Mason (a pseudonym) had been in my first-grade class for several months and was making slow progress. He would appear to know something, then suddenly he would not. Mason was a challenging student, and it was clear to me that unless something changed in my teaching, he would not be successful in first grade. In this article, I describe a collaborative lesson I conducted with my colleagues to help me identify and address the reading challenges that Mason experienced.

What Is a Collaborative Lesson?

A collaborative lesson is a professional development strategy that involves a small group of educators who cooperate to help a struggling reader or group of readers. Collaborative lessons were initially designed as professional development for Reading Recovery, a one-to-one intervention program. For similar collaborative adaptations see Rodgers, Rodgers, and Pinnell (2007). However, these lessons can be implemented with any struggling reader. Although most students respond to high-quality instruction, a few prove more difficult to teach, and collaborative lessons provide teachers with opportunities for group problem solving to help these students.

What Are the Components of a Collaborative Lesson?

Once a student—or group of students—is identified as experiencing difficulties with reading, the teacher invites three to five colleagues to visit the classroom to observe a lesson. These observers might include literacy coaches, teachers who are facing similar difficulties with their own students, administrators with expertise in reading, and special area teachers, such as speech and language specialists, English as a Second Language teachers, or special education professionals. Prior to the collaborative lesson, one observer is selected as the group leader. Collaborative lessons are conducted in the student’s regular classroom, so a substitute teacher must be secured to cover the class so that the classroom teacher can participate in the collaborative lesson discussion.

A collaborative lesson involves the following five steps:

1. The observers meet with the teacher, who describes the difficulties that the target student is having. Lesson records, running records, and writing samples are discussed, and the collaborators ask questions.

2. The group quietly observes and takes notes as the classroom teacher teaches a small-group or one-on-one lesson to the target student’s needs.

3. After a 20–30-minute lesson, the collaborators and the teacher who taught the lesson leave the classroom to discuss the lesson. They attempt to build a complete picture of the student and construct a plan of action, identifying two or three teaching practices personalized for the target student.

4. The collaborators and the classroom teacher return to the classroom, and the group leader teaches a minilesson—lasting approximately...
10 minutes—that incorporates the teaching strategies recommended for the target student.

5. Following the minilesson, the collaborators and the classroom teacher again leave the classroom and discuss the results of the teaching strategies. The group brainstorms further possibilities to give the teacher an expanded view of the student and a rich set of instructional possibilities.

**Mason’s Collaborative Lesson**

My concerns about Mason focused on two issues: (1) his dependence on prompts to solve words in connected text and (2) his inability to remember words in writing. Specifically, I was concerned that when Mason encountered a problematic word, he would pause with his eyes on the text but make no effort to solve the word until he was directed to do so. Only then would he articulate the first letter and attempt a word.

In writing, Mason had difficulties remembering how to write words. He would sometimes write *all* as *oll* and *said* as *sad*. He tended to perseverate on words he had just seen or written: If he had recently written *she* on the board, he would write *she* instead of *see* in his journal. Mason was passive and dependent on me when he encountered challenges in print.

After I shared my concerns, my colleagues asked me questions and theorized possible explanations for Mason’s difficulties. The theories and ideas raised during the preconference were treated as tentative insights that participants considered as they observed the lesson.

**Mason’s Lesson**

During Mason’s collaborative lesson, four teachers situated themselves as unobtrusively as possible to watch Mason and three of his peers in a guided reading group. I taught Mason as I would on an ordinary day. During the lesson, I asked him to write the word *the*. Although he spelled the word correctly, he wrote the *h* first and then the *t* and then the *e*. I had him practice focusing on the *th* and writing the letters in the correct sequence. Then, while reading a book he had read the day before, I prompted him to attend to the same initial letters in an effort to help him conceptualize those letters as a graphophone-mic unit:

CL:  *[pointing to this in the sentence “Look at this.”] Do you see a part you know in that word? “Look at /th/…”* [I masked -is with a card and provided the /th/ sound.]

Mason:  /th/….

CL:  Read to the S. [I removed the masking card.]

Mason:  /th/….

CL:  /th/ “Look at /th/.” Go to the S. /th/….

Mason:  /th/….

CL:  “Look at /th/… Look at this.” [I told him the word.] Yeah, that makes sense, doesn’t it? “Look at this.”

In this interaction, my teaching is clearly ineffective. I directed him to attend to initial letters, provided the sound for those letters, directed him to attend to the end of the word, and eventually resorted to telling him the word.

At other times during the collaborative lesson, I prompted Mason to attend to the meaning of the text, such as in the following example:

Mason: I’m going to look in—

CL:  Where’s he going to look? I’m going to look in—?

Mason: Here.

Although this prompt elicited a correct response, it did not help Mason become independent. He needed to use a range of processing strategies independently, including monitoring, searching, and self-correcting.

**After the Lesson**

After Mason’s lesson, the visiting teachers and I left the classroom to discuss their observations. We brainstormed ways to get him to monitor and solve his own reading challenges rather than wait for me to tell him to try the first letter or think about the story. Specifically, we discussed his
inattention to errors. After making an error, he would continue reading rather than correcting the error. We agreed that a first step was to help him notice the tricky part while reading.

In addition, it was clear that learning new words was hard for Mason and we needed to help him develop clear word learning routines so that he would attend closely to words and ultimately learn how to learn new words.

**Mason’s Minilesson**

With this conversation in mind, Mary, a particularly experienced teacher, taught the follow-up minilesson. First, she returned to two words that the group had identified as difficult for Mason to write: will and them. She showed Mason will, then covered the word and told him to think about it. She asked him a few questions: How many letters are in that word? What letter does it start with? What is the tricky second letter? Then she asked if he needed to see the word again before he wrote it. Mason nodded, so she let him peek at the word. She covered it again, and he wrote it correctly. The process was repeated, and Mason was able to write will several times without looking. Mary then followed the same procedure with the word them. She returned to will, asked him to write it, and checked to see if he was right; she then had him write them once more.

Next, Mary introduced Mason to a new book. When he incorrectly read a word, rather than asking him to try the first letter or having him think about the story, she had him finish reading the page and then asked him to find the tricky part. When he attempted to read the problematic word, she asked him if his attempt looked right. Mason was able to confirm that he read the word correctly and was on his way to developing independent checking skills.

At the end of the 10-minute minilesson, Mary returned to the words that Mason had written at the beginning of the lesson. Before asking him to write each word, she directed him to think about how the word looked, asking the following questions: How many letters? What is the first letter? How does it end? He correctly answered these questions and fluently wrote both will and them on the board.

After Mary demonstrated these techniques, we reflected on her minilesson. I left the collaborative lesson with refined ways of thinking about Mason as a reader and with techniques I could use with other students, specifically instructional strategies for helping students learn high-frequency words and monitor their own reading so that they could locate errors while they read.

Although having colleagues watch me teach was stressful, it resulted in significant learning for all participants, and Mason and his friends enjoyed being the center of our attention.

**The Challenges and Rewards of Collaborative Lessons**

Collaborative lessons may be used with small groups of students when either individual students or the entire group is struggling with reading. However, there are challenges that must be carefully considered when planning a collaborative lesson, because they (a) can take almost a half-day of school, (b) require administrative support, and (c) necessitate a willingness on the part of teachers to be observed. Through observation and discussion, collaborators jointly identify promising teaching strategies, test these strategies, and reflect on future possibilities. The power of the collaborative lesson is in the cooperative efforts of teachers and their collective expertise.

**References**
