

Making Reading Interventions Effective in the Secondary School Setting

In the information provided by Kerry Hempenstall, the importance of providing effective intervention for low-progress readers in the secondary school was emphasised. While it is the job of primary schools to equip students with literacy and numeracy skills for their high school careers, the sad fact is that an unacceptably high proportion of students leave primary school without the necessary reading skills to access the secondary school curriculum. This transfers the obligation to educators in the secondary school; an expectation that is both unreasonable and daunting. Having said that, we must not give up on students who enter secondary schooling unable to read proficiently. It is the school's obligation to not allow students to leave their school education without being able to read at least at a level that allows them to access the modern world. There is no point in worrying about whether curriculum areas are covered if the student cannot actually read. This certainly applies to the very low students, but the students who are not as far behind are harder to justify taking out of other curriculum areas to receive reading intervention. Good assessment (and monitoring) is critical to know what type of intervention is required and how intensive it needs to be.

When students enter secondary school in Year 7 a quick universal screening of all students should take place to ensure those students who need additional support are identified immediately and are triaged into appropriate levels of support. This can be achieved with a time effective curriculum-based measure such as words read correctly per minute. For students identified in the bottom 25% of the age/grade cohort, Tier 2 intervention in small groups can be an effective solution to this problem.

Further, and understandably, secondary school teachers have not been trained to teach reading. Quite reasonably, they expect this job has been done at the primary school level. This means there can be a lack of knowledge about how best to support students who have not developed adequate reading skills to access the secondary school curriculum. This is why it is so critical to have suitably qualified special education professionals available in every school to support both the students who need support and the teachers who are teaching them. A few key points to making intervention successful are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Intensity

As stated by Hempenstall, intervention needs to be intensive for students who have a lot of ground to make up. One hour a day of explicit instruction in reading is what is required on at least 4 days, preferably 5 days of the week. This can be done effectively in small groups of up to 5 students if they are grouped according to their skill level. This will mean that it is likely that there will be at least two groups operating at different skill levels so that students can be moved between groups according to their progress. This will require monitoring to ensure that students are working at the correct level of instruction. Progress monitoring is an essential feature of Tier 2 intervention. In addition to the small group instruction, at least 15-20 minutes of supported one-to-one reading should occur at least three to four times a week to provide essential practice required for skills to develop and generalise. This one-to-one practice lends itself to peer-tutoring interventions, often utilising older students to work with younger students. This might occur at roll call or before school or at lunchtime. Clearly this takes a lot of organisation as tutors need to be trained in how to support their student and they need to be monitored to ensure the support is being effectively delivered.

Timetabling

One of the major challenges with providing intensive intervention at the secondary level is the timetable. Clearly, schools operate very differently at the secondary school level compared to primary school. Students have multiple teachers across discrete subject areas. No longer is one teacher responsible for

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the progress and welfare of the student. This scenario makes providing effective support very challenging. For intervention to truly work, school leaders need to think carefully about how it's built into the timetable. That might mean students being pulled from different subjects across the week, scheduling intervention as a timetabled "elective" (even though it functions differently), or finding another structure that works for their context. Whatever the approach, it's hard for an intervention to be effective if it isn't clearly prioritised in the timetable.

Understanding

It's important to bring a large dose of compassion and understanding when working with older low-progress readers at the secondary school level. Teachers often report that 'undesirable' behaviour will also be displayed by students in high school who are well behind in their reading. This behaviour is often masking embarrassment of not wanting to appear 'dumb' and, of course, low self-esteem. This can make it very difficult to engage with students who are themselves disengaged. We must focus on building relationships, celebrating gains, and creating supportive and respectful interactions for an intervention to be successful.

Keeping the learning going

During (see above) and after the intensive intervention phase (for an hour a day, preferably five days a week) it's important to provide some further structured support for reading. This is where peer tutoring can play a powerful part. Shared supported reading for just 15-20 minutes a day, three or four times a week can maintain and continue the reading gains that are being made in the intervention sessions. Students who have struggled with reading are unlikely to read at home; it's important to try to compensate for this lack of practice and learning through more supported reading while the student is still in 'school mode'. Exposure to text where new vocabulary and ideas are presented as well as more elaborate language is critical in closing the gap between these students who have missed out on so much compared to their peers. Providing low-progress students with choice of reading materials, in their area of interest for example, can provide a sense of agency in the student. It's important to provide access to non-fiction as well as fiction material in this context. Experience has shown that reading practice with a supportive 'other' can be a real turning point for students who are low-progress readers. Trained peer tutors, teaching assistants and volunteers can provide crucial opportunities for low-progress readers to engage with text in a supported context. There are a few simple strategies that can be readily taught to make the maximum impact in these sessions. Again, it is acknowledged that this is difficult to arrange in a secondary school setting, but it is well worth the effort.

Communication with colleagues and parents

Given low-progress readers are not likely to be able to access grade level print, it is important to provide 'work-arounds' in class while intensive reading instruction is bringing students up to speed. Mitigation of the word reading barrier that impairs knowledge building and understanding is crucial to give students access to age and grade level content and knowledge. This can be done by preparing students with content knowledge for upcoming learning area texts, planning for opportunities weeks prior to a new topic or area of study being introduced, for texts to be read to students, vocabulary explored and discussed, marking up text, and using graphic organisers.

For reading interventions to be successful, it is important that there is effective communication between learning support teachers and subject teachers. There will need to be a collaborative relationship among all those involved in the support of low-progress readers. InSpEd worked with MultiLit and AERO to produce a practice guide on collaboration that can be found at <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/collaborating-support-networks-supporting-diverse-needs>

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