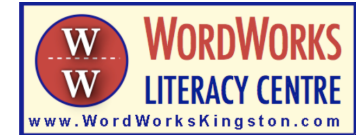


# But what if they're not reading yet?

Rebecca Loveless, a Tutor at the Nueva School, describes the transformation of a Grade 1 student through Structured Word Inquiry

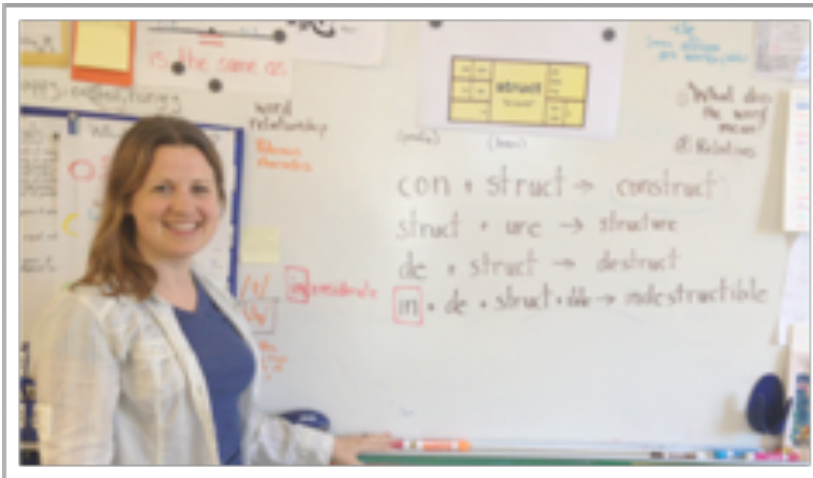


## WordWorks Newsletter # 78: Special Issue

January 14, 2015

This past January 6-8 I was fortunate enough to work with high school and middle school students at The Nueva School. My first visit to that school was presenting at their biannual Innovative Learning Conference in 2011.

Rebecca was teaching Grade 1 during that first visit and jumped right into investigating words with her students. I included the picture of Rebecca investigating the bound base <struct> with her Grade 1 students (below) right after her first introduction to Real Spelling and a link to [a great Real Spellers post](#) of hers in my [WW Newsletter #69](#) that addressed that trip.



Eventually, Rebecca moved into tutoring and has been building her understanding of spelling and her instructional practice ever since.

Since September Rebecca has been working with “B,” a student who was having serious struggles that had the school and parents very concerned. During my recent visit, Rebecca shared a joyous email describing the session in which the process of reading crystalized for B as a result of their work together. I asked Rebecca if she would write a fuller account of that story that I could share through WordWorks. She agreed, and the child’s parents were just delighted for this story to be shared publicly.

Not only is Rebecca a master tutor who can draw on an advanced understanding of English orthography, her writing beautifully and powerfully articulates this learning journey. I will address some of the points that I think are central to this story in an upcoming Newsletter, but I wanted to make this story available as soon as possible. I hope readers will share observations and questions in the comments on the Real Spellers post that archives this piece.

It is important to note that there was a great deal of pressure for B to receive traditional remedial instruction that would have emphasized grapheme-phoneme correspondence instruction without the context to words or stories. You’ll see that Rebecca’s work with B not only

explicitly addressed grapheme-phoneme correspondences, but that she did so with reference to how those conventions are guided by morphology and within a context that was meaningful to B and his interest in words and stories.

Rebecca's story about the process that allowed B to become a reader highlights what is possible when those struggling to read have the good fortune of guidance and support from educators who understand spelling and how to investigate it scientifically with learners of any age.

Rebecca, Loveless  
January 10, 2015

Last year in kindergarten, B. struggled behaviorally and seemed to have reached a block in his reading and writing development. His incredible intellect was evident in his oral language, building constructions, and mathematical insights but he was really struggling with literacy work. He began working with the school's Word Inquiry specialist one-on-one during the winter. He started to develop his Real Script and understood how to read a matrix. But living in a culture where the prevailing wisdom for learning to read is "sound it out," B. bumped into a lot of frustration. At one point he asked his mother with exasperation, "Just tell me all the exceptions!"

I saw B. for a handful of sessions over the summer. He absolutely adored literature and would happily listen to me read books for an hour. Written tasks were challenging,

and I had to be very strategic about how I presented them if I wanted his buy-in. He often enjoyed working with morphemes, however.

Once first grade started in the fall, I began to see him regularly four times a week. We had a great rapport—he is truly a delightful and insightful child—but as soon as a challenging task was put before him, he became defiant, aggressive, and refused to work. This was happening in the classroom as well, despite the loving accommodations of skillful teachers. He had to be sent home several times, and eventually could only handle a few hours of school each day. In just a few short weeks, the anxiety and pressure that B. felt from these new academic demands, and his awareness that he didn't believe he could meet them, sent him into a full crisis.

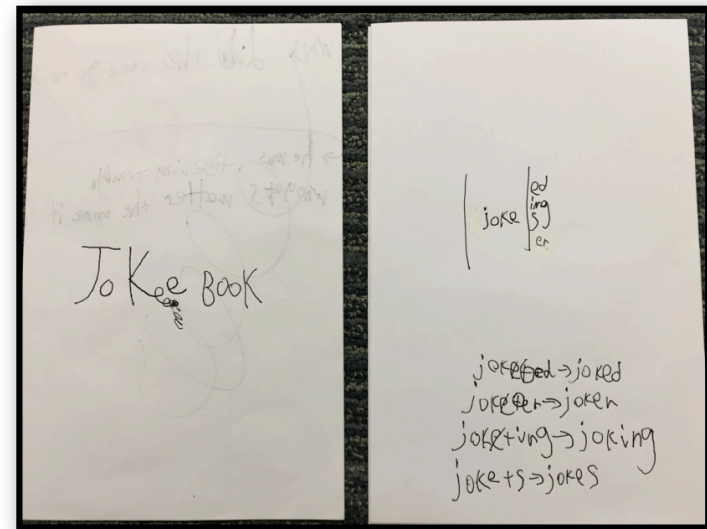
Fortunately, B.'s parents were willing and able to do anything that would support their child. Based on some outside expert advice, a gifted, one-on-one behavioral aide joined B. at school all day. Within a few days, B. and I were able to restart our sessions.

What became clear right away, was that B was not going to learn to read in any way we might call traditional. Leveled, controlled readers and their mind numbing text were absolutely useless as far as B was concerned. What was the motivation for decoding the simple pattern on the final page? We worked with authentic texts—particularly books by Jon Klassen and Oliver Jeffers. They employed a wry sense of humor that could send B. howling with

laughter. We used words from the books for our investigations. While I generally read aloud to B, he also learned to read the Klassen books, and it brought him confidence and pride. He had a lot of knowledge already inside—the trick was finding the key to let it out.

A Pokemon lover, B discovered the card game “Magic the Gathering.” He brought the cards to school and really wanted to find out how to play the game, which he saw older boys playing. Filled with “juicy words” like <horde> and <naturalize>, B had a new motivation for investigating. He identified the stem <natural> from <naturalize> easily. He was tickled to find out that bases can change pronunciation with the addition of affixes, like the <c> in <magic> and <magician>. Doors open when we identify what is really happening in our language, rather than sweeping these changes into an ever growing pile of “exceptions.”

One of his parents wisely began putting jokes into B.’s lunchbox each day. I suggested we compile some of his favorites into a joke book, as a way to get in some script practice. He decided to title it "Joke Book". But he didn't just use the word <joke> I had written in front of him. He **independently** took another piece of paper and created his own matrix for <joke>. Then he used that matrix to spell from. I was fascinated to see that the organizational structure of the matrix had already become hard-wired as his preferred strategy to make sense of words and their derivations.



B's *Joke Book*. What appears like an extra <e> is actually B's playing with script. He was attempting a “flourish” to make the title fancy.

After the winter holidays, the class chose new books for their daily Reader’s Workshop sessions. For the first time, B found books that he was interested in. He brought his book, *The Latke Who Couldn't Stop Screaming*, to our next session. This is an advanced book with small print, but B was determined to read it. Here is an example passage from the story:

*This story ends in someone's mouth, but it begins in a tiny village more or less covered in snow. The snow had fallen during the long night, during which the children had pressed their face to the windows looking for a glimpse of a man who they suspected of bringing them wonderful gifts, but instead they heard a terrible noise from a certain cottage...*

I could see he was able to rely more often on morphemic strategies rather than purely phonological ones. Sometimes I just supplied the base of a complex word, and he put the rest together. For example, he came to the word <miracle>. After spelling it out, he said, "miraculous?" These meaningful connections are so much more productive than random guessing or skipping the "big" words entirely! And it allowed him to find a trail back to the word when he encountered it again.

At the end of our session, I asked him if he had heard the book before. When he said no I asked, "So you're reading this for the first time? Do you think you know how to read?" He was about to automatically answer "No," but knew that his answer wouldn't make sense anymore! He had just read the book! The evidence was staring him in the face, and he couldn't deny it. We had a great conversation about how no one knows all the words in the world, and how he was ready to continue learning just like the rest of his peers. Since that day, he's demonstrated a new level of confidence and willingness to take risks.

Where would he be without the structured word inquiry approach? I'm convinced that only being allowed to read controlled texts and having to practice decontextualized sound/symbol correspondences would have kept B in a state of defiance and unhappiness. Because we can engage his deep intellect and natural curiosity, he has a reason to want to learn. His interests are being honored, and he has the opportunity to be seen and heard. And finally, he is

being given information that makes sense! Six-year olds understand authenticity, and structured word inquiry brings it to the youngest learners. The entire school team has been blown away by B's progress. It fuels our own research, that this is the best approach for real learning!

### Post Script: Links to follow-up

#### **Continue the Conversation**

- Email *Rebecca* <[beccaj@gmail.com](mailto:beccaj@gmail.com)> with comments & questions.
- Comment on [the Real Spellers post](#).

Explore these links to learn more about the culture of learning fostered with Structured Word Inquiry at the Nueva School and around the world.

#### **<triangulate>**

Click [here](#) for an account of Grade 2 students and their teachers investigating this word. You might be surprised at what the students helped their teacher discover.

#### **WW Newsletter #74**

Click [here](#) for more stories from Nueva and other schools.

#### **WW Newsletter #76: The Getting Started Issue**

The Newsletter at this [link](#) shares a number of stories to help teachers and schools just getting started with Structured Word Inquiry.

**Lyn Anderson's "Beyond The Word" website** offers a wealth of information and resources to help teachers use SWI from the beginning of schooling.

"**About WordWorks**" is a good starting place for examples of this instruction and links to related research.

#### **Research Connections:**

[This 4-page paper \(Bowers & Cooke, 2012\)](#) summarizes the morphological instruction research that finds morphological instruction is most effective for younger and less able students.

[This recent intervention \(Devonshire, Morris, Fluck, 2013\)](#) with 5-7 year old students found the experimental group taught about the interrelation of morphology, etymology and phonology with matrices and word sums scored significantly higher on standardized measures of reading and spelling than the comparison group that received explicit phonics based instruction.