*p < .001*).

The functionality of the program is more clearly seen by controlling for pretest scores and analyzing the number of sessions the children received. Because the lowest scoring children on the pretest were served first, they received more sessions than higher scoring children. Children with the lower pretest scores and higher number of sessions (>40) outperformed children with the higher pretest scores and lower number of sessions (<40). When they received more than 40 sessions, the lower scoring children on the pretest received the higher posttest scores on measures of phonemic awareness (*t = 2.98, p = .004*), word recognition (*t = -6.00, p < .001*), and contextual reading (*χ² = 4.24, p < .01*).

The success of this intervention program is also based on whether the children can independently read *Little Bear* with greater than 90% accuracy in word recognition. At the end of our first year, only 50% of the children with more than 40 sessions could read *Little Bear* with greater than 90% accuracy. At the end of our second year, 72% of the children with more than 40 sessions read *Little Bear* with 90% accuracy. At the end of our third year, 86% of all children read *Little Bear* with 90% accuracy. Ninety percent of the children with more than 40 sessions and 73% with fewer than 40 sessions read *Little Bear* to criterion (see Table).

The first-year data clearly indicated a need for refinement. Therefore, in our second year, we made several improvements: (a) tutoring began earlier in the school year; (b) volunteer training procedures included more small-group, building-level seminars; and (c) lesson plans included more word study. In addition, we, the tutors, and the coordinators realized that some children needed more than 1 year of tutoring.
Oral reading of *Little Bear* with greater than 90% accuracy as a function of number of sessions and program year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>More than 40 sessions</th>
<th>Fewer than 40 sessions</th>
<th>Chi square</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994–1995</td>
<td>90% (n = 71)</td>
<td>73% (n = 16)</td>
<td>4.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993–1994</td>
<td>72% (n = 43)</td>
<td>39% (n = 43)</td>
<td>9.24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992–1993</td>
<td>50% (n = 12)</td>
<td>45% (n = 51)</td>
<td>.09</td>
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*p < .05.*  **p < .01.

Some tutors expressed an interest in working with the same child a second year. As a result, we expanded our program to include second-grade children and matched returning tutors with their same children if the children needed the extra boost. Of the 143 children in the second-year cohort, 41 were second graders. Of the 122 children in the third-year cohort, 18 were second graders. Preliminary analysis of second-grade results indicated that a third of the second graders achieved a second-grade reading level as measured by an informal reading inventory.

**Survey data.** Tutors and children are surveyed each year. Tutor surveys address communication routines (e.g., “What kinds of communication did you have with your coordinator and how often?”); quality and frequency of coordinator feedback and guidance (e.g., “How often did your reading coordinator observe your tutoring sessions?”); and fidelity to the prepared lesson plans (e.g., “With regard to the lesson plan, rate the flexibility you feel you had as a tutor”). Results of these surveys are used to fine-tune the training and communication aspects of the program.

Children are surveyed one on one by their reading coordinators. They are asked about their favorite part of the lesson plan, areas in which they felt the most success, and whether or not they read at home. Results are used to refine the activities and to find ways to encourage reading at home.

Tutor survey return rates ranged from 62–70% of approximately 100 community volunteers per year. Findings revealed that tutors volunteered for a variety of personal reasons. Most reported a commitment to making a difference for the children of Charlottesville. This commitment was best reflected in the words of Mr. Jones, a retired coach, who said, “I was in the company of some gentlemen who were discussing the subject of youth gone bad. I simply responded by saying that if we’d all put our time where our mouths are, we could make a difference.”

Ninety-six percent of the tutor respondents indicated that they enjoyed the tutoring and the unexpected benefits derived from it. Most cited the Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial as the highlight of their volunteering experiences. In the words of a tutor, “At first I volunteered because of Mary Ann [the volunteer recruiter]. The second year I volunteered because of the progress I saw with my child, and now, I’ve realized it’s the only real thing I do all week.”

**Each year, pre- to posttest gain scores have shown statistically significant increases on measures of alphabet, phonemic awareness, and word recognition.**

The appropriateness of the premade lesson plan raised questions. Some school personnel worried that not allowing the volunteers to make their own plans was too rigid, while others worried that volunteers would not adhere to the plan. However, the correlation between the degree of lesson plan flexibility the tutor reported *having* versus the degree of flexibility the tutor reported *wanting* was .60 (p <.01). In all written reports, tutors indicated their appreciation of their coordinators’ plans and guidance.
On the average, 98% of the children responded to the end-of-the-year survey. The children’s favorite activities included learning a new book and journal writing. Ninety-four percent reported that they read at home; 51% reported that they read at home every day.

Cost analysis. Cost effectiveness is determined by an annual accounting of reading coordinators’ and volunteer recruiters’ salaries and expenses for books, materials, and video training tapes. The sum total of these expenses is divided by the number of children served each year to yield a per-pupil cost. In-kind contributions from the school, community, and the university are not included in the cost analysis.

Cost analyses of the first 3 years showed an average cost per child of US$595.00. This cost was considerably less than other one-on-one interventions. Hiebert’s analysis of the cost of Reading Recovery, for example, ranged from $3,000 to $3,488 per student at Grade 1 (Hiebert, 1994).

The results of the program are reported back to the community in both official and unofficial ways. We report the program results to the school board and to the community at a public meeting during the fall term. Local news reporters publish the results, and local media also feature various aspects of the program throughout the year.

Staying power

All partners in the Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial collaboration have sustained their commitment to helping our at-risk first-grade children by contributing their time, talents, and money. The number of children who are served by the program is climbing. In 1992–1993, the Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial served 93 first graders in four of six elementary schools. In 1993–1994, the program expanded to serve 143 first- and second-grade children in all six elementary schools. In 1994–1995, the third year of the program, 122 children were served, bringing the total number of children served during the first 3 years to 358. Low per-pupil expenditures underscore the cost effectiveness of the program, and our research demonstrates that community volunteers can make effective tutors.

Bronfenbrenner (1985), Comer (1990), and Heath and McLaughlin (1987) have called for greater community involvement in schools and for schools to reach out to communities for supportive services. The Charlottesville Volunteer Tutorial combines the concern, expertise, and human resources inherent in every community, its schools, and its universities. The program offers one model of an affordable, alternative form of early intervention that meets the needs of a struggling city. And, according to one of our tutors, Millie, “There’s a lot of love that comes from it, actually.”

Authors’ note

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Invermizzi, Juel, and Rosemary teach in the McGuffey Reading Center at the University of Virginia. Invermizzi may be contacted at the University of Virginia, Ruffner Hall, 405 Emmet St., Charlottesville, VA 22903, USA.

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