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Effects of the *failure free* Reading Program on Students At-Risk for Reading Failure

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ABSTRACT. Reading problems are among the most prevalent concerns for elementary school teachers. In this research, students at-risk of serious reading failure were taught word recognition and comprehension skills by teachers 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 reading performance were evident after intensive intervention. The *failure free* Program appears to have promise for improving attitudes and achievement of students at-risk of reading failure. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]*

For more than a century, professionals and the general public have engaged in significant and profound worrying about the "reading problem" in America's schools (Marr & Allington, 1994). Over the same time, a variety of special methods not typically used in general education classrooms have been developed and used with

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students at-risk of severe problems in 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) is among the most recent additions to this area of study.

Reading Recovery (RR) is a preventive intervention program designed to help correct reading problems in students who have failed to profit from formal reading instruction (Clay, 1985, 1987, 1991; Tunmer, 1990). During daily individualized lessons with specially prepared RR teachers, *selected* "at-risk" students are tutored to help develop independent literacy skills (Center, Wheldall, Freeman, Outhred, & McNaught, 1995). 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).

For the most part, data on the effectiveness of other broadly described and widely implemented approaches to remedial reading instruction are equally equivocal or unconvincing (Marr & Allington, 1994). Consider the following: (a) the Slingerland (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) " . . . it is not yet established that a heavy investment in first grade [global reading improvement programs] will pay off in permanent gains for at-risk students" (Wasik & Slavin, 1993). Additionally,

> as a result of classroom observational research and the evaluation of compensatory education programs, much concern [has been] raised about the lack of progress made by . . . high-risk readers. These students did not maintain gains made in reading and, more often than not, read below grade placement and remained in the remedial pull-out programs through their school career. (Marr & Allington, 1994, p. 95)

Clearly, there is a strong and continuing need for the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs to improve reading skills of at-risk readers.

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, 1995). This program's 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 conduct a pilot test to evaluate effects of *failure free* Reading on students likely to experience serious reading failure.

METHOD

First grade students nominated by their teacher to be at-risk for serious reading problems used *failure free* Reading to supplement instruction for an entire school year. Pretest and posttest achievement comparisons were completed to evaluate the effects of the program.

Participants and Setting

Nineteen 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." Each was reading far below grade level and teacher's prognoses for success in later grades were bleak. Research has supported the validity and reliability of teacher nominations in identifying students at-risk for reading failure (cf. Marr & Allington, 1994; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1995; Shanahan & Barr, 1995).

Program and Procedures

The *failure free* Reading Program[1] was developed to give students with severe reading difficulties the opportunity to immediate-

ly 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. Instruction for the teacher involved a series (5) of brief (1 hour) inservice presentations illustrating key aspects of usage and providing opportunities to work through the instructional sequence and content under supervision of the second author. Though the *failure free* Reading Program provides both printed material and computerized software material, this particular sample of students 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 standardized measures of achievement. Reading and Spelling subtests of the Wide Range Achievement Test 3 (WRAT3) and Letter/Word Identification and Passage Comprehension subtests and the Broad Reading Achievement Cluster of the Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery-Revised (WJ-R) were available for all participating students.

The WRAT3 was designed to measure the "codes which are needed to learn the basic skills of reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic" (Wilkinson, 1993, p. 10). It is a single-level, individually administered test that can be used with students of all ages. The Reading subtest assesses skills in letter recognition, letter naming, and pronunciation of words in isolation. The Spelling subtest assesses skills in copying marks onto paper, writing one's name, and writing single words from dictation. The test is well standardized and has adequate reliability to be used in making decisions about individuals (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1995).

The Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery-Revised (Woodcock & Johnson, 1989) is a widely-used, individually administered, norm-referenced assessment system with adequate technical adequacy (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1995). The Letter-Word Identification subtest assesses the identification of letters in isolation and words. The Passage Comprehension subtest uses a modified cloze procedure to assess understanding of short passages. The Broad Reading Cluster combines subtests to produce a general measure of reading achievement.

The students entered the program in September and were pretested. At the end of the school year, the students were retested using the same subtests. Comparisons of reading performance were completed as a measure of the effectiveness of the Reading Is Fun Lab; the level of significance for all statistical tests was 0.01.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for participating students' WRAT3 Reading and Spelling scores are presented in Table 1. Skills in letter recognition, letter naming, and pronunciation of words in isolation improved from pretest to posttest. Reading standard scores ($t = -2.10$, $df = 18$, $p < 0.05$), percentile scores ($t = -1.66$,

$df = 18, p < 0.05$), and grade equivalency scores ($t = -2.88$, $df = 18$, $p < 0.05$) improved significantly. By comparison, Spelling standard score subtest performance ($t = 1.08$, $df = 18$, $p > 0.05$) as well as other indicators remained constant.

Means and standard deviations for participating students WJR scores are presented in Table 2. Significant standard score ($t = -2.11$, $df = 18$, $p < 0.05$), percentile score ($t = -1.43$, $df = 18$, $p < 0.05$), and grade equivalency score ($t = -6.22$, $df = 18$, $p < 0.05$) improvements were evident in students' skills in identifying letters in isolation and words. Similar improvements were evident in understanding of short passages and Broad Reading Cluster scores.

Performance improved in all areas of reading that were assessed (see Figure 1). In general, the improvements represented significant changes in basic reading skills above those that would be expected for this group of students without the benefit of the Reading Is Fun Lab. The practical significance of these outcomes was evaluated

TABLE 1. Achievement Performance Comparison

Subtest		Pretest	Posttest	Correlation	Obtained t
Wide Range Achievement Test					
Reading SS	M	76.37	78.63	0.72	−2.10*
	SD	6.41	6.16		
Reading %ile	M	7.32	9.26	0.66	−1.66
	SD	5.83	6.50		
Reading GE	M	0.74	1.05	0.38	−2.88*
	SD	0.45	0.41		
Spelling SS	M	84.89	83.32	0.44	1.08
	SD	4.92	6.74		
Spelling %ile	M	16.68	15.47	0.51	0.60
	SD	7.80	9.67		
Spelling GE	M	1.00	1.05		−1.00
	SD	0.00	0.23		

*$p < 0.05$

using effect size calculations (see Table 3). In general, improvements evident for students participating in the *failure free* Program were similar to those obtained in other comparable remedial reading and tutorial programs.

DISCUSSION

Most students with learning disabilities have difficulties in reading (Kirk & Elkins, 1975; Lyon, 1985; Lerner, 1993) and very poor

TABLE 2. Reading Performance Comparison

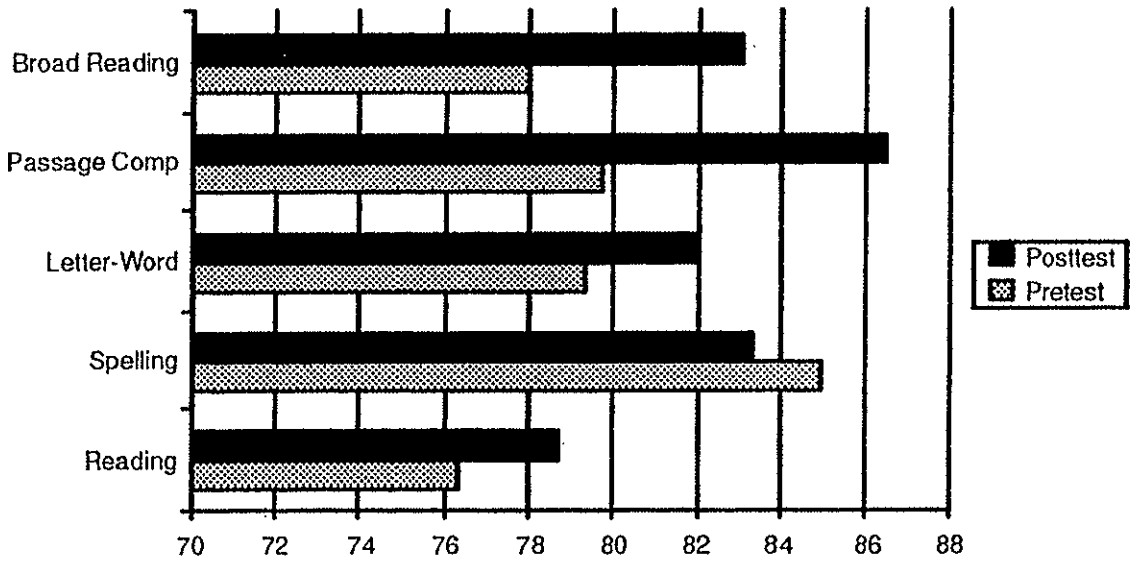
Subtest		Pretest	Posttest	Correlation	Obtained t
Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery					
Letter Word Identification SS	M	79.26	82.05	0.76	−2.11*
	SD	8.74	7.52		
Letter Word Identification %ile	M	11.26	14.11	0.70	−1.43
	SD	9.92	11.93		
Letter Word Identification GE	M	1.26	1.63	0.57	−6.22*
	SD	0.24	0.30		
Passage Comprehension SS	M	79.89	86.47	0.67	−2.88*
	SD	13.49	9.22		
Passage Comprehension %ile	M	15.85	14.69	0.71	−2.61*
	SD	14.69	13.40		
Passage Comprehension GE	M	1.26	1.80	0.55	−4.44*
	SD	0.63	0.39		
Broad Reading Cluster SS	M	77.95	83.11	0.75	−3.13*
	SD	10.79	8.08		
Broad Reading Cluster SS	M	11.33	15.84	0.71	−2.35*
	SD	10.20	11.53		
Broad Reading Cluster SS	M	1.33	1.70	0.50	−5.57*
	SD	0.28	0.31		

*$p < 0.05$

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; 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. Similarly, Juel (1996) identified several activities that were particularly important in successful tutoring dyads: using reading material that gradually and repetitively introduced high-frequency vocabulary with common spelling patterns, directly teaching letter-sound relations, helping students to identify and spell words, and hearing the tutor's words as a model

FIGURE 1. Standard Score Performance Differences



for reading unknown words. 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 with 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 global tutoring programs (e.g., one-to-one instruction, extensive training needs, cost)

TABLE 3. Effect Size Comparisons

Program	Effect Size
failure free Reading	
Reading	.36
Letter Word Identification	.34
Passage Comprehension	.58
Broad Reading	.55
Comparable Programs[a]	
Reading	.45
Word Recognition	.28
	.53
Reading Comprehension	.95
	.07
	.39
	.61
	.14
Vocabulary	.51
	.39
Word Knowledge	.30

[a]Data presented in Shanahan & Barr, 1995, p. 974.

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 Close 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, as well as those obtained in this study, favor the *failure free* students on important outcome measures. While additional effectiveness research is needed, it appears that the *failure free* Reading Program can be successful with students who fail to profit in traditional reading programs. The benefits of this approach include the following: (1) basic, 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).

NOTE

1. Contact JFL Enterprises, 137 Corbin Court, Concord, NC 28025 for school or district implementation information.

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