

Lessons Learned From My Granddaughter by Laura Robb

My granddaughter, Helena has a rare syndrome: the left and right sides of her body grow at different rates, and her right arm and leg are shorter. Moreover, her brain development comes in spurts from no physical growth to large amounts of growth and plateaus in-between. At four, she saw alphabet letters and numbers as random squiggles, and I feared that she had also inherited the dyslexia that runs in my family. Despite these drawbacks, we played together, we took nature and listening walks, and I read picture books aloud every time she visited.

During her first three years of school, I resisted the temptation to tutor Helena. Instead, I became a back seat supporter and donated dozens of books to her teachers' classroom libraries allowing Helena and her classmates to have more choices when self-selecting books. Each year I continued donating books to the young resource teacher who supported Helena and other students.

Somewhere, deep in my gut and heart, I believed that Helena would signal me when she wanted help and was ready to invest the time and energy to read with expression and fluency. In third grade, Helena was reading Level 1 and 2 early reader books and writing in her journal fearlessly using spelling inventions. She had many friends at school, and her teachers enjoyed learning with her. They described her as spunky with major doses of grit, as she never gave up and practiced even when it took a long time to "get it." At the end of third grade, a telephone call I received from Helena transformed my support role and my teaching life.

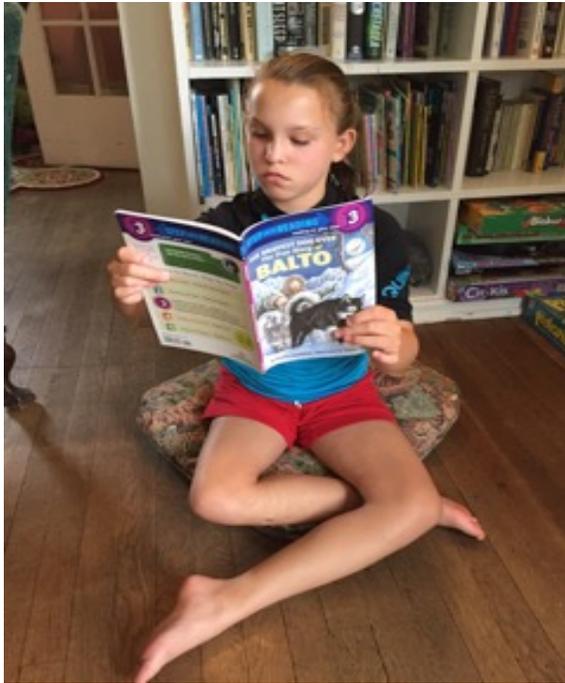
Helena complained to Lucas, her older brother, that she wasn't reading "like lots of my friends." His advice was to call her grandmother, and with Lucas by her side, she dialed my telephone number and said, "Grandma, will you help me read better?"

"Of course," I answered.

"Can I walk up to your house now so we can talk?" And that's how the journey began. Besides sharing her feelings and frustration at not "getting better in reading," Helena also asked me, "Why is it when I work so hard, I don't get better?"

"I'm not sure," I said, "but we'll figure it out together." That question replayed in my head because it's a feeling that children have, but often don't express to teachers. I worry that as children like Helena move from grade to grade without much improvement in

reading that they will eventually stop working, stop trying, unless there is a powerful intervention. As we worked and learned together, I recognized that schools could not offer this level of intervention to students and a goal that replayed in my mind was how to transfer what Helena and I were doing to interventions in public school. In this blog I will also offer suggestions for supporting developing readers at school.



The story of the heroic dog Balto was the first book Helena read during the summer we began working together. Balto’s story captured her imagination to the point that she reread favorite parts, asked questions, studied the map of Balto’s route to Nome, Alaska, pored over illustrations and discussed why Balto was heroic. For me, “captured her imagination” is a key phrase because when a book does that, readers are deeply involved with the story and live through events as if they are part of the book. Even as a rising eighth grader, Helena still talks about that book. Here’s what she recently told me: “I love that book and still keep it in the bookcase in my room. I think I know why [I loved it] now. I became the sick children, and I was Balto leading the other dogs to Nome to save lives. If you become the characters, you love the book.”

Helena’s understanding of the *WHY* behind reading shows a maturity that developed over time and as her reading skills improved. Know that every book she tried

didn't engage her, and she abandoned several in search of the book that she didn't want to stop reading. During that first summer and her fourth grade year at school, Helena and I worked together five to six days a week. Her drive to improve was relentless, and when I missed one to two sessions due to my speaking schedule, we made them up on weekends. The primary purpose of the tutoring was to increase her reading volume, but there were other elements that supported her progress.

Preparing a Tutoring Framework

The tutoring framework consisted of five elements, and these became our routine. I carefully explained to Helena why I chose a learning experience and how it could benefit her reading progress and skill. As a rising fourth grader, I believed that understanding how a specific experience could support her progress would enable us to have conversations about each one and work through periods when progress slowed.

By consistently integrating the five elements every time we met and working one-on-one five to six hours a week enabled Helena to steadily move forward. Her parents read aloud to every day and we discuss her progress at the end of each week. She learned to accept that progress could be small or big leaps forward, and we both recognized that she required more than phonics and practice reading.

Poetry Practice and Performance

The research of Dr. Timothy Rasinski shows that practice and performance of poetry and readers' theater scripts can improve children's fluency, expressive reading, vocabulary, and comprehension (2011). To offer Helena a choice of poems, I prepared a folder with about twenty-five poems that Helena could select from and continually updated the folder. On Monday, Helena chose a poem, read it silently and then out loud. We discussed the poem's meaning and words she wanted to know more about, why she selected it, and Helena began each session by reading it out loud with expression. On Friday, she took the poem home in a folder and set a time with her family when she could perform it. She loved the performing and her family's enthusiastic responses of "we loved it" and "read it again!" To this day, Helena loves to read poems. When she read Sharon Creech's *Love That Dog*, two poems she performed were part of the book and

discovering this thrilled her: “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carol Williams and Robert Frost’s “Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening”

Word Study and Sorting

Helena completed words sorts using *Words Their Way* (2011). This hands-on approach asked students to sort a group of words into categories based on patterns, phonics, and word meanings. The assessment I administered to Helena placed her in the letter-name stage. Most of the time, I created word sorts based on her writing about reading. However, I also used the pre-made sorts available for letter-name and within word pattern spellers—the two stages Helena completed.

Instructional Reading Book

Helena had modified choice as I selected three books and asked her to browse through each and select one. This strategy worked well for Helena as it permitted her to abandon a book she didn’t connect to and try another. She called this her “stretch” reading because she often had to reread parts, use context to figure out word meanings, and learn new information. I tried to alternate fiction and nonfiction to expose Helena to a variety of genres.

Independent Reading Book

Again, choice was key and Helena practiced browsing through a few books, and through practice she learned to select a book she wanted to read and could read and enjoy. Books were in a plastic crate, but I also had books on the kitchen table where Helena ate a before-tutoring snack. At first she ignored these books but after several weeks, she’d munch on veggies or crackers and cheese and browse through them deciding which ones to add to the crate.

Writing About Reading

Besides a word study notebook, Helena had a notebook for writing about reading. The research of Graham, Harris, & Santangelo makes clear the importance of informal writing about reading (2015). These researchers show that when students write about books they

can read, their comprehension of that book can rise 24 percentile points. She wrote lists, words that describe characters' emotions or her feelings. She jotted predictions and confirmed or adjusted them, wrote why she enjoyed the book, and which characters, persons, or animals drew her into the story.

Robb's Observations

Choice meant so much to Helena and she expressed this to me again and again. Instead of a "required school book" that she couldn't read but had to listen to, Helena enjoyed browsing through books and deciding which ones appealed to her. She enjoyed the hands-on aspect of word study, but needed my support to verbalize what she taught her about specific patterns.

She had two favorites: self-selecting independent reading books and practicing and performing poetry. On some days after a lesson, she'd browse through my own collection of poetry books and anthologies. We'd sit side-by-side on the carpet and Helena read newly discovered poems to me. Free verse books like *Love That Dog* appealed to her because as she put it, "the pages aren't scary and full of words I might not know." I worked closely with Helena through sixth grade when she passed the state reading test for the first time. Now, reading above grade level, Helena has developed a personal reading life and a reading identity, and I believe it's possible to do the same for developing readers in intermediate grades and middle school.

Transferring Tutorial Elements to the Classroom

For three years I worked with developing readers and trained teachers at Daniel Morgan Intermediate School in Winchester, Virginia. Having enough scheduled time, having rich classroom and instructional libraries, and teachers who meet frequently to support one another and read professional articles and books to improve their teaching skill can change students' reading trajectories. Here's what happened at this school:

- ELA classes were 90-minutes: 60-minutes for reading and 30-minutes for writing. These classes had students reading from a first to sixth grade instructional level. Each class opened with fifteen minutes of independent reading, followed by an interactive read aloud, the common teaching text in a class

that differentiated reading instruction. Teachers modeled what good readers do using a short text that was the same genre as their current reading unit. Instructional reading units were genre-based and included about 100 different books that represented the instructional reading levels in classes. Students had choice for instructional and independent reading.

- Developing readers had an additional 53-minute reading class every day. Instead of pull-out tutorials, students reading three or more years below grade level completed practice and performance of poetry; independent reading; and word work lessons. Teachers pulled small, guided reading groups and worked on specific skills for five to 10 minutes. Groups were fluid and changed according to the support and extra practice students needed.
- Writing about reading in notebooks was an integral part of ELA and intervention classes. Teachers kept notebooks to “cold write” in front of students using a doc camera and their interactive read aloud texts to model different kinds of responses.

Lessons Learned

The most important lesson I learned is that if the superintendent and the principal of a school recognize the need to support all learners, they will fund classroom and instructional libraries, adjust schedules so there’s enough teaching and practice time, and provide training for teachers. Including poetry and performance improved students’ fluency and comprehension, and their self-confidence. Having students read at school more than 45-minutes a day increased their reading volume and they steadily moved forward and improved to the point many became at home readers, too (Allington, 1977, 2014).

Closing Thoughts: Helena’s Message

When Helena was in fifth grade she made a video that I shared at the 2017 NCTE Convention. I asked her: What advice do you have for students who need and want to move forward with reading? Here’s her answer:

Read as much as you can. Get up early and read before you go to school. Read at school every chance you get. Get you parents to read books to you—your grandmother, too. Find the kind of books you love and reread them ‘cause you’ll enjoy them even more. Find books you love to read and you’ll get better.

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