

**FEATURE STORY**

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Innovation Links Language and Literacy

"It's a wonderful profession, in general, because you can affect so many lives throughout your professional career. I have dealt with people from 2 years old to 90! The effect you can have on their personal well being and their ability to communicate their thoughts and wishes is wonderful." Those are the feelings of Maryellen Rooney Moreau, MEd, CCC/SLP, President of MindWing Concepts Inc. in Springfield, Massachusetts. Founded by Moreau in 1994, the company specializes in developing learning products and instructional materials that help students with speaking, language comprehension and writing. Among MindWing's better-known products are the Story Grammar marker® (for elementary school children) and Braidy, the StoryBraid™ that fosters the connection between language and literacy to preschool through first-grade students.

The company is actually a family business, with her daughter, Sheila Moreau, as National Sales Director and her son-in-law, Brian Welch, Executive Vice President and Chief Operations Director. Moreau states, "Our tools are modeled to assist children in understanding more deeply and expressing that understanding more clearly so they can make the connections required of them in school: text to self, text to life, text to world, text to text. We meet the criteria for Reading First and presently are working in several Reading First Schools, among them the Renaissance Charter School in Boston."

Moreau received a bachelor's degree in communication disorders from the University of Massachusetts and a master's degree in communications disorders from Penn State University. She is certified as an elementary education teacher and teacher of communication disorders in the state of Massachusetts. In addition, she has ASHA certification as a speech-language pathologist. She says, "I became a speech-language pathologist because I was drawn to it as a helping profession. I took elocution and drama lessons as a child and was cognizant about children who could not express themselves. Also, a neighbor in my childhood neighborhood suffered a stroke, which impacted her ability to communicate orally and to count. She was a bank teller! Her plight was part of the reason I wanted to become a speech-language pathologist."

Moreau began her work in Hartford, Connecticut, as the first teacher of a "language disabilities class" in 1970. At the time, "language" was a new term to school-based SLPs. Moreau credits Margaret Kennedy, who was then the director of communications disorders for Hartford schools, with being a major inspiration in the early part of her career. "The person who hired me for my first position, Margaret Kennedy, encouraged me to teach a very new program that was about "language" when the whole communication disorders field consisted primarily of articulation, fluency and voice work. At the time, I didn't know if I should take a chance teaching a class like that. But she said to me, 'You know, you're very qualified. You're as qualified as anybody else, and I really think you could do this if you put your mind to this. I am encouraging you to try this and know you won't regret it.' And this turned out to be the very job that affected my career. It got me into the area of literacy in the 1970s where I never would have been if I hadn't taken her advice and encouragement. Looking back, it was just what I needed to hear at just the right time. I was right out of grad school."

Moreau adds, "The language disabilities class was Margaret's idea. It opened, for me, a lifetime of interest in language and literacy culminating in my creation of a hands-on communication tool known as the Story Grammar Marker®. One of the problems my students had across the board was an inability to express information, stories and thoughts on their own; independent of someone asking the questions and prodding. The Story Grammar Marker® is a solution to that problem and to difficulties that students have in retelling, telling and writing a story. It facilitates comprehension and expression of text."

Following her years in Hartford, Moreau worked as an SLP, professor/diagnostician and curriculum director at the Curtis Blake Center of American International College in Springfield, Massachusetts. It was there that she actually designed and field-tested the Story Grammar Marker® as a hands-on tool for oral and written narrative development.

She eventually left the college and established MindWing Concepts at the Scibelli Enterprise Center in Springfield, Massachusetts, a state-funded entrepreneurial center for businesses. In the years since becoming full-time at the Enterprise Center, Moreau and her staff have succeeded in growing the business to impressive heights. "We are now in over 10,000 classrooms across the United States, Canada, Iceland and Australia," she notes. "We provide professional development on our methodology and hands-on literacy tools across the US. We have a complete line of manipulatives for teachers, special educators and SLPs to use for comprehension and oral/written communication for students from preschool to high school. Our focus has expanded to include expository text as well."

She describes her company's tools and methodology as "cutting edge" in the area of comprehension and oral/written expression. In fact, Haskins Laboratories, a research facility associated with Yale University, URI and UConn has used Braidy, the StoryBraid™ as part of a four-year US Office of Education study on reading for 120 first-graders in high-priority schools in Connecticut. Many of the students involved are English language learners and children with limited English exposure.

"Our tools were used for the fourth year of the study, the data of which is being analyzed now," Moreau says. "Preliminary data looks very positive for teachers' professional growth and children's oral narrative development, a foundation of comprehension. Our tools have patented icons to signal the parts of a story: Character, setting, initiating event, feeling of the character about the initiating event, plan, attempts to carry out the plan, the consequences of the attempts and the resolution or feeling at the end. These components constitute an 'episode.' A plot is a series of episodes. Thus, our tools assist across the academic curriculum and in social situations requiring extended conversation. The tools are used in regular education, special education, court schools, private schools for those with emotional problems, for children along the autism spectrum and gifted and talented children, as well. Recently, we have had many requests for a product for college programs in speech-language pathology and teacher preparation."

For the Haskins/Yale study, Moreau provided workshops using Braidy, the StoryBraid™ to the Haskins mentors who work directly with the first-grade teachers in the experimental group. Those teachers and administrators also received professional development training from Moreau. "The training focused on narrative macrostructure [character, setting, etc.] and also the microstructure—elaboration of noun phrases, conjunctions, adverbs, mental state words, such as 'remember,' and linguistic verbs, such as 'yelled,' 'sobbed,' 'chuckled,' that mirror the tone of voice the speaker should have."

She has also served on the Oral Language Module Creation Team for the BayState Readers Initiative and was an original state trainer for the initiative. In turn, she served as a trainer for the first year of Reading First in Massachusetts as it replaced the formal BayState Readers Initiative. Moreau comments, "All in all, I always knew and saw the impact that SLPs had in classroom literacy. The journals and professional organizations, such as the American Speech-Language Hearing Association, in recent years are presenting research to bolster the argument for the SLPs' expertise in literacy. Additionally, in the latest newspaper publication of the International Reading Association, there was an article stating the organization's suggestions for the re-authorization of No Child Left Behind that includes an oral language module."

Looking back on her career, Moreau says she is most satisfied with the help she has managed to provide to those in need. As with most healthcare professionals, part of the thrill in the work is being able to make a difference in other people's lives. Moreau remarks, "My favorite part of my job is creating materials. I love going out, demonstrating those materials and seeing student growth because of them. I am proud of the fact that I took research and turned it into a methodology and hands-on tools for language development that works. I am very happy with the response of workshop participants and practitioners as they use the tools and see improvement in students. The children, their parents and the teachers that support them have always been my focus."

She has also had many fabulous opportunities to travel, provide product demonstrations, provide in-depth professional development workshops and meet "kindred spirits" all across the United States. "Everywhere I have been," she says, "there are people with vision and energy for innovation. For instance, I met Judy Montgomery of California [former president of ASHA] in my travels, and she and I collaborated and wrote two books, *East Meets West* and *East Meets West for the Holidays and Other Special Events*. In these two books, we analyzed popular children's books for phonology, vocabulary, syntax and text structure so that an SLP or special educator could gain access to any of the books and, with little preparation, present read-alouds in classrooms or intervene in clinical settings. That has been a great experience and connected Massachusetts and California in the spirit of language and literacy!"

Moreau has also been able to encourage numerous young SLPs still looking to make their mark. "I would advise anyone new to the profession to do research as they go along," she states. "Continually read the journals so you can keep on top of everything and always keep applying the research evidence as educational professionals to the broader educational group of classroom—teachers, special education, administrators—so that everyone might see the value of oral language development and how it relates to reading and writing. After over 30 years of change, 'language' is now a well-known component of therapy and classroom instruction."

Moreau went back for her second round of training in the Orange County (Florida) Public Schools in early January. Further down the road, she hopes to become more involved in Reading Initiatives and research in the area of students learning English and those children along the autism spectrum. She concludes, "There are problems with students' abilities to comprehend and use strategies in all areas of the content area curriculum and across grade levels. I would like to be involved in any research related to comprehension and, in turn, expression of what one comprehends. I also have a great interest in expanding our focus to include more general educators, parents and teachers of reading."

Maryellen Rooney Moreau, MEd, CCC/SLP, is president and founder of MindWing Concepts Inc., headquartered in Springfield, Massachusetts. She received a bachelor's degree in communication disorders from the University of Massachusetts and a master's degree in communications disorders from Penn State University. Moreau is certified as an elementary education teacher and teacher of communications disordered students in the state of Massachusetts. She also has an ASHA certification as a speech-language pathologist. For more information about MindWing Concepts, visit www.mindwingconcepts.com.

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