

Afterschool Achievers: Reading Club

R e s e a r c h B a s e

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The Importance of Afterschool Programs

The relationship between reading practice and reading achievement is clear (Allington, 2001). Children who are behind in reading (according to their performance on reading tests) can progress, but they need to do so at a faster rate if they are to catch up to their peers (Allington, 2001; Clay, 1991). One of the ways to give children this additional time for reading is to provide them with an afterschool program focused on reading. Studies show that there is a positive relationship between participation in afterschool programs and academic performance (Munoz, 2002; Posner & Vandell, 1994). In fact, “Studies of students who attend high-quality programs for a significant period of time show improvements in academic performance and social competence, higher scores on achievement tests, lower levels of grade retention, improved behavior in school, increased competence and sense of self as a learner, better work habits, fewer absences from school, better emotional adjustments and relationships with parents, and a greater sense of belonging in the community” (Perkin-Gough, 2003 citing Miller, 1999).

This being said, there are specific criteria for afterschool programs that appear to be necessary to maximize student potential (Fashola, 2002). After reviewing afterschool programs deemed effective by the measures used to evaluate them, Schwartz (1996) noted that those designed to increase learning had three primary goals:

- to reinforce learning that occurs during the regular school day;
- to provide time and space for quiet study;
- to provide educational enrichment activities and to spark curiosity and love of learning.

These three goals are at the heart of *Afterschool Achievers: Reading Club*. The program is designed to provide children with 20-30 minute activities every day of the school year. These activities provide students with additional meaningful practice in fluency, comprehension, word study (i.e., phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary)—components of the reading process researched by the National Reading Panel (2000); and test-taking. Recognizing that program participants have already been in school for a full day, each activity is designed to engage students with thought-provoking activities that call for active participation (Miller, 1999).

Afterschool programs can present challenges such as little planning time, inaccessible materials, and difficulty finding consistent staffing (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Likewise, those who are called upon to teach these programs may be expected to teach a grade level with which they have had little experience (Miller, 1999). *Afterschool Achievers: Reading Club* addresses these challenges by providing the necessary materials and succinct, lucid lessons that are similar across grade levels; that is, regardless of grade level, the same strands prevail: Read Out Loud, Thinking About Reading, Word Games, Building Words, and Rule Out Two. What changes from grade level to grade level is the level of sophistication for each strand.

Essentials of Reading Instruction

The components that form the foundation of *Afterschool Achievers: Reading Club* are those highlighted by the report published by the National Reading Panel (2000). These include phonological awareness (including phonemic awareness), phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness refers to awareness of many aspects of spoken language. These include the awareness that there are different sound units:

- words within sentences;
- syllables within words;
- phonemes within syllables and words.

Much quantitative research has pointed to the importance of phonological awareness; in fact, phonemic awareness in particular is seen as essential for children to become competent readers (Blachman, 2000; Goswami, 2002).

The lessons that teach phonological and phonemic awareness appear in the Words Games and Building Words strands. Activities such as chanting a nursery rhyme help students develop an appreciation for the sounds in language. In the game Odd One Out, for example, students are asked to stand when the teacher says a pair of words that rhyme and sit when the words do not. Students also learn to clap the syllables in words, and match words with the same phonemes. Through these games, students gain awareness of the sounds of language, and the phonemes in words. Because the games are active and engaging they allow students to have fun while learning.

Phonics

Whereas phonological awareness focuses on oral language, phonics is the association of oral language with the written word. It involves helping children to understand and use letter/sound correspondences. Much research has pointed to the benefits of teaching letter/sound correspondences as one way of helping children to decode and identify words (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001; Snow et al., 1998; Stahl, 2002).

Afterschool Achievers: Reading Club provides meaningful phonics lessons in the Building Words strand of the program. Students are asked to build words with letter cards and rearrange words to create new words. They also practice working with words that have the same phonogram and sounds that are often confused. In the game Sum of the Parts, children receive cards with parts of words and must make a match with other students to create a word. Through these activities students learn their letters and letter sounds.

Vocabulary

As accomplished readers know, not all words can be decoded; they have to be identified by sight. These are words that we can identify instantaneously without having to resort to using any decoding. Developing and calling upon this store of words enables readers to read with relative ease and enables them to focus more attention to comprehension (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). *Afterschool Achievers: Reading Club* provides opportunities for children to acquire a large store of words in the Word Games strand of the program; in fact, a major purpose of this strand is to help children further expand their reading vocabularies.

Students expand their vocabularies with activities that ask them to classify words, work with the meaning of words, antonyms and synonyms, homophones (words that sound the same but have different spelling) and homographs (words that are spelled the same but have different meanings and sometimes different pronunciations), and parts of speech and idioms. During the game Guess the Word students give each other one-word clues about word meaning so that another student can guess the word meaning. Students also work together to generate words that describe a character in a story they have just read, or explore shades of word meanings in the Word Games section.

Students also practice working with word parts. During these lessons students are working with words that have already appeared in the reading or that are related to what they read to make connections between lessons.

Comprehension

Comprehension is the essence of reading. Most instruction models include common elements as articulated by Duke and Pearson (2002, pp. 208-209): explicit strategy description; teacher and student modeling of the strategy; collaborative use of the strategy; guided practice of the strategy; and finally, independent use of the strategy. *Afterschool Achievers: Reading Club* includes lessons in comprehension strategies such as making connections, making predictions, monitoring understanding, summarizing, and visualizing. In the early grade levels, students also learn concepts of print. During the Think About Reading activities, the teacher models for students, leading them to independent use of the given strategy. In response to the selection, students write about what they thought, further practice the strategies, and practice using graphic organizers to aid their comprehension.

Fluency

Being able to read a text with fluency can be an indication that the reader is comprehending the text (National Reading Panel, 2000); however, many times students need to learn how to attend to the text features in order to best understand and express the author's intended meaning. In *Afterschool Achievers: Reading Club*, Read Out Loud is the strand that helps foster this ability. Teachers first model for students how to read with fluency and demonstrate how different texts need to be read to best convey the author's intended meaning. Oral reading is used as a means to help students become more able silent readers; that is, it teaches them how to attend to text features so that when they are reading silently, they will be able to use the features to better comprehend text.

The lessons develop students' fluency by first having the teacher read the text to give the students' a model of fluent reading. The selection will then be read or chanted by the students. Students also practice reading aloud in small groups where they may feel more comfortable reading the text to each other. As students hear the teacher and other students reading aloud they also develop their listening skills.

Ongoing Assessment Helps Students Achieve

Perhaps one of the best ways to determine how well children are learning is to use ongoing assessment (Opitz & Ford, 2001). One unique feature of *Afterschool Achievers: Reading Club* is that it provides an assessment tip for every lesson. The assessment tip is related to the lesson concept. Pre- and post-tests are also included to help teachers evaluate the success of their program and to identify students' areas of weakness. At the end of each section of the pre- and post-tests, a correlation chart is included that links specific test items to activities in the program.

In the Rule Out 2 activities, students practice the skills that they will need when taking multiple-choice tests. These lessons are valuable because they help students to perform at their best in testing situations when many struggling learners experience anxiety and help to assure that testing is an accurate measure of what students actually know. Teaching students how to self-assess has also been shown to improve student achievement and their ability to transfer their knowledge to new learning situations (Black & William, 1998; Stiggins, 1996). *Afterschool Achievers: Reading Club* integrates this research by having students self-assess at the end of every lesson.

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