Addressing Reading Failure at the Secondary Level: Problems and Issues

Early identification and intervention

Learning to read is the most important outcome of a child's primary school education. High levels of literacy promote human capital accumulation, thus promoting income, employment, health benefits, and social participation for individuals, and poverty reduction and economic development for societies. Failure to develop basic reading skills by age nine predicts a lifetime of illiteracy. If a child does not learn to read in primary school, they will not be able to use reading to access the curriculum in secondary and tertiary education. Unless they receive the appropriate instruction, children entering first grade who are at risk for reading failure are likely to continue to have reading problems into adulthood.

If a student is two years behind his peers he must develop in reading at a rate twice as fast as they do, if he is to catch them by the end of primary school (as they will improve by at least two years over that period). While this conception of reading progress is rather crude, it does give the flavour of just how immense a task it is. Most students do not have access to intervention, and their prognosis is grim. For those students who do receive help, it is incumbent upon us to provide the best and most efficient intervention available at the time. This implies that the most salient content must be delivered to students in the most effective manner possible.

The early identification of children at-risk for reading failure coupled with the provision of comprehensive early reading interventions can reduce the percentage of children reading below the basic level in the fourth grade. When teachers identify students exhibiting persistent reading problems, interventionists and reading specialists can collectively work to reduce student reading gaps and help these students develop along desired reading continuums. If this issue remains unresolved, struggling readers' educational achievement will continually erode because students lack essential, foundational reading comprehension abilities (Capin et al., 2021).

Teachers are critical in identifying struggling readers, because they first observe signs of reading difficulties (Virinkoski et al., 2018). Many educators report, however, that their teacher training programs lack relevant training regarding identification of students with varying learning difficulties (Jones et al., 2019). Additionally, recent observation studies have discovered that teachers' whole group instruction methods have become increasingly inadequate in addressing the unique needs of struggling readers (Reed et al., 2019). Students with persistent reading difficulties benefit from methodical, purposeful, and progressive reading instruction that provides continuous teacher-student feedback, involvement, and engagement.

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Many older children have experienced the debilitating sequence of interacting skill deficits described by Stanovich (1986) as the Matthew effect. For example, the early lack of phonemic awareness leads to a failure to master the alphabetic principle. This further entails slow, error-prone decoding, the overuse of contextual cues, and poor comprehension. This resultant laborious, unsatisfying reading style leads students to avoid text, with a consequential reduction in vocabulary growth, and a broadening of the skill deficit. Much evidence has now accumulated to indicate that reading itself is a moderately powerful determinant of vocabulary growth, verbal intelligence, and general comprehension ability (Stanovich, 1993).

Content: It has long been assumed that once a student is past the primary grades, phonological processing is no longer critical to word identification and to reading. Across the life span, from childhood

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to adolescence and beyond, phonological skills central to decoding remain the primary skill engaged when we are presented with an unknown word, rather than orthographic coding. Such findings are consonant with evidence that phonological mechanisms mediate word identification in all readers, whether beginners or experienced readers (Shaywitz et al., 1999).

Many students who have relied upon whole-word memory recognition as their mode for storage and retrieval find the strategy collapses in Year Four. Students who cannot access the phonological route to identify the escalating array of new words obviously struggle, and progress grinds to a halt. In truth, they had difficulties before this time, but perhaps managed to disguise them in classrooms where careful continuous assessment of word attack skills was unavailable.

Should we be focussing on decoding or comprehension? It is true that most reading problems can be traced back to problems of "getting the word off the page" rapidly and effortlessly; however, there are students whose general language development (in addition to their decoding) is also delayed. However, in 90% of cases, the source of reading comprehension problems is poor word recognition skills (Oakhill & Garnham, 1988).

Effective intervention: The specific decoding tendencies of the problem reader suggest what a program must do to be effective in changing this student's behaviour.

- The problem reader makes frequent word identification errors.
- The student makes a higher percentage of mistakes when reading connected sentences than when reading words in word lists.
- Often the student reads words correctly in word lists and misidentifies the same words when they are embedded in connected sentences.
- The specific mistakes the reader makes include word omissions, word addition, confusion of high frequency words (such as 'what' and 'that', 'of' and 'for', 'and' and 'the').
- The student also reads synonyms (saying 'pretty' for 'beautiful').
- The student often guesses at words, basing the guess on the word-beginning or ending. And the student is consistently inconsistent, making a mistake on one word in a sentence and then making a different mistake when re-reading the sentence.
- The student doesn't seem to understand the relationship between the arrangement of letters in a word and the pronunciation of the word.
- Often the student is confused about the "word meaning" (a fact suggested by "synonym reading", "opposite reading", and word guessing). The strategy seems to be based on rules the student has been taught.
- The problem reader follows such advice as: Look at the beginning of the word and take a guess; Think of what the word might mean, and look at the general shape of the word. The result is a complicated strategy that is often backwards: The student seems to think that to read a word one must first understand the word, then select the spoken word that corresponds to that understanding.
- Although the problem reader may use a strategy that is meaning based, the reader is often pre-empted from comprehending passages. The reason is that the student doesn't read a passage with the degree of accuracy needed to understand what the passage actually says (omitting the word 'not' from one sentence changes the meaning dramatically).
- The student's reading rate is often inadequate, making it difficult for the student to remember the various details of the passage, even if they were decoded accurately.

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Often the problem reader doesn't have an effective reading strategy. An effective strategy has the following characteristics:

- The learner must learn to look at the order of letters in a word and learn that this order suggests the general pronunciation of the word. Furthermore, the student must learn that the game is simple: First figure out how the letters suggest one should say the word. Then see if the word you say is one that you recognise, one that has meaning (note that this strategy is basically the opposite of the one the typical problem reader uses).
- The problem reader must receive practice in reading connected sentences that are composed of words that have been taught in isolation. Merely because the student reads words in lists does not imply transfer to written sentences.
- The student must receive strong reinforcement for working on reading because the task is very difficult and frustrating for the student. The student has received a great deal of evidence that reading is a puzzle that can't seem to be solved.
- Finally, the student must receive practice in reading a variety of passages. If the student practises reading only narrative passages, the student will not "automatically" transfer the reading skills to textbooks, articles, or other forms of expository writing. Therefore, different styles must be introduced.

The message in intervening effectively for older students is that it will take considerable time (perhaps a year or two) and the chosen intervention must be very effective and efficient to increase the students' acceleration. It must be intensive – daily for about an hour. It must increase the students' free reading so as to generalise their new skills to all their reading. It must include daily fluency activities - as fluency is the last feature of reading to improve.

If reading assistance fails to exert a significant impact on the reading performance of low-achieving older readers, one reason is that the instruction provided is not sufficiently intense. Extended practice is particularly important toward increasing the magnitude of treatment outcomes (Swanson, 2001). Lack of practice means fewer words can be read by sight, thereby restricting automaticity. The continued expenditure of cognitive attention on decoding leaves few resources available for comprehension, and so the student's difficulties are compounded. The longer this set of circumstances prevails, the further delayed the student becomes, the more pervasive becomes the problem, and the more difficult the rescue operation.

Often these students have other deficits too – in numeracy, writing, thinking, content knowledge, problem solving. Unfortunately attempts to address all these difficulties together lead to a diluted curriculum in which no discernible progress occurs in any area. It is more effective to focus on the pivotal area of reading.

Conclusion

Learning to read can, thus, be described as a fundamental skill which enables not only active participation in the curriculum but also forms the basis for lifelong success and opportunity (Hulme & Snowling, 2011). Evidence suggests that if learners have not reached expected levels of proficiency in 'learning to read' strategies in the early years of schooling, there will be little to no improvement in reading ability without intervention/remediation (Bigozzi et al. 2017).

(see https://www.nifdi.org/resources/hempenstall-blog/kerry-s-complete-list-of-blogs.html)

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