

Early Reading Proficiency and its Relationship to Accessing the Curriculum

Introduction

Reading affects every aspect of a student's learning, from the ability to listen and comprehend a story in preschool; to the acquisition and exercise of critical reading and comprehension skills in elementary, middle, and high school; to the successful application of reading as part of one's life skills as a young and aging adult. Because reading is essential to other content acquisition, ensuring that early learners have a strong foundation in reading has been a major focus of recent U.S. education initiatives.¹

Although the ability to read is critical to a child's future success, recent reading assessments have shown less-than-stellar results. The 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that 37 percent of the nation's fourth graders failed to demonstrate they are capable of reading at a basic level (Santapau, 2001). According to Lyon (1999), approximately 20 percent of school children in the United States encounter significant difficulties in learning to read. Many, but not all, reading disabilities can be traced to obvious risk factors (e.g., physical, environmental, and psychological); these difficulties often occur in disproportionate levels among children who are poor, racial minorities, and nonnative speakers of English (Mercer, 1997; ERS, 2002).

Inadequate reading ability can diminish a student's acquisition of the knowledge and skills embedded in the general education curriculum and result in reduced or limited learning outcomes (Morocco, 2001). Reading difficulties may also lead to other problems, such as a lack of motivation and engagement, high levels of anxiety, and misbehavior in the classroom (Lane, O'Shaughnessy, Lambrose, Gresham, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2002; Taylor, Hasselbring, & Williams, 2002). Further, the 2002 report of the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education stated that up to 40 percent of students receiving special education services were identified as having a disability because of their inability to read. When looking only at students with specific learning disabilities, the Commission found that "80 percent are there [in special education] because they haven't learned how to read."

In response to these concerns, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has prioritized reading as a critical goal for students with disabilities along with other academic content goals related to mathematics, science, and social studies. Currently, OSEP has funded more than 10 research, personnel preparation, and technical assistance and dissemination projects to address academic content, access, and related issues. The Texas Center for Reading and Language Arts at the University of

¹ For this brief, "early readers" refers to all students who are beginning readers, regardless of their age or grade level in school.

Texas at Austin, for example, is investigating effective reading strategies for students with emotional and behavioral disorders at the elementary and middle school level. In addition, the REACH for READING project at the Center for Family, School, and Community in Newton, Massachusetts, will link an accessible literacy approach to four evidence-based reading interventions and gather longitudinal data about the reading development process of students with varied patterns of reading difficulty. Thus, reading is a priority.

Because reading is so essential to the ability of students with disabilities to gain access the general education curriculum and improve their content knowledge and life skills, the Access Center is developing resources that can help state and district technical assistance providers, state and local administrators and policy makers, educators, and parents learn more about reading programs, practices, and research to enhance reading outcomes for children with disabilities. To respond to this goal, the Access Center is developing a series of briefs on reading that will help promote reading and increase access to the general education curriculum. The series begins by focusing on early reading. Recent syntheses of research have given a new and deeper understanding of scientifically based practices to teach early reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; NRP report, 2000).

This brief outlines arguments for the importance of early reading; orients the reader to some of the more widely disseminated and influential reading research undertaken to date; provides information about current federal legislation and guidelines that are intended to positively affect reading goals, instructional approaches, and student outcomes; and reviews a series of issues pertinent to reading interventions and the conditions needed to support “access” for students with disabilities.

Why is Early Reading Important?

“Students who do not ‘learn to read’ during the first three years of school experience enormous difficulty when they are subsequently asked to ‘read to learn’” (NCITE, 1996, p.1). This quote underscores the reason that reading is of such great importance—reading is the primary way students are asked to learn information in the various content areas of English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Therefore, when students cannot read, or struggle to learn to read, their ability to learn other subject matter and achieve at grade level is severely limited (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002). To ensure sustained access to the general education curriculum, then, it is imperative that students attain solid reading skills in the early grades.

How can state education agencies, LEAs, school administrators, and teachers support student acquisition of solid reading skills? One important way is through quality classroom instruction of skill-appropriate content. “Quality classroom instruction in kindergarten and the primary grades is the single best weapon against reading failure” (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 343). From kindergarten through third grade, the majority of classroom instruction focuses on learning to read and developing children’s understanding of the written symbols for the oral language they have been exposed to since birth. Beginning in the fourth grade, the instructional purpose and focus shifts to

helping students use the reading skills they have been taught to acquire new content knowledge. The older a child gets, the more that solid reading comprehension and higher-order thinking skills are required to complete complex and often demanding assignments. According to Torgesen (1998), students who experience early reading failure are unlikely to ever catch up to grade level expectations. “As several studies have now documented, the poor first grade reader almost invariably continues to be a poor reader. And the consequences of a slow start in reading become monumental as they accumulate exponentially over time” (Torgesen, 1998). If students receive better quality reading instruction, they may be less likely to fall behind in reading and therefore be more likely to succeed in school (Scanlon & Vellutino, 1996; Pascopella, 2001) and access the curriculum in all content areas (NCITE, 1996).

Research on Effective Approaches to Early Reading Success

In 1999, the Congressionally appointed National Reading Panel (NRP) submitted its report identifying approaches proven effective in teaching children to read. In the report, the NRP focuses on the following specific aspects of reading instruction: alphabetics (including phonemic awareness and phonics), fluency, comprehension (i.e., vocabulary, text comprehension, strategies for comprehension, and teacher preparation), teacher education and reading instruction, and computer technology and reading instruction (NICHD, 2000). Among the conclusions drawn, the panel found that specific aspects of reading instruction led to improvement in reading performance. For example, the research shows that teaching students phonemic awareness led to improvement in phonemic awareness, reading, and spelling. Similarly, systematic phonics instruction was found to be significantly more effective than instruction that includes little to no phonics. Benefits of phonics instruction were seen for students in kindergarten through sixth grade as well as for children who had difficulty learning to read. Specifically, kindergarteners that received systematic beginning phonics instruction read and spelled better than other children, and first graders decoded and spelled words better than those who did not receive such instruction. In studies on older children, results showed that phonics instruction also improved their spelling and decoding skills, but not necessarily their comprehension (NRP Report).

On reading fluency², the Panel concluded that guided repeated oral reading had a significant impact on word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension for students of all ages. For silent reading, another common instructional approach for fluency, more research is needed to understand what factors of independent silent reading practices affect reading fluency. When panel members addressed reading comprehension, they concluded that efforts to build vocabulary and develop strategies for comprehending vocabulary in text are also important for reading comprehension, especially when vocabulary words are taught directly as well as indirectly through a variety of methods and used repeatedly across many contexts. The panel also concluded that teaching students through a combination of reading comprehension techniques (e.g., question

² Fluency is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly and with proper expression and comprehension. Because fluent readers do not have to concentrate on decoding words, they can focus their attention on what the text means. From the Partnership for Reading (<http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/>)

answering, question generation, and summarization) led to better performance in recall, answering questions, generating questions, and summarizing texts (NICHD, 2000).

The NRP report was widely received and has been influential for both researchers and policy makers. It was extremely influential, for example, in shaping President Bush's Reading First Initiative. The report is also being widely referenced when states and districts are establishing their own reading programs.

Ensuring early reading success for all students is not an easy task. However, according to Stanovich (1997), most student reading problems can be prevented through effective instruction in kindergarten and early elementary school when what is known from research is translated and implemented in the classroom.

As the NRP and other studies have shown, there are a host of reasons for students having difficulty acquiring reading skills (Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000). The basic foundations for literacy can affect early reading, including physical, environmental, and psychological risk factors; concentration problems; hearing or vision impairment; lack of interest or motivation to read; or limited access to books (Wisconsin Literacy Education and Reading Network Source, n.d.). All these factors may complicate reading proficiency (Thurlow, 2002). Although the reasons for early reading difficulty are varied and individualized, no one reading program or approach is effective in treating each student's individual needs. Instead, the research suggests that high quality—and often personalized—approaches to teaching reading are necessary and that early intervention is much more effective than later intervention or remediation. The gap that separates children who are at risk for reading failure and children who are likely to be successful readers is smaller in the early grades, and conditions are most ripe for addressing this gap during these early years (Scanlon & Vellutino 1996; Pascopella 2002).

Federal Initiatives to Improve Early Reading Instruction and Outcomes

To fully understand the issues involved in implementing reading interventions for students with disabilities, educators should look at recent federal legislation calling for improved educational access, content, and instruction in early reading.

Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94–142) in 1975 to support states and districts in protecting the civil rights of children and youth with disabilities. This landmark law is currently enacted as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as amended in 1997. IDEA '97 is designed to ensure that all students with disabilities receive the same educational opportunity as students without disabilities, including access to the general education curriculum. IDEA '97 focused national attention on the need to help students with disabilities engage in the general education curriculum and perform at proficient and high levels on state and local assessments. The federal regulations to IDEA '97 also provide guidelines for ensuring that a student's individualized education program (IEP) helps states, districts,

schools, and teachers provide students with access to the general education curriculum.³

In 2001 President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. NCLB is the federal law governing education in the United States and broadly encompasses curriculum and instruction for all children. Although not specifically designed for students with disabilities, the law seeks to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (20 U.S.C. § 6301 [2002], <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA02/pg97.html#sec6301>), by “meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our Nation’s highest-poverty schools, limited English proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance” (20 U.S.C. § 6301[2002]). In essence, NCLB mandates that all students, including (but not limited to) those with disabilities or who may be considered at risk for academic failure, receive the opportunity to obtain an education that allows them to demonstrate academic success. Recognizing that reading is an important component of the general education curriculum, NCLB includes a specific provision to promote improved reading teaching and learning: the Reading First initiative.

The Reading First initiative aims at ensuring that all students read at least at the third grade level by the time they complete the third grade (20 U.S.C. § 6361 [2002]). To meet this goal, the initiative identifies key components that make up reading and outlines the essential elements of reading instruction (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency [including oral reading skills]), and reading comprehension strategies) (20 U.S.C. § 6368 [3], [2002]). Reading First also calls for schools to implement reading programs “that are based on scientifically based reading research” (20 U.S.C. § 6361[1]). The initiative seeks to provide funding to states willing to improve K–3 reading instruction using scientifically based research. As a result, many states have applied for these funds and are working to improve their teaching and learning systems through research-based materials and practices.

This focus of NCLB highlights the priority of improving early reading development and the importance of helping all students effectively engage in the general education curriculum. By focusing efforts on using instructional strategies that positively impact early reading development, we may be able to “nip reading problems in the bud,” for many students who struggle with reading. However, despite these efforts, some students may still struggle and require more intensive and specialized education and related services. The IDEA assures that students with special learning needs will be supported by accommodations designed to address their individual disability. Every student should receive high quality instruction that supports early reading development, but effective supports, technology, and accommodations are often needed to help students with special needs achieve their full potential.

³ <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/Policy/IDEA/IDEA.pdf> Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 Section 614 (D)(1)(a)(i-iv)

The Access Framework

Effective reading interventions can help students with disabilities more effectively engage in learning general education content. Still, reading programs will not reach all students if appropriate supports are not in place. Administrators, policy makers, and educators thinking about implementing a research-based reading intervention should become grounded in the theory and features of the intervention. Once knowledge is attained at a sufficient level, a framework of access-related issues should be explored and applied to the educational settings. This involves the following steps:

- *Step 1:* Ask questions about the research base supporting using interventions specifically for students with disabilities. Questions should begin to probe more deeply what research says about implementing the interventions for students with varying types of disabilities.
- *Step 2:* Ask questions about the contextual conditions needed to support effective implementation of the intervention. What conditions appear to be facilitating or restricting implementation? What is the status of those conditions in the state, district, or school? How can educators address those conditions that need to be more fully developed to facilitate implementation?
- *Step 3:* Make sure the following conditions are present to support access: a) the intervention will support the learning goals defined for each student in accordance with the general education curriculum and content standards; b) necessary media, technology, and materials are available to provide instruction through a variety of formats to meet the demands of diverse learning needs; c) appropriate accommodations are available to address the unique needs associated with individual students; and d) appropriate assessments are available for measuring student progress.

Following the access framework will enable states and districts to become more aware of the conditions that should be present to effectively reach diverse learners and become effective consumers of research-based reading interventions. The Access Center and other services are available to support decision makers as they work through these steps.

Concluding Remarks

This brief has focused on the importance of early reading success for educational achievement in general, as well as on how early reading success is a key to enabling students with disabilities to gain access to the general education curriculum. Research is cited to support these arguments and to provide a brief introduction to current legislation supporting reading interventions for improved outcomes, as well as accountability for the outcomes of students with disabilities. In addition, using the research base on effective reading interventions to guide implementation of such interventions for improving student reading is important. However, these research-based interventions are only effective when implemented with consistency and fidelity and when critical issues related to access and context have been acknowledged and addressed.

In future briefs on reading, the Access Center will discuss many of the issues and concepts reviewed in this brief in greater detail, drawing on practical examples from the field, as well as the research base guiding state and district reading programs. Future briefs can be accessed at the Web site of the Access Center: Improving Outcomes for All Students K–8 at <http://www.k8accesscenter.org>.

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Links to Federal legislation:

ADA law: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm>

section 504 law: <http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/29/794.html>

IDEA law and regs: <http://www.ideapractices.org/law/index.php>

NCLB legislation & policy: <http://www.nclb.gov>