

Sharing a Screen, if Not a Classroom



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Edward Muñoz, a first grader at P.S. 55 in the Bronx, works out tricky words with Jenny Chan, his tutor in Midtown Manhattan.

By KYLE SPENCER
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In a hushed first-grade classroom at [Public School 55](#) in the South Bronx, Edward Muñoz, a bashful 7-year-old in scuffed sneakers and a worn hoodie, was sounding out tricky words with his tutor.

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Together they plowed through a book about a birthday barbecue, tackling the words “party” and “presents.” Then they played a rousing game of word-based tic-tac-toe, with Edward eventually declaring victory.

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Exchanges like theirs take place every day in classrooms around the country, now that links between early literacy gains and later school success have been clearly documented.

But Edward’s tutor was not in the classroom. His school, a 20-minute walk from the nearest subway stop in a crime-plagued neighborhood, has long had trouble finding tutors willing to visit. “It is hard to get anyone to volunteer,” said the school’s principal, Luis Torres, who sometimes cancels fire drills because of the gunfire he hears outside.

Now, newly designed software for the tutoring of beginning readers has bridged the gap, allowing volunteers to meet students online from a distance. P.S. 55 is testing the program with students in its four first-grade classes.

Edward’s tutor, Jenny Chan, was an hour away in Midtown, on a bustling trading floor at JPMorgan Chase, where she provides technology support. She was talking to Edward by phone and seeing the story he was reading with screen-sharing software on her desktop computer.

JPMorgan Chase is sponsoring the remote tutoring program and encouraging its employees to get involved from their desks during the school day. This is a boon for Ms. Chan, who has participated in corporate-sponsored volunteer reading programs at other firms. But since having two children and receiving a promotion, she has been unable to

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make the lunchtime trek to a school, particularly one as far away as P.S. 55.

As for Edward, he was perched on a blue plastic chair, listening to Ms. Chan's encouragements through headphones as he read haltingly into the microphone. When he mispronounced a word, Ms. Chan prompted him to try alternatives, occasionally proclaiming, "Good job!" From her desk, she followed along and turned the pages of a virtual book for her budding reader.

The program is the creation of Seth Weinberger, a 56-year-old former technology lawyer from Evanston, Ill., and the founder of [Innovations for Learning](#), a 19-year-old nonprofit organization that has set its sights on raising persistently low reading scores among the nation's poorest children. The tutoring software is being tried by over 550 volunteers in 60 low-performing classrooms in Chicago, Detroit, Miami and Washington, as well as at P.S. 55, where in 2010, only 15 percent of the third graders passed the state English exam.

Countless studies, many outlined in an exhaustive 1998 literacy [report](#) by the National Research Council, indicate that there is a strong connection between how fast young readers progress and how often they encounter written language. But according to the 2007 National [Survey](#) of Children's Health, less than half of the nation's young are read to at home on a daily basis.

As a result, the literacy organization [Everybody Wins! New York](#) plants more than 1,000 volunteers in city schools. [New York Cares](#) sponsors volunteers in an early morning reading program. And in September, the national advocacy group [Reading Partners](#) began a volunteer tutoring initiative in seven of the city's poorest-performing elementary schools.

What sets Mr. Weinberg's program apart is that the tutors arrive via technology. "If it takes a village to raise a child," he said, "it now takes technology to connect that village."

His methods are not without critics.

At schools like [P.S. 3](#), in the West Village, parents gush about the "magical" connection in-school mentors develop with the students they help. There, where 78 percent of third graders passed the statewide English exam, dozens of reading volunteers show up "live" every week.

At schools like P.S. 55, the Innovations for Learning program presents a welcome solution to a persistent problem.

To get the program started, I.F.L. trained educators at the school and installed Mr. Weinberger's software on dedicated laptops donated by JPMorgan Chase. Volunteer tutors were required to watch a one-hour Web seminar and read a 20-page guide to basic reading skills, such as "chunking" groups of letters together to decipher a word, or using pictures to help get the gist of a story.

When a student and a tutor log on, they choose from 10 original stories, all suited to that student's reading level, as well as games that use words from the stories. After the session, students can reread their stories on classroom [iPod Touches](#).

Brenda Salazar, a first-grade teacher, says the greatest advantage of the program is the provision, which she can oversee, of much-needed one-on-one instruction for struggling readers. The software allows teachers to communicate with tutors about students' problem areas via a messaging system. "When they come back to doing their reading and writing with me, they'll often say: 'I know that. I did that with my tutor.'"

Still, the program has yet to be studied, and at a time when educators are pondering the pros and cons of online learning, there are skeptics. Some question whether young learners, particularly struggling ones, have the communication skills needed to benefit from a virtual connection.

Joanne Meier, a research consultant at Reading Rockets, a literacy initiative based in Arlington, Va., wonders how effective tutors can be if they don't have access to students'

facial expressions and body language. "Subtleties are missed with a phone call," she said.

Ms. Chan, the P.S. 55 tutor, acknowledges this challenge. "You do lose the face-to-face," she said. "But this is a good alternative."

After her recent session with Edward, Ms. Chan hung up, and the 7-year-old unhooked his headphones and sauntered back to his desk, where his classmates were rifling through picture books. What was his favorite part of the new program, he was asked. He said it was when the phone rang in his classroom, a signal that a tutor was online.

"They get excited," Mr. Torres said. "They all want to be on that call."

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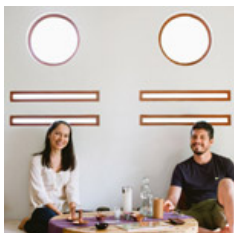
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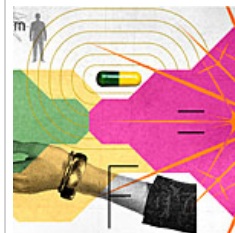
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