

This edition of Getting Schooled focuses on the development of Reading Skills.

Michele Pentyliuk and I have a keen interest in the strategic development of an individual's reading skills. Research has demonstrated that with the implementation of evidence-based core instructional strategies most students can learn to read. Unfortunately, some School Psychologists and educators may not be up-to-date on the foundational reading literature that has been published over the past 13 years. This article provides School Psychologists with an overview of key reading research findings and recommends a few mainstay resources.

Happy Reading!!

R. Coranne Johnson, PhD., R. Psych.

Co-Chair, PAA School Psychology Committee

The Role of School Psychologists in the Prevention of Reading Difficulties

Michele Pentyliuk, R. Psych. is in private practice in Edmonton. She is the Past-President of the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta.

Dr. R. Coranne Johnson, R. Psych. is presently working in private practice and is serving as a Board Director for the Psychologists' Association of Alberta.

Reading difficulties are the most common cause of academic failure and underachievement, and one of the primary reasons why students are referred to School Psychologists (Bramlett, Murphy, Johnson, Wallingford, & Hall, 2002). Despite the extensive research and the vast array of evidence-based reading approaches and strategies available, students in our schools continue to experience reading challenges. Research indicates that many of these reading challenges could be prevented with the implementation of core reading instruction along with early identification and remediation when reading acquisition difficulties are detected. School Psychologists play a pivotal role in students' reading development by engaging in a number of activities including:

- Assisting with division-wide implementation of evidence-based core reading instructional strategies.
- Promoting and developing early identification processes in schools.
- Planning and implementing targeted interventions.

School Psychologists possess competencies in assessment, intervention, and research, as well as program development and evaluation. As such, they are uniquely prepared to assist with the

development and implementation of effective reading instruction in schools. These skills are essential when analysing reading research findings, and when devising reading instruction intervention processes within universal, targeted and individualized tiers of support.

What should School Psychologists know about core reading instruction?

In 2000, the National Reading Panel reviewed more than 100 000 studies to establish what aspects of reading instruction were required to yield the best results in terms of overall reading ability. The Panel identified five essential components of reading instruction that enhance reading acquisition:

1. **Phonemic awareness** – the ability to hear, identify and manipulate sounds in words.
2. **Phonics** - the understanding that there are predictable relationships between sounds and letters in print.
3. **Fluency** – the ability to read effortlessly in terms of accuracy, speed and expression.
4. **Vocabulary** – the ability to understand the meaning of words.
5. **Text comprehension** – the ability to gain meaning from text.

The intent of the National Reading Panel was to provide educators with evidence-based instructional reading approaches that could be utilized as the foundation for reading instruction. Two central publications discuss and describe the five essential components: (a) *Put Reading First* (National Institute for Literacy, 2001,) and (b) *What Content-Area Teachers Should Know About Adolescent Literacy* (National Institute for Literacy, 2007).

The establishment of five essential components of reading instruction contradicts the “whole language” training that many Alberta teachers received in their university preparation. Furthermore, teaching reading using whole-word approaches as a model of reading instruction has not stood up to the scrutiny of research. Tunmer and Greaney (2010) describe the whole-word approach as the “multiple cues” theory of reading acquisition. This approach teaches students to use multiple cues to identify words in text. That is, they are encouraged to use picture cues, semantic and syntactic information, passage content, and prior knowledge when reading. There is evidence that struggling readers rely too heavily on these cues to compensate for their deficient alphabetic coding skills (Stanovich, 1986). “The scientific evidence is simply overwhelming that letter-sound cues are more important in recognizing words.... than either semantic or syntactic cues (p. 21, Pressley, 2006). Good readers readily deduce letter-sound cues when learning to read, but poor readers require explicit instruction. The research regarding the importance of alphabetic coding skills resulted in The National Reading Panel’s (2000) recommendation that ALL students should receive direct and explicit instruction of phonemic awareness and phonics. Research has defined for educators how to teach students how to read (National Reading Panel, 2000). School Psychologists, therefore, have an

opportunitiy to assist with the dissemination and implementation of evidence-based reading instruction.

How do we identify students at-risk?

“The most common cause of children’s early difficulties in acquiring accurate and fluent word recognition skills involves individual differences in their phonological knowledge and skill” (Torgensen, 2002, p. 12). Torgensen (2002) believes this is a critical point, and one that underlies the need to assess phonological awareness at a young age, possibly, the most important discovery about reading difficulties made in the last 20 years. What may be the second most important discovery is that we can identify students who possess poor phonological awareness at a very young age, and with targeted intervention we can prevent the development of reading delays (Al Otaiba & Torgensen, 2007; Helland, Tjus, Hovden, Ofte, & Heimann, 2011; Lipka & Siegel, 2010). Specifically, Lesaux and Siegel (2003) found that early screening and intervention reduced the risk of reading difficulties from 23.8% in Kindergarten to 2.7% in Grade Four. The potential impact of strategic reading intervention is astounding.

What are Early Identification processes?

Given the evidence that suggests that students at-risk can be identified at a young age, School Psychologists have a professional responsibility to identify children before they begin to fail. While many teachers and School Psychologists believe that reading disabilities cannot be identified until a child is well into elementary school, and as a result, well behind expected reading achievement levels, research suggests that at-risk students can readily be identified in Kindergarten and Grade One (e.g., Lipka and Siegel, 2010). Difficulties with the building blocks of language (i.e., phonological and phonemic awareness skills) as well as a limited vocabulary and poor letter knowledge are all indicators that a child may be at-risk. School psychologists can train classroom teachers to administer screening tests to identify students at-risk. Once weaknesses are identified, School Psychologists can work with teachers to enhance their knowledge of intervention strategies. The Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta’s Right to Read committee developed a screening test, the *Reading Readiness Screening Tool (RRST)*, which is designed to be administered by classroom teachers to all students at the Kindergarten and Grade One level. More information about this screening tool can be obtained by contacting Greg Markusson, coordinator of the Right to Read Project (gmarkusson@canlearnsociety.ca).

What intervention strategies are effective?

When students' reading development is delayed, they should be provided with targeted instruction. Several approaches to the application of more intensive supports have been described in the literature; most suggest a multi-tiered, Response to Intervention (RTI) model (Vaughn, Denton, & Fletcher, 2010). This occurs through some combination of reducing group size, increasing learning time, and tailoring the instruction so that it better meets the need of the learner (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2009). School Psychologists have a growing number of excellent resources to refer to for specific interventions. *Understanding, Assessing, and Intervening on Reading Problems* (Joseph, 2006) is a practical resource that is essential when consulting about reading interventions. Dawn Reithaug's *Three Tiers of Instruction and Intervention for Reading* (2009) frames reading instruction/intervention in an RTI model. Advocating for and working with schools to develop early intervention, regular instruction, and specialized intervention practices are vital roles of the School Psychologist.

What happens if we don't intervene?

The effects of unidentified and/or unremediated reading difficulties are numerous. Stanovich (1986) described how poor reading skills not only impacted all areas of academics, but also extra-curricular activities and peer relations. He coined the term, "The Matthew Effect" to describe how students who started their school careers with lower reading abilities continued to fall further behind their peers. What begins as relatively small differences in reading and reading-related skills during the first year of school, develops into a downward spiral of achievement deficits, with negative motivation and behavioral spinoffs. Self-esteem and self-concept suffer (Boetsh, Green, & Pennington, 1996), with impacts that reach far beyond the walls of the classroom. Not only do low literacy levels place individuals at greater risk for early school leaving, but a high number of homeless youth and adolescents who have committed suicide were identified as learning disabled (McBride & Siegel, 1997). It would be negligent to allow students to progress through school without effective intervention when there is strong evidence to suggest that we can prevent many reading difficulties.

Conclusion

School Psychologists play a key role in helping teachers and parents understand how reading develops and how to intervene when development is not progressing as expected. Research has identified the essential elements of reading instruction that should be provided to all readers (National Reading Panel, 2000), and that the intensity and explicitness of intervention strategies must be increased for those students who continue to struggle despite receiving high quality core reading instruction. School Psychologists who have a solid understanding of the development of reading skills, the reasons for reading difficulties, the process of identification of students at-risk, and the essential components of evidence-based instruction are valued

members of the school team. Helping teachers expand their understanding and utilization of evidence-based reading interventions is a challenging role for School Psychologists, but a worthwhile one that has the potential to reduce the numbers of students who struggle with reading in Alberta's schools.

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