

RICU: The Reading Intensive Care Unit

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It's the end of the second quarter, and a first grade team is meeting to reflect on the reading progress their students have made in the first half of the school year. The mood is somber.

"I don't understand why there's so little progress."

"I know. Johnny barely moved up one reading level, from level 1 to level 2. That's from having one word on each page to two words on a page."

"I don't know what more we can do. We're teaching our hearts out as it is!"

"Yeah, and all these kids who aren't progressing get two reading sessions most days."

"Well, they never read at home, that's the problem. They never complete their reading logs and never read a single book at home. Ever."

"Yeah, that's a problem."

"They just wander the room during reading workshop. They never read."

"There's no more time in the day to add in more reading time."

"I know. What more can we do?"

"It's so frustrating. I feel like we're doing all the right things and still no progress."

"Maybe something's wrong with them."

"It's beyond just helping now. These kids need to go to intensive care!"

No, there wasn't something wrong with the students but there was something wrong with the instruction. The students in question had just spent five months in first grade yet had not learned to read beyond an emergent level of B in the Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) leveling system or a level 2 in the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) leveling system. The average first graders were reading in level F (F&P) or level 10 (DRA) books by that time. The first grade teachers consistently met with all reading groups daily for 20-minute sessions. The students who were not progressing also read with the ESL teacher and/or the reading teacher several

days each week. Clearly this model was not working, so instead of doing more of what was not working, the team decided to do something different. The reading teacher proposed creating an intensive care instructional setting for these students and RICU began; the Reading Intensive Care Unit.

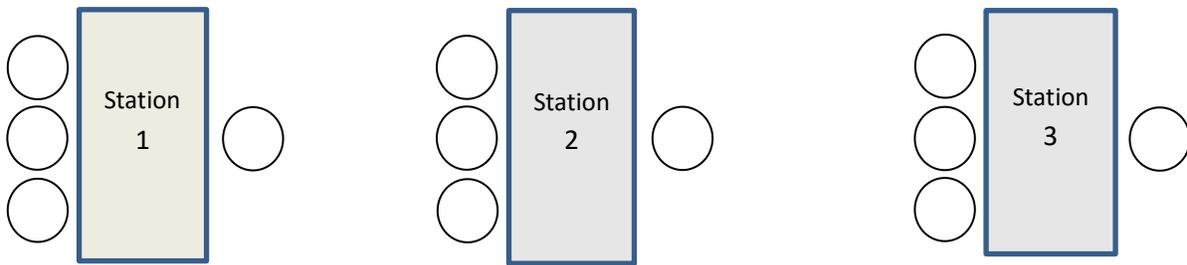
Because the low-progress students never read at home and because they also did very little reading during the day at school, they were rapidly falling behind their peers in the number of minutes spent reading in text. As the readers read better, the nonreaders read more poorly. The fewer minutes they spent in reading texts, the harder the texts were each time they tried to read so they chose not to try and began avoiding reading as much as they could. No wonder! Any new skill is hard without daily practice. These students needed to be in an intense instructional environment where as much time as possible would be spent in reading and rereading text. As their reading skills improved, reading would become more rewarding and they would begin to read more.

The Reading Intensive Care Unit is a model or a framework for an intensive short-term reading intervention. It's designed to increase students' reading skills and levels to grade level expectations in six-eight weeks at which time the students will return to their classrooms and resume the usual reading workshop routine. RICU is part of a delivery model for synchronizing intervention and literacy instruction in first grade classrooms. The six first grade teachers taught guided reading using guided reading plans by Jan Richardson (2009) from *The Next Step in Guided Reading: Focused Assessments and Targeted Lessons for Helping Every Student Become a Better Reader*. These guided reading lessons are two day plans for 20 minutes each day. The first day involves starting with reviewing sight words, then introducing and reading a new instructional level text followed by a discussion of the text. Next, a new sight word is taught followed by a word study activity. Day 2 begins with a sight word review followed by rereading the text from the previous day and rereading other previously read texts. Students again discuss or retell the previous day's text and then are led in a guided writing activity where students write sentences about the instructional level text.

The first grade team realized how much more effective guided reading instruction in all of the first grade classrooms would be if they all followed the Next Steps model because the consistency and common language would be in place. The team also thought that keeping a similar instructional model for RICU intervention would increase the effectiveness of the intervention instruction and possibly transfer back to the classroom setting more easily. The daily guided reading lesson is a 20-minute lesson with four components. It was decided that RICU would follow the same lesson format but would expand and intensify each component during a 20 minute station. Students would rotate through all three stations (the sight words

and guided writing components were combined into one station) each day to experience the full balanced lesson. RICU supports 9 students (3 students at each station). Students rotate through all 3 stations daily for 6-8 weeks. Each daily session is for 80 minutes.

Here's how it works. Three teachers teach in RICU. There should be one reading teacher, but the other two can be instructional assistants, ESL teachers, resource teachers, or special education teachers—whoever is available during the RICU time. Each teacher directs one station for 20 minutes, and then students rotate to the next station for another 20 minutes and finally to the last station for another 20 minutes. Each student works at each station each day. Students rotate and teachers stay put.



RICU followed *The Next Step in Guided Reading* early lesson plan for readers in levels D (F&P) or 4 (DRA) through levels I (F&P) or 16 (DRA). The reading teacher's station introduces the new book, introduces vocabulary or words that students would not be able to figure out on their own, directs the picture walk, and coaches students on strategic problem solving as they read the new text. There are three students at the station. While students whisper read the new text, the teacher confers with each student, prompting students and teaching word solving strategies. A running record is completed on one student each day. After students have read the text, the reading teacher chooses a teaching point based on the individual conferences and the running record information. The teaching points may include monitor for meaning, monitor for letters and sounds, strategies for problem solving unknown words, or reading more fluently. Students are given a copy of the book read that day to take back to class and to take home to reread with their teacher and family.

The second teacher's station does word work and guided writing. These are two separate components in the Early Lesson Plan in *The Next Step in Guided Reading* that have been combined for this station. The teacher reviews previously taught sight words with students by asking them to write the sight words on a white board. Next, she introduces new sight words using the What's Missing?, Mix

and Fix, Table Writing, and Whiteboard Write and Retrieve activities. The teacher writes the sight word on a white board and tells the student the word. She erases one letter and asks students what's missing? She repeats the procedure several more times by erasing letters at the beginning, middle, or end of the word. Students are given magnetic letters to make the new sight word themselves. Once the word is made, they're asked to mix it and fix it. Students are asked to use their finger to write the sight word on the table and last they are given a marker and a white board and asked to write the word on the white board. The final task at this station involves guided writing. Students discuss a familiar text with teacher prompting for an event from the beginning, middle, and end of the story. When three sentences have been orally crafted by the group, the teacher writes the key words for each part of the story on a white board. Students use the key words as the teacher dictates the sentences for students to write down in a notebook.

The third teacher leads word study activities at the third station. Explicit activities are used to look closely at spelling patterns such as initial and final blends, short vowels, and digraphs. Students use magnetic letters, picture or word sorting, whiteboards, letter tiles, and sound boxes to manipulate and break apart words. The lesson is followed by students reading a decodable text that highlights the word study feature they just worked with.

The final 10 minutes of each daily session of RICU is spent on choral reading of poems or songs. Selections are chosen from the *Fluency First Grade 1 Student Book* by Timothy Rasinski and Nancy Pedak (2005). The choral reading and rereading is to improve fluency and improve automatic word recognition. It turns out, it also improves enthusiasm and a love for reading. Students leave RICU humming or singing and in a happy mood. Students have a RICU bag and a take-home copy of the book they read with the reading teacher is added each day. Once they return to their classrooms, they join the centers in progress and will receive another 10-minute session with their classroom teacher who will listen to them reread and work on retelling and comprehension of the book they brought from RICU.

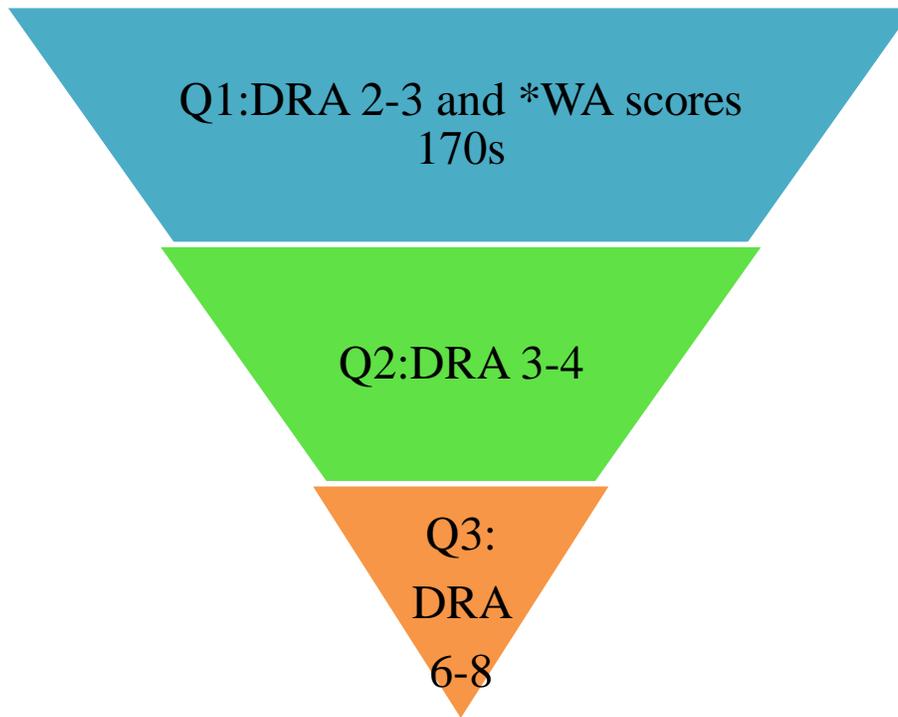
RICU began functioning in February 2013. Since then several changes have been made as the model was fine-tuned and improved upon. The first three years of RICU included four teachers running four stations with three students at each station and 12 students total. The fourth teacher would work on comprehension skills such as retelling a story, identifying story elements, or problems and solutions. The RICU teachers noticed that by the fourth rotation, the students were tiring and losing stamina and focus. Last year, the model was changed to three teachers and nine students who rotate through three stations and spend the final 10 minutes reciting or singing. The reciting and singing has an energizing effect so

when students return to their classrooms they still have the stamina to participate in more reading activities.

The selection process for students to participate in RICU has also undergone changes. In the initial years of RICU, facilitators selected students who had the lowest reading scores across the grade level each quarter. The students made slow progress and tended to occupy the RICU slots throughout much of the year. Last year and this year, the first-grade team took a different approach to selecting the RICU students. At the very beginning of the year and at the end of each quarter, students are tested and have benchmarks for reading level expectations for those times. Rather than take the lowest scoring students, the team looked at students who were one-two reading levels below the benchmark for that quarter. The minimal reading level expectations for the year are as follows:

Beginning of the year	End of quarter 1	End of quarter 2	End of quarter 3	End of the year
Level D (F&P) Level 4 (DRA)	Level E (F&P) Level 6 (DRA)	Level F (F&P) Level 10 (DRA)	Level H (F&P) Level 14 (DRA)	Level I (F&P) Level 16 (DRA)

Last year, for the first round of RICU at the beginning of the year, nine students who tested in levels B (F&P) or level 2 (DRA) and level C (F&P) or level 3 (DRA) were selected. After eight weeks, the RICU students were tested and seven had progressed to levels E (F&P) or level 6 (DRA) and E (F&P) or level 8 (DRA). They returned to their classrooms to join the usual reading workshop activities. The two students who did not progress remained in RICU for the second round. Seven more students were selected who tested in levels C (F&P) or level 3 (DRA)-D (F&P) or level 4 (DRA). At the end of the eight weeks all nine of the students tested in level F (F&P) or level 10 (DRA) and were sent back to their classrooms for the reading block and different round of nine students was selected for the next RICU. Students who had scored in reading levels E (F&P) or level 6-8 (DRA) at the end of the second quarter were selected for the next round. The new selection process has resulted in greater success for the RICU students. The students selected for the third quarter started the year as emergent readers and as immature readers. They needed the time during the first six months of the year to mature and progress in their reading skills beyond the emergent level. By the time they began reading in RICU in late February, however, they also had developed habits such as reading a text by looking at pictures and guessing words and “reading the pictures” instead of actively word solving. These habits required a little extra time to replace with word solving strategies and for this reason, the final round of RICU students remained in RICU for 10-12 weeks.



In all by the end of last year, 33 first-grade students had been instructed in RICU and 25 out of the 33, or 76%, were reading on or above the end of year grade level benchmark of level I (F&P) or level 16 (DRA). The eight students who did not meet the end of the year benchmark level were the students served in the final twelve weeks of RICU.

This current school year's second grade has only 8 former RICU students in Tier 2 interventions and none in Tier 3. Those eight students began working in RICU on the second week of school this year. Currently, after five weeks in RICU intervention in second grade, all eight have passed reading levels I (F&P) or level 16 (DRA) and are working in level J (F&P) or level 18 (DRA). They will return to their classroom for guided reading instruction but will receive twice weekly fluency support with the Read Naturally program, *Read Naturally Rational & Research*, 2005-2009 Read Naturally, Inc.

RICU, or the Reading Intensive Care Unit, has proven to be a cost effective and instructionally effective reading intervention model for first grade students. Restructuring available resources during the first grade reading block was what our school needed to move low achieving readers to grade level reading success. No additional personnel or instructional materials are required to implement this intervention.

*WA- the Developmental Reading Assessment Word Analysis is the assessment given to our kindergarten students throughout the year. The test

measures phonological awareness skills, alphabet letters and sound knowledge, sight word knowledge, and concept of word. A perfect score is 193. It is similar to the PALS-K assessment.

References

Rasinski, T., & Padak, N. (2005). *Fluency first! Grade 1 student book*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill

Richardson, J. (2009). *The next step in guided reading: Focused assessments and targeted lessons for helping every student become a better reader*. New York, NY: Scholastic.