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# RESCUING **BLUEBIRD**

## **Finding solutions for struggling readers**

By **Lisa Trottier Brown**

*b*luebird is the pseudonym my vivacious sixth-grade student chose for herself. Bluebird is always happy, fluttering gracefully with her many friends. Her mother is a literacy specialist. One morning, she stopped by my classroom. The term-end Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) scores indicated her daughter's scores were below grade level, as they had been throughout her elementary years.

"Can you talk me off a cliff?" she said with tear-filled eyes. She described testing and interventions she had done with Bluebird in an effort to improve her scores. We discussed Bluebird's progress and the work we were doing in school. I described research on reading interventions using the Neurological Impress Method (NIM), developed by R.G. Heckelman in the 1960s. NIM involves an adult and a struggling reader, sitting side by side, simultaneously reading aloud at a rapid rate using challenging text. This method was designed to expose readers to correct reading and greater quantities of material while providing scaffolding for difficult text.



Heckelman tested the method with 24 adolescents who achieved an average increase of 1.9 grade levels after seven and a half hours of instruction over six weeks. I had begun using a modified NIM procedure in my classroom with Dyad (partner) reading on the basis of a 2000 study by Alisa Morgan, Bradley R. Wilcox, and J. Lloyd Eldredge from Brigham Young University published in *The Journal of Educational Research*. Dyad reading involves student pairs—a strong reader and a weaker reader—reading aloud simultaneously from the same challenging text.

I recommended that Bluebird's mother try a similar application at home.

## Remembering Robin

A few weeks later, I attended a lecture by David Lieben. He discussed the research on NIM and Dyad reading. He talked about another modification of NIM using audiobooks to scaffold difficult material as students follow along in a printed version. Robin, one of my former students, came to mind.

Robin had been in reading resource most of her elementary years and was reading at a fourth-grade level at the beginning of sixth grade. Her mother told me that Robin wanted to read *The Hunger Games* (Scholastic). She asked if Robin could listen to the audiobook for her home reading requirements. I agreed, but on the condition that she follow along using the printed version.

Two months later, Robin's SRI score had increased from 814 to 1055. After five months of reading with audiobooks, her DIBELS scores increased from 85 WPM with 94% accuracy to 167 WPM with 99% accuracy. Her SRI score was 1216, a 12th-grade comprehension level. The resource teacher recommended that Robin "graduate" from resource, and her SRI scores remained in the 12th-grade range with DIBELS scores above grade level for the rest of the year.

I assumed the book-on-tape method helped Robin's progress, but I didn't recognize it at the time as the key to her success.

## Incorporating audiobooks

Audiobooks and recorded readings have a long history in reading intervention.

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Prime-O-Tec, the Listen-Read Program, and various studies all show that reading with audiobooks is an effective variation of NIM, producing strong results in cases like Robin's.

I e-mailed Bluebird's mother to update her with this information and Robin's story, emphasizing the importance of finding high-interest, difficult texts (200 to 300 Lexile measures above her current level) and using quality audiobooks that provide prosody modeling.

*Prosody* refers to features of speech that affect meaning (e.g., pitch, stress, and juncture). Although technology can provide auditory presentation of text, some are computer-generated voices that do not model speech-like prosody, which is an essential component in comprehension. Research indicates readers' prosody naturally increases with the difficulty of the text, in readers of all levels, as they strive for comprehension. By cognitively bracketing key informational units such as phrases, prosody assists comprehension by maintaining the phrase in working memory for analyzing meaning.

Bluebird's mother was excited about this new approach and went to work gathering materials. Audiobooks are available online, in bookstores, and in many libraries. Apps such as OverDrive provide free access to audiobooks through the public library system.

After spring break, I received the following e-mail:

*I don't know how much [Bluebird] shared with you today, but it was quite a reading weekend! I decided we would try The Selection and see if she liked it. Well, one weekend later, it's finished, and she's on to the*

*next one. We went to a friend's home for dinner last night and she didn't fight at all when it was time to go home because she wanted to finish the book. That was a great moment. I believe you are onto something and I'm excited. Thank you for your great ideas and loving concern for Miss [Bluebird]!*

Bluebird completed The Selection series (HarperTeen) and several others, excited about accessing books her friends were talking about. At the end of the term, her SRI scores had increased from 799 to 914, just below the grade-level benchmark of 955. Two weeks later, our school reading specialist performed a DIBELS progress monitoring assessment with Bluebird. I stepped into the room at the end of the test.

"What have you been doing to get so much better at reading?" the reading specialist asked.

"I've been reading with audiobooks," Bluebird said.

"Wow, it's really been working. You've gone from 70 to 113 words per minute. You're almost on grade level!"

The smile on Bluebird's face was evidence of the pride in her accomplishment—and her newfound confidence. ■

## ILA 2016

**Lisa Trottier Brown** will be a copresenter on a panel discussion on Sunday, July 10 titled, "Stacked Partner Reading Can Be Transforming: Maximizing Research-Based Options in Elementary Classrooms." For more information, visit [ilaconference.org/iplanner](http://ilaconference.org/iplanner).