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IMPLEMENTING FAILURE-FREE READING

with students seriously at-risk for failure

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ABSTRACT

Reading problems are among the most prevalent concerns for students with learning disabilities. In this research, students at-risk of serious reading failure were taught word recognition and comprehension skills using the failure free Reading program. The intervention is based on effective principles identified in research on successful reading programs; key steps included (a) previewing the story, (b) listening to the story being read, (c) presenting content from the story, (d) reading the story, and (e) reviewing the story. Significant differences in oral reading, word recognition, and silent reading performance were evident after intensive intervention; improved reading was demonstrated across seven different curriculum-based reading measures. The failure free Program appears to have promise for improving achievement of students at-risk of reading failure.

Many of the ills of society have been associated with reading disabilities (e.g., chronic unemployment, dropping out of school, juvenile delinquency) and teachers have long been involved in adapting instruction to meet the needs of students at-risk of failure in reading (Hiebert, 1994; Marr & Allington, 1994; Sleeter, 1986; Smith, 1934, 1965). About 80 percent of students with learning disabilities have difficulty reading (Kirk & Elkins, 1975; Lerner, 1993; Lyon, 1985; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1995).

Data on the effects of general approaches to enhancing reading skills are favorable (Tindal, Algozzine, & Ysseldyke, 1997). For example, several studies have been completed on the effects of previewing and various reading practice techniques. Generally, these studies show that listening to a story prior to reading it is very effective and more effective than silently reading it (Rose, 1984; Rose & Beattie, 1986; Rose & Sherry, 1984). Additionally, studies have focused on previewing with peers (Salend & Nowak, 1988), using tapes (Freeman & McLaughlin, 1984), paragraphs vs. word lists with concept attentional cues or motivational statements (Sachs, 1983; 1984), simply repeatedly reading the passage (van Bon, Boksebeld, Font Freide, & van den Hurk, 1991; Weinstein & Cooke, 1992), or one-to-one tutoring (Wasik & Slavin, 1993). All these general techniques appear to be effective in improving students' oral reading fluency.

A few studies have also been completed that reveal significant effects in improving students oral reading performance when using specific error correction and feedback strategies. For example, supplying correct words while students are reading them and providing extensive practice reading materials focused on sight word vocabulary have been studied by Rosenberg (1986) and Rose, McEntire, & Dowdy (1982), with results showing the need to include correction procedures that complement simply supplying the word to students when they make an error. Similar effects are obtained when students simply receive feedback (Perkins, 1988; Thorpe, Chiang, & Darch, 1981).

A variety of remedial reading approaches not typically used in general education classrooms have been developed and also used with students with severe problems reading. For example, multisensory stimulation approaches (e.g., VAKT, Fernald, and Orton-Gillingham methods), neurological impress methods (rapid-unison reading by student and teacher), intensive phonics instruction, and whole-language approaches have been popular over the years (Lerner, 1993). Reading recovery (Clay, 1985, 1987, 1991; Tunmer, 1990) is among the most recent additions to this area of study.

For the most part, data on the effectiveness of these broadly described and widely implemented programs for remedial reading instruction are equivocal or unconvincing. Consider the following: (a) the Slingerland approach (Lovitt & DeMeir, 1984), was not found to be any more effective than a traditional basal program, (b) studies of Direct Instruction curricula reveal contradictory outcomes, with some

studies showing no significant effects (e.g., Kuder, 1990; O'Connor, Jenkins, Cole, & Mills, 1993) and others showing significant effects (e.g., Polloway, Epstein, Polloway, Patton & Ball, 1986), and, (c) despite implementation with 78,000 students from 1984-1993, data from Reading Recovery research sites produce an unconvincing scenario on its effectiveness with age cohorts (Hiebert, 1994; Viadero, 1994).

A newly developed commercial product, the failure free Reading Program, is grounded in much of the research on effective reading instruction and tutorial programs (cf. Wasik & Slavin, 1993; Lerner, 1993; Lockavitch, 1993). Its primary goal is to provide a basic understanding of the reading process to students with pronounced reading difficulty by employing age appropriate materials, promoting independence in reading, using a consistent approach, repetition, and immediate performance feedback. The program controls three factors critical for reading progress: repetition within a meaningful context, easy and predictable sentence structures, and meaningful story content. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effects of a pilot implementation of the failure free Reading Program with a group of students with learning disabilities. While the factors that differentiate this approach are sometimes evident in remedial classroom instruction, their packaging and the simultaneous nature of their presentation represented a unique intervention in this research.

METHOD

First grade students (n=165) at risk of serious reading problems used failure free reading to supplement instruction for an entire school year. Standardized test scores for these students reflected below average performance at the beginning of the school year. Pretest and posttest achievement comparisons were completed to evaluate the effects of the innovative reading program.

Participants and Setting

One hundred and sixty-five students from a rural school district in a southeastern state participated in this study. All participating students were nominated by their classroom teachers as "at-risk for serious reading failure." Prior to participating, 45% of the group was reading at the Preprimer Level, 45% was reading at the Primer Level, and 10% was reading at the First Grade Level of the Metropolitan Achievement Test routinely administered by the school district.

Procedures

The failure free Reading Program was developed to give students with severe reading difficulties the opportunity to immediately experience success in appropriate age- and grade-level materials (Lockavitch, 1995). The failure free materials are specifically designed to allow teachers to place non-reading students in age- and grade-appropriate reading passages regardless of current levels of reading performance. The product includes a Teacher's Manual with scripted lessons and Instructional Readers and Independent Reading Booklets at varying levels of difficulty as well as Flashcards and Independent Reading Activities for additional practice; talking software is also available. The program controls and emphasizes three elements crucial to reading success: repetition, sentence structure, and story content. Lessons in the failure free Reading Program provide high rates of vocabulary repetition in sentences that are not complicated with inverted phrases, dependent clauses, or incomplete thoughts that confuse and frustrate emergent readers. The program content also controls the use of multiple meaning words, figurative speech, and complex language in the content of each reading passage.

The students participated in a maximum instructional period of 30 minutes daily with a teacher trained in the failure free Reading Program. Though the failure free Reading Program provides both printed material and computerized software material, this particular sample was instructed using both components of the program in the "Reading Is Fun Lab."

The approach reduces reading to its simplest form by controlling for context of the material, sentence structure, and story content. The primary instructional procedure involved: previewing material to be read, listening to teacher read, answering factual, inferential, and leading questions, reading the material, and reviewing the material successfully. While these activities are often included in classroom reading instruction, their simultaneous application within a structured remedial program was a unique intervention for this group of students. The approach was designed to improve word recognition and comprehension performance by having students read controlled passages from a carefully scripted commercial program (i.e., failure free Reading Program).

Reading performance was assessed using 3 different curriculum-based measures of achievement. Seven different reading passages were used to monitor performance in word recognition, oral reading, and silent reading performance; key words in each passage were presented in different testing formats. Lists of twenty words were supplied for the recognition measure; students were asked to read each word in the lists prior to and after completing the failure free Reading program materials and passages related to them. The oral reading task required students to read 20 sentences and supply a missing word in each using a cloze procedure (e.g., The swan _____ over the lake. fly flew flower). Silent reading performance was measured using a 10-question simple comprehension task. The number of correct answers was converted to a percentage score for each assessment and these three scores served as dependent data for subsequent comparisons.

The students (n=165) entered the program in September and were pretested. At the end of the school year, after 8 months of instruction, the students were retested using the same measures. Dependent group t-test comparisons of reading performance were completed as a measure of the effectiveness of the failure free Reading program; the level of significance for all statistical tests was 0.01.

RESULTS

After participating in the project, only 13% of the students remained at the Preprimer or Primer Level on the Metropolitan Achievement Test

TABLE 1: READING PERFORMANCE

		PERFORMANCE MEASURE					
		Oral Reading		Silent Reading		Word Recognition	
CRITERION STORY		PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Going To The Park	M	16.26	88.84*	19.59	88.41*	14.31	67.60*
	SD	26.88	18.53	30.77	17.27	23.70	24.02
At The Lake	M	53.50	96.15*	47.13	94.00*	23.86	85.49*
	SD	24.12	8.65	28.84	14.85	20.05	17.38
Walk In The Woods	M	72.60	98.19*	69.11	97.72*	44.19	92.05*
	SD	21.16	4.18	26.58	8.13	26.94	13.34
Eating Lunch	M	62.47	97.52*	52.00	93.68*	30.78	87.51*
	SD	16.52	6.12	25.34	14.19	21.65	18.73
Pony Ride	M	74.17	98.25*	63.75	97.03*	36.85	84.99*
	SD	13.73	3.85	24.69	7.97	26.23	19.73
Sitting Down	M	76.53	98.23*	58.67	96.76*	44.21	87.50*
	SD	13.71	3.66	32.14	10.05	26.20	16.34
Time To Leave	M	89.80	97.23*	61.19	97.01*	54.76	92.26*
	SD	9.33	10.81	30.13	8.71	26.41	15.12

routinely administered by the school district; 52% of the students were reading at the First Grade Level and 35% were reading at the Second Grade Level. Similar progress was evident in curriculum-based measures of reading performance.

Means and standard deviations for participating students oral reading, silent reading, and word recognition scores on seven criterion stories are presented in Table 1. Improvements were evident in all areas regardless of the level of performance demonstrated on the pretest scores. Performance on successive stories also improved, supporting the value and importance of repeated reading sustained by participation in the failure free Reading program.

DISCUSSION

Most students with learning disabilites have difficulties in reading (Kirk & Elkins, 1975; Lyon, 1985; Lerner, 1993) and very poor reading skills have been blamed for many of society's ills (e.g., chronic unemployment, dropping out of school, and juvenile delinquency). Improving reading performance has received continuing interest in efforts to meet the needs of students at risk of school failure as well as in the schools' continuing commitment to see that all students learn basic skills (Lerner, 1993; Marr & Allington, 1994; Wasik & Slavin, 1993; Wood & Algozzine, 1995). The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effects of a structured program designed to improve the reading achievement of students with learning disabilities. Significant improvements in reading were evident as a result of this intervention.

In a review of five tutoring programs, Wasik and Slavin (1994) identified eight components of the reading process that were emphasized in successful approaches: perceptual analysis of print, knowledge of print conventions, decoding, oral language proficiency, prior knowledge, lexical access, syntactic analysis of sentences, and prose comprehension. The failure free reading program is grounded in these factors and the belief that "reading is relating" (Lockavitch, 1995, p. 78):

> Students must be able to relate to what they read. They must be able to relate to the text, the sentence structure, and the story's content. When they can relate, successful reading will take place. When they can't relate, reading failure will occur.

The failure free reading instructional approach follows a simple, direct method using carefully constructed passages of connected text and addresses the disadvantages of many other remedial tutoring programs (e.g., one-to-one instruction, extensive training needs, cost) by emphasizing the following: (a) group administration, (b) ease of use, and (c) cost-effectiveness. The practical effects of implementing this program are similar to those associated with broader, more expensive, more labor-intensive programs.

For example, in "an evaluation of Reading Recovery," Center, Wheldall, Freeman, Outhred, and McNaught (1995) reported posttest effect sizes ranging from 0.42 on the Syntactic Awareness Cloze Test to 3.05 on Clay's book level test. Effect sizes on comparable measures of reading

recognition and silent reading ranged from 1.14 to 2.85 when students participating in the failure free Reading Program were compared to control groups of their peers (Lockavitch & Algozzine, 1996). These large effect sizes favor the failure free students on all outcome measures. In another study, England, Rankhorn, Collins, Lockavitch, & Algozzine (in press) reported improved reading performance and decreased discrepancies between ability and achievement in a group of students with reading disabilities after using the failure free program to supplement their reading instruction.

The results of this study add to the growing body of literature supporting the failure free Reading program. While additional effectiveness research is needed, it appears that this innovative program can be successful with students who fail to profit in traditional reading programs. The benefits of this approach include the following: (1) simple, direct implementation using scripted materials that minimize the need for extensive teacher preparation and training, (2) systematic instruction grounded in components of effective reading instruction (e.g., repetition within a meaningful context, easy and predictable sentence structures, and meaningful story content), (3) carefully organized lessons building on key components of successful reading lessons (e.g., previewing material to be read, listening to material being read, answering factual, inferential, and leading questions, reading the material, and reviewing the material successfully).

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