

Intensive interventions boost at-risk first-graders' reading development

First-graders in Oregon and Texas, identified as at-risk because of a lack of early literacy skills, showed dramatic improvements across a range of reading measures after receiving extra instructional time systematically designed to enhance reading development, according to researchers at two institutions.

In the study, published in the March/April issue of the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 21 at-risk students in Oregon, in groups of four or fewer kids, received an intensive 60-minute daily intervention. In Texas, 33 similarly at-risk students, in groups no larger than five, received an intensive daily 30-minute intervention. The sessions were carried out during the school year, focused on similar skill development and were delivered in a similar explicit and systematic manner. The main difference was length of time devoted to the students.

"This study looked at the role of time with students most at risk for reading difficulties to determine whether doubling intervention time at the beginning of first grade is an efficient use of instructional time," said Beth A. Harn, professor of special education at the University of Oregon.

The Oregon students in the longer sessions scored higher on end-of-the-year testing, but all students receiving the extra instruction improved with many of their scores ending in the average range against national norms.

"The significantly greater growth in fluency for all of these students who received more intense intervention is indeed noteworthy," said Harn, who led the study. "A lot of early interventions in the past have done an exceptional job of filling gaps in phonemic awareness, phonics and comprehension, but closing the gap in fluency has represented a struggle."

The Oregon approach was more intensive, increasing instructional support significantly for the most at-risk students, beginning in first grade. In Texas, intensifying to the same level was not available until students were in second grade.

In Oregon, during the first half of the school year, most time was spent on word analysis, such as phonics and word recognition, followed by passage reading and comprehension and reading fluency. In the second half of the school year the intervention focus shifted, with more time spent in passage reading with comprehension and fluency development and less time in word analysis.

The results suggested that students in the longer intervention outperformed students in the less intense intervention on all outcomes except passage comprehension. The greatest differences were found in improvements on oral reading fluency for students in the longer intervention.

Researchers theorize that longer, 60-minute sessions may provide students with the additional practice they need to master early literacy skills. Whether the improvements will continue to be demonstrated across later years is not known, Harn said. "This was a post-hoc study," the authors wrote, "limiting direct comparisons and generalization."

Harn and colleagues also noted that the interventions analyzed in their research involved schools experienced in using research-based instructional and assessment practices with multi-layered support systems. Because of that pre-condition, Harn said, an exact replication of the study in schools that do not use such approaches may be difficult.

"The study certainly has implications in how schools approach their instruction and interventions," said Harn, who led the analysis of data from the Oregon schools. Schools may want to allocate more instructional resources earlier for struggling students, rather than waiting until later grades when it becomes more difficult to catch up struggling readers, she said.

Source: University of Oregon

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