



A Brief Intervention for a Lifetime of Reading

by SHARON ZINKE, author and
creator of *Rime Magic*



Over the past decade I have been amazed by the incredible results reported by teachers using the Rime Magic program in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms—especially with students who had fallen behind in reading due to low word recognition. *Rime Magic*, published by Scholastic, is an innovative word-recognition system that is raising the achievement and building the confidence of K–2 readers just starting out, and 3–12 readers who have fallen behind in word recognition and need to catch up fast! Research-based and classroom-proven, Rime Magic focuses on the rime, the vowel and consonant combination that helps drive word analysis. For example, readers see the /ip/ in “slippery” and build the word out from the middle—adding the onset, the beginning consonant or consonant cluster (/sl/ in “slippery”), as well as the affix or endings (/er/ and /y/ for “slippery”).

By focusing on the rime, readers learn to see the natural segmentation patterns of the written word to “crack the code.” With practice, students pick up the pace and the rimes jump out at them as they read. Confidence soars and word recognition becomes more automatic, boosting comprehension and fluency.

Rime Magic takes decoding instruction to a level that makes it easily transfer to reading. Instead of practicing isolated phonics skills, students learn to see the rime inside a word (example: seeing the “ip” in *slippery*). After experiencing the Rime Magic sequence, they will no longer have to rely on “sounding out” words from beginning to end, a strategy that is most often frustrating and confusing, given the irregularity of the English language. They will begin to see words in “chunks” that make sense to them, allowing more efficient word recognition.

Cradle to Career: A Formal Study

In the summer of 2017, Meredith Wiley, a long-time advocate for imprisoned youth, and I decided to attempt a formal study of the program among incarcerated teenagers at the Fresno County Juvenile Hall. Perhaps this program could motivate youth who might otherwise lose motivation to improve their reading skills.

Through the Fresno County C2C (Cradle to Career) group, Meredith had connections with key county administrators. She was able to set up a meeting with Cliff Downing, who was the chief administrator of the juvenile hall in Fresno, and is now the division director of adult services in the probation department. This meeting led to several more, and we were pleased to discover that the staff at the juvenile facility strongly supported this project. We created a plan, sponsored by the C2C, to do a two-week study with eight students, one girl and seven boys, ages 14–17, who volunteered to participate.

My colleague, Angela Barra, and I met individually with each of the eight incarcerated teenagers for one-half hour each day in small rooms inside their pods. We administered the Slosson Oral Reading Test, a word-recognition assessment, to each student. All but two of the teens had word-recognition grade equivalent scores below 3.5. I worked with the four boys, all with IEPs, who had the lowest Slosson scores and Angela worked with the others. She decided to include the two teens with higher scores in the program (They begged to stay!), but we did not include them in the results of the study.

The six boys who scored below 3.5 on the Slosson each received a total of four or four-and-a-half hours of instruction, one-on-one, over the two-week period. The instruction included 10 minutes of Rime Magic and 15 minutes of TO WITH BY, a strategy for supported reading. A passage is read TO and WITH the student as many times as requested, thereby making the passage more predictable and easy to read before the student reads it himself. By the end of the two weeks, the boys had achieved .5 – 2.3 years growth in word recognition. Not only had they made significant growth in the foundational skills; they also experienced an astounding transformation in their attitudes about reading. In the course of the study, it became clear to me that these teens needed exposure to books that they could relate to—that were more reflective of their lives and experiences.

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On Their Way to Reading!

One of the boys (Slosson score 3.1) refused to meet with me on Monday of the first week of the study. His officer was unable to talk him into coming. The next day he refused again. I asked the officer to request that the boy meet with me for only five minutes and then he could leave. He stayed for the whole session. Each day he came in and shared his enthusiasm about how much easier reading felt to him and how long he spent reading in his cell. In seven half-hour sessions, he achieved 8 months' growth in word recognition. During his final interview he said, "At first I didn't understand some of the words but now it's getting easier... I really didn't like reading, but now I like reading. Last night I finished the whole book [*Bronxwood* by Coe Booth] ... a lot of stuff happening in that book. At the end it got really exciting."

Another boy (Slosson score 2.2) shared with me on the first day that he really wanted to read, but he was attempting to read a book that was much too difficult for him. I gave him *Scary Stories to Read in the Dark* by Alvin Schwartz, and he said the next day that he had his

“bunkie” read it to him first so that it was easier for him to read. I realized that here was an opportunity for us to provide books that would resonate with these teens. I searched the internet for books that might be relevant and enticing for these boys. On Day 6, I offered this boy *Tyrell* by Coe Booth. Looking back at my notes, I found this entry:

“I have never, in over 50 years of working with struggling readers, seen anyone so excited about a book. I read the back cover to him and started to read the first page. He grabbed it away from me and said, ‘I got this!’ and began reading. For the rest of the session his hand kept drifting over to touch the book.”

He was with me for seven sessions, achieving eight months’ growth in word recognition. On the last day he burst through the door and declared, “You made me addicted to reading! I’m stuck on it! Now you made me read more—I like this book! I read all day in my room. I read at night till 12:00! I never used to read.” When I interviewed him at the end of the session, he said, “Ever since you started helping me, I started reading every day ... I can comprehend the words better and it ain’t that hard how it used to be. I feel better ... it’s the little part of the word that’s magic that helps me read it better.”

Post-Note

This study is included in a report by the C2C (2018) and was followed up by meetings with juvenile justice administrators to plan training for teachers at the facility so that they could assess students as they arrive and provide reading intervention during their stay. Two teachers were trained in 2018 and have been working with students at the facility. District Attorney of Fresno County, Lisa Smittcamp, has been a strong advocate for the program, and even purchased books for the students in the juvenile hall, using her own money. One of the officers in one of the pods was so inspired by the enthusiasm of the boys about books and reading that he wanted to tutor them himself.

One of our boys was serving a months-long sentence and, four months later, I returned to bring him another book. I was allowed only a fifteen-minute visit. He told me he had read the books I had given him over and over for the past four months and asked if he could read to me. I was astonished at the amazing fluency and confidence he displayed—and the light in his eyes!

Because of the fast results possible with this treatment—administering the Rime Magic system to enhance word recognition, coupled with making available relevant books—we learned that it is possible to deliver significant improvement in reading ability and motivation for incarcerated youth who might otherwise have given up on reading.

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