

TX Kindergarten Students Overcome Reading Difficulties with PLATO Focus Reading and Language Program



Speech therapist Elaine Janiga at Willow Creek Elementary in Kingwood, Texas was introduced to PLATO Focus Reading and Language Program during a training program in 2000. The ideas and methodology of PLATO Focus appeared to be just what the school needed to fill a major gap in its early reading program.

"The curriculum alludes to phonemic awareness, but it doesn't direct teachers on how to do it, and they're not always trained on how to teach it either," said Ms. Janiga. She returned from the training resolved to try PLATO Focus at Willow Creek, and began to implement the program in the school's three kindergarten and four first grade classes.

Improving standard reading assessments

PLATO Focus Reading and Language Program is a K-3 scientifically-based program that teaches the five components of reading instruction as outlined by the National Reading Panel and Reading First, namely, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension. PLATO Focus provides a balanced approach to language and literacy learning to ensure that all students become successful readers. Lessons are delivered through teacher print curriculum and an engaging software environment that features verbally interactive computer animation and substantial student practice. Teachers using PLATO Focus have seen

significant improvements on standard reading assessments for readers at all levels, including students with specific reading disabilities.

Making a paradigm shift

One of the kindergarten teachers who used the program at Willow Creek was Barbara Osterwisch. She found that PLATO Focus Reading and Language Program spoke to specific issues not addressed in any of the curriculum resources she had used up to that point. "The English language was developed first as an oral language," said Ms. Osterwisch "Then we added written symbols to correspond with those sounds. PLATO Focus is a paradigm shift from other products out there since it works in the same way. It teaches students to hear and recognize the pure sound, and then how to make the sound in the mouth and throat. We add the written symbol last."

Covering all aspects of literacy development

Ms. Osterwisch uses PLATO Focus in her classroom every day, teaching one new sound every week. She deals with children at the kindergarten level who are developing phonological awareness and appropriate articulation, but it is not uncommon to have several children who are less mature in their articulation of specific phonemes. While this may be a developmental issue, it can delay those students on their path toward literacy success.

Recently Ms. Osterwisch had a student in her class who started the school year knowing only seven letters. By Thanksgiving, the impact of PLATO Focus on this student had become apparent. She had spelled the word "pilgrim" by sounding it out as she had learned to do in her PLATO Focus lessons. "Only sixty-three days—and she was spelling words not by rote memory but by sounding them out," said Ms. Osterwisch. "In their daily lives, students are frequently asked to repeat themselves to be understood. They know that there is something different about what they say and what others hear. This impacts all areas of their literacy development, including vocabulary development, comprehension, spelling, and decoding. It is truly a privilege to offer them this program."

Keeping students in the mainstream classroom

Another student in Ms. Osterwisch's class had particularly pronounced articulation delays, having difficulty with the letters T and K. In the past, this student would have been a prime candidate for immediate intervention via a pullout program. However, a goal at Willow Creek is to keep students out of Special Education programs and in the regular classroom as much as possible. Using PLATO Focus lessons with the whole class of 20 students five days a week and with a small group of three students two days a week, Ms. Osterwisch was able to provide the support the student needed. "It has been my experience and indeed my delight to notice how this child, like many others, approached each PLATO Focus lesson with rapt attention," she commented. "I am happy to say that he is now in first grade and not in need of any additional intervention. Prior experience leads me to believe that his success was a direct result of my use of PLATO Focus in the classroom."