

Reading and Writing Intervention for Older Students with Disabilities: Possibilities and Challenges

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As a field, we know considerably less about effectively remediating older students with significant reading disabilities than we do about preventing reading difficulties with younger students. Most older students with reading disabilities either have had inadequate instruction, have not attended school consistently, and/or require more intensive reading instruction than they are currently receiving. Furthermore, the consequences for not reading well are quite significant. Not only are these students unable to read and learn from text, they read slowly and laboriously, preventing them from completing assignments in a timely manner. Furthermore, the burden of poor reading yields low motivation and discouragement.

One student said it this way, “I didn’t learn to read until I was 11 years old. I am a foster child. I used to live with my real Mom and Dad and we lived on the streets. I never learned to read because I hardly ever went to school. I had to repeat the second grade. Now, I am scared to read because I know I’ll mess up. I am scared that people will start to laugh at me and say, ‘She can’t read, she can’t read’” (McCray, Vaughn, & Neal, 2001, p. 21).

Over the past 30 years, we have taught or conducted research in classrooms with students with disabilities representing the full gamut of grades. Our experiences reveal that accelerating reading growth for older students with severe reading disabilities is the most challenging task we have encountered. The authors who have contributed to this special issue are among the finest researchers who have accepted the challenge of designing and testing the efficacy of interventions with older students with disabilities.

We developed this special issue with the intention of culling from these experts some of the best knowledge we have about effectively teaching older students with reading and writing disabilities. Our hope is that this overview of

literacy intervention for older struggling readers will assist both practitioners and researchers in developing effective intervention approaches for this group of students.

Greg Roberts, Joseph Torgesen, Alison Boardman, and Nancy Scammacca introduce the series of articles with a description of evidence-based practices in teaching reading to students with learning disabilities in grades 4 and above. They list five key areas on which instruction for older, struggling readers should focus: word study, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation. For each of these areas, the authors provide practical descriptions of critical elements of instruction for older students with learning disabilities, along with two important conclusions—that adolescence is not too late to intervene and that the level of intensity required for these older struggling readers to close the gap with their peers is likely high. Students who are several grade levels behind will need to make markedly accelerated progress if they are to close the gap.

The ultimate goal of reading is, of course, comprehension. Educators have long noted that many secondary-level students—especially those with reading difficulties and disabilities—struggle to understand and remember what they read. Michael Faggella-Luby and Donald Deshler summarize the findings of six research reviews, syntheses, and meta-analyses related to reading comprehension intervention, noting that there is evidence that reading comprehension for adolescents with learning disabilities can be improved through intervention. They identify key characteristics of effective comprehension instruction for these students, addressing both instructional emphasis and pedagogy, but suggest that these findings must be qualified and interpreted with some caution because of various shortcomings of the available research. They include four specific recommendations for future research in this area.

Carolyn Denton, Jade Wexler, Sharon Vaughn, and Deanna Bryan describe an experimental study with middle school students with severe reading disabilities, many of who are also English language learners. Implementing a multi-component reading intervention with middle school students

with severe reading disabilities resulted in very limited impact. Neither the treatment group nor the comparison group demonstrated significant standard score growth during the one-semester intervention. Even though the intervention was provided in small groups ($n = 5$) for approximately 40 minutes a day for 13 weeks, reducing the gap between current performance and grade-level expectation was not realized. The authors describe the challenges related to effectively accelerating reading growth with older readers who have significant reading disabilities, speculating that some students, particularly those with limited oral vocabularies along with deficits in decoding, fluency, and comprehension, will require intensive intervention over an extended period of time.

Susan Ebbers and Carolyn Denton reviewed relevant research related to vocabulary instruction and provide specific considerations for how we might promote vocabulary acquisition with older students. Many of the suggestions they provide can be implemented by all secondary teachers—such as creating a learning environment that fosters word consciousness to increase students' interest in words and their meanings, so that using and noticing new words is an ongoing part of schooling. They also identify practices related to effective instruction in specific word meanings as well as instruction designed to teach students independent word learning strategies through a combination of contextual and morphemic analysis. These instructional approaches are grounded in overarching principles recognized by researchers as being characteristic of effective instruction for students with learning difficulties, including explicit instruction; promoting cognitive and collaborative engagement; and providing many opportunities for practice, including distributed practice, with teacher feedback. They provide a rationale for how vocabulary enhancement can be integrated across the content areas and throughout the school day so that word learning is not only for reading or language arts classes. These authors also recognize the need for additional research validating practices for enhancing vocabulary learning.

Reading is not the only area in which older students with learning disabilities struggle. Using criteria from the meta-analysis conducted by Graham and Perin (2007), Linda Mason and Steve Graham identify effective practices for enhancing writing instruction with older students with writing

disabilities. They identify 40 studies across six programs of research that provide interventions for adolescents with learning disabilities. Based on the findings of these studies, they define instructional approaches that are associated with improved outcomes in writing.

Taken together, these researchers describe an emerging research base related to effective literacy instruction for older students with significant reading and writing difficulties. They recognize that we cannot simply assume that instructional strategies and approaches validated with younger struggling readers are equally effective for students in the middle and upper grades. We still have much to learn, and there is a need for continued research in this area.

The research described in this series of articles illustrates that it is not too late to intervene with these older struggling readers, but that intervention may be challenging. There are practical and effective instructional practices that can be integrated into both content-area and reading classes across the school day, but some students are likely to need small-group intensive intervention that includes direct instruction in effective reading and writing strategies and in what might be considered the foundation skills (e.g., decoding, fluency, and vocabulary development) necessary to effectively implement those strategies. For many students who have experienced repeated failure in their efforts to read and write, motivation must also be addressed. Some students will need intensive intervention over an extended period of time. Providing this level of intervention will likely require substantial changes to business as usual in the upper elementary grades and in secondary schools.

Despite the inherent challenges, there is a sense of urgency in the need to address these issues, as students' lives may be changed considerably if they learn to read successfully. The challenge is equally urgent for researchers who design and evaluate effective interventions and for practitioners who implement them.

REFERENCE

- McCray, A. D., Vaughn, S., & Neal, L. I. (2001). Not all students learn to read by third grade: Middle school students speak out about their reading disabilities. *Journal of Special Education, 35*, 17–30.

About the Authors

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