# EFFECTS OF FAILURE FREE READING ON CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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*ABSTRACT*

*Reading problems are among the most prevalent concerns for general and special educators who teach culturally and linguistically diverse students with learning disabilities. In this study, 60 students with serious reading problems were taught word recognition and comprehension skills using the Failure Free Reading Program. This intervention is based on effective teaching principles identified in successful reading programs. Key steps in the program included (a) previewing the story, (b) listening to the story being read, (c) presenting content from the story, (d) reading the story, and (e) reviewing the story. Improved performance in letter and word identification, word attack skills, reading comprehension, and dictation were observed after intensive intervention procedures were implemented. The results showed that discrepancies between intellectual ability and reading achievement decreased in more than half of the students. Discussion is focused on the implications of the Failure Free Reading Program as an effective intervention program for improving the reading achievement levels of ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities.*

Reading is fundamental to success in our society (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The ability to read is highly valued and essential for academic, social, and economic advancement. As a result of positive efforts made by educational practitioners, most children are learning to read fairly well. However, in many schools today, large numbers of students are educationally at risk, rarely performing at the same level as their more advantaged peers. Culturally and linguistically diverse learners who are at risk meet serious problems in the educational system. They are more likely to (a) experience continuous academic failure, (b) be referred and placed in special education programs and lower track classes, and (c) drop out of high school (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998). In this article, we address problems of children whose educational careers are in danger because they do not read well enough to succeed in school, including about 80% of students with learning disabilities who have difficulty reading (Kirk & Elkins, 1975; Lerner, 1997; Lyon, 1985; Snow et al., 1998; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1995; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 2000).

When questions arise about how best to teach early reading skills to culturally and linguistically diverse children, the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow et al., 1998), suggested (a) using reading to obtain meaning from print; (b) having frequent and

intensive opportunities to read; (c) being exposed to frequent, regular spelling–sound relationships; (d) learning about the nature of the alphabetic writing system; and (e) understanding the structure of spoken words. Furthermore, this Committee pointed out that adequate progress in learning to read beyond initial levels depends on the following factors:

- a working understanding of how sounds are represented alphabetically,
- sufficient practice in reading to achieve fluency with different kinds of text,
- sufficient background knowledge and vocabulary to render written texts meaningful and interesting,
- control over procedures for monitoring comprehension and repairing misunderstandings, and
- continued interest and motivation to read for a variety of purposes. (pp. 3–4)

Efforts to improve reading and literacy skills also must avoid some pitfalls to be effective:

There are three potential stumbling blocks that are known to throw children off course on the journey to skilled reading. The first obstacle, which arises at the outset of reading acquisition, is difficulty understanding and using the alphabetic principle—the idea that written spellings systematically represent spoken words. It is hard to comprehend connected text if word recognition is inaccurate or laborious. The second obstacle is a failure to transfer the comprehension skills of spoken language to reading and to acquire new strategies that may be specifically needed for reading. The third obstacle to reading will magnify the first two: the absence or loss of an initial motivation to read or failure to develop a mature appreciation of the rewards of reading. (Snow et al., 1998, pp. 4–5)

Most literacy scholars and the latest "Blue Ribbon Panel" (i.e., the National Reading Panel) agree that the majority of reading problems faced by adolescents and young adults are the result of stumbling blocks, obstacles, and problems that

should have been addressed during early elementary school years (cf. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000a, 2000b). Clearly, focusing on a few fundamental factors while avoiding challenges inherent in and/or created by faulty literacy instruction makes the most sense as a method for overcoming reading problems of at-risk students, especially those from diverse backgrounds (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000a, 2000b; Snow et al., 1998; Winzer & Mazurek, 1998).

The program evaluated in this study is grounded in much of the research on effective reading instruction and tutorial programs (cf. Lerner, 1997; Lockavitch, 2001; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000a, 2000b; Snow et al., 1998; Torgesen, 1995; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). Its primary goal is to provide a basic understanding of reading to nonreaders and those with pronounced reading difficulty by employing age-appropriate materials, promoting independence in reading, and using a consistent approach with repetition and immediate performance feedback. The program controls three factors critical for reading progress: repetition and practice within a meaningful context, easy and predictable sentence structures, and meaningful story content. As Vadasy, Jenkins, Antil, Wayne, and O'Connor (1997) indicated, some of these strategies have been incorporated in one-to-one tutoring programs that are being used to prevent reading failure, such as Reading Recovery (Clay, 1985) and Success for All (Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1996). These approaches vary in their emphasis on decoding strategies and reading of connected text, skills essential in programs for nonreaders and those with extremely low reading ability (Snow et al, 1998; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). Furthermore, because of their high cost, programs like Reading Recovery and Success for All that are delivered by specially trained and certified teachers are available to only a small portion of elementary school students needing supplemental literacy instruction.

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effects of a commercially available intensive remedial intervention, Failure Free Reading, on the reading performance of at-risk students, including those from culturally and linguistically

diverse backgrounds. The approach was selected because it offered several advantages over other special methods typically used with students at risk of continuing and serious failure (e.g., Reading Recovery, Success for All). The program was designed for nonreaders and those with extremely low reading scores (e.g., number of words known ranges from 2 to 50, consistent performance below 50th percentile). For example, in this research, all students reading below the 25th percentile were included, and students were not excluded or rejected based on performance during initial lessons. Failure Free Reading was designed for small-group instruction of children with the lowest reading levels using principles grounded in best practices in preventing difficulties while providing effective literacy instruction (cf. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000a, 2000b). Success rates with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations are favorable (Lockavitch, 2001). The investigators sought to answer the following question: To what extent is Failure Free Reading an effective reading program with culturally and linguistically diverse students at serious risk of continued reading failure?

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

A total of 60 students from a suburban school district in a southwestern state participated in this study. No students dropped out or were removed from the study (i.e., the attrition rate was 0%). Culturally and linguistically diverse students with learning disabilities were taught reading using the Failure Free Reading program to complement general education classroom instruction for an entire school year. The students were randomly selected from among the lowest reading students in several elementary schools to participate in this study. The gender ratio was approximately even, with boys representing 53% of the sample. Approximately two thirds (63%) of the students were White, 20% were Black, 15% were Hispanic, and 2% were Asian. Approximately 37% appear to come from culturally and linguisti-

cally diverse backgrounds. Each student participated in third-, fourth-, or fifth-grade special education programming, and was reading 2 or more years below grade placement. The specified area of discrepancy for the participating students was reading. To participate in the program, each student's intelligence had to fall in the average range; no differences were indicated between IQ scores or reading discrepancies for students from majority or minority backgrounds. Pretest/posttest comparisons of reading achievement and ability-achievement discrepancies were completed to evaluate the effects of the supplemental reading program on these culturally and linguistically diverse learners with learning disabilities (see Table 1).

The total school enrollment in the school district was approximately 30,000 (24th largest in the state) in 18 elementary campuses, 6 intermediate schools (grades 6–8), and 3 comprehensive high schools. Approximately 12% of the students in the district received some type of special education service, including speech and language therapy, coteaching classes, resource room arrangements, helping teacher programs, vocational preparation opportunities, self-contained classes, collaborative approaches, alternative education classes, homebound services, and supported language development classes. Students with learning disabilities represented 52% of the special education population; eligibility criteria defined in Section 89.234 of the *State Board of Education Rules for Special Education* (relating to Learning Disabilities: Criteria for Determining the Existence of a Severe Discrepancy) were typical of those used across the country:

(a) The multidisciplinary assessment team shall determine whether a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability exists in accordance with the provisions in 34 Code of Federal Regulations §§300.540-300-542.

(b) The team shall determine the student's intellectual ability based on standardized intelligence tests, and shall determine the student's achievement level based on standardized achievement tests in areas

# TABLE 1

PARTICIPANTS' INTELLECTUAL ABILITY, READING DISCREPANCY SCORES, AND READING ACHIEVEMENT SCORES

| Score | | Group | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | White | Ethically Diverse Students |
| WISC Full Scale | M | 93.61 | 88.95 |
| | SD | 17.56 | 6.18 |
| WISC Full Scale-Reading Discrepancy | M | 7.97 | 6.64 |
| | SD | 17.48 | 15.97 |
| Letter Word Identification (%ile) | M | 28.18 | 22.00 |
| | SD | 23.36 | 26.53 |
| Letter Word Identification (Standard Score) | M | 85.66 | 82.77 |
| | SD | 20.11 | 16.61 |
| Word Attack (%ile) | M | 27.21 | 21.91 |
| | SD | 23.52 | 21.24 |
| Word Attack (Standard Score) | M | 85.89 | 84.64 |
| | SD | 19.21 | 13.26 |
| Comprehension (%ile) | M | 29.55 | 15.27 |
| | SD | 25.03 | 20.82 |
| Comprehension (Standard Score) | M | 84.73 | 78.59 |
| | SD | 23.94 | 13.66 |
| Dictation (%ile) | M | 26.84 | 17.77 |
| | SD | 20.33 | 18.49 |
| Dictation (Standard Score) | M | 86.26 | 83.27 |
| | SD | 18.27 | 10.82 |

Note. *Discrepancy represents difference between IQ scores and average Standard Scores across subtests of the Woodcock-Johnson. Participating students were in third, fourth, and fifth grades.*
M = *Mean;* SD = *Standard Deviation.*

in which the student has had appropriate learning experiences. The two sets of standardized scores shall be compared. The team shall find that a severe discrepancy exists when the students' assessed intellectual ability is above the mentally retarded range, but where the student's assessed educational achievement in areas specified is more than one standard deviation below the student's intellectual ability. The team's report shall include a statement of the degree of discrepancy and the method of computation used in determining the severe discrepancy.

Participants were combined for all subsequent analyses and treated as at-risk students, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Overall, the sample demonstrated

average intellectual ability, and reading discrepancies were substantial (i.e., more than one-half standard deviation difference). As a measure of severity in learning disabilities in participating students, discrepancies between average reading achievement Standard Scores and WISC-R Full Scale IQ Scores were calculated (WISC-R Verbal and Performance Scores were not available for analysis). At the beginning of the study, 27% of the students exhibited severe (i.e., greater than one standard deviation) discrepancies between ability and achievement (i.e., average reading performance).

## PROCEDURES

The Failure Free Reading program was developed to give students with severe reading difficulties the opportunity to immediately experience success (Lockavitch, 2001). The materials were specifically designed to allow teachers to place nonreading students in age- and grade-appropriate reading passages regardless of current levels of reading performance. The product includes a teacher's manual with scripted lessons and instructional readers and independent reading booklets at varying levels of difficulty, as well as flashcards and independent reading activities for additional practice. Talking software is also available. The program controls and emphasizes three elements crucial to reading success: repetition, sentence structure, and story content. Lessons in Failure Free Reading (a) provide high rates of vocabulary repetition in sentences that are not complicated with inverted phrases and (b) control dependent clauses, or incomplete thoughts that confuse and frustrate emergent readers. The program content also controls the use of multiple-meaning words, figurative speech, and complex language in the content of each reading passage.

Culturally and linguistically diverse students with learning disabilities participated in a maximum instructional period of 30 minutes each day of the week with a teacher trained in Failure Free Reading. The special instruction was provided in a separate reading laboratory by a teacher who was taught to use the program in a series of inser-

vice workshops. Although the program provides both printed material and computer software, this particular sample was instructed using printed material only. The approach reduced reading to its simplest form by controlling for context of the material, sentence structure, and story content. The primary instructional procedure involved (a) previewing material to be read; (b) listening to the teacher read; (c) answering factual, inferential, and leading questions; (d) reading the material, and (e) reviewing the material successfully. While these activities are often included in classroom reading instruction, their simultaneous application within a structured remedial program was a unique intervention for this group of students. The approach was designed to improve word recognition and comprehension performance by having students read controlled passages from a carefully scripted commercial program.

A typical 30-minute session included the following literacy activities:

1. *A teacher-led preteaching oral language lesson (5–10 minutes).* The teacher previews material within a structured instructional lesson that sets the stage for the students with a brief discussion of the story to follow (e.g., "Today we are going to continue reading our story about going to the park. Who would like to tell me what we have already read?") and other context-based activities. This lesson has a strong language development component, including introduction and explanation of new vocabulary as well as review of previous words. The oral language lesson also includes factual, inferential, and prediction comprehension questions. Factual questions cover specific story content to ensure that students comprehend all aspects of the story, including vocabulary and theme. Inferential and leading questions are used to increase students' abilities to make meaningful context-based decisions and predictions.

This lesson was used to (a) show how sounds are represented alphabetically, (b) provide background knowledge and vocabulary to render written text meaningful and interesting, (c) illustrate the use of reading to obtain meaning from print, (d) teach the

nature of the alphabetic writing system, and (e) foster understanding of the structure of spoken words by relating material being read to a meaningful context. These are skills identified as critical to reversing the devastating effects of reading failure in young children.

2. *A teacher-led guided instructional reading lesson (10–15 minutes).* The teacher engages students in instructional activities using targeted words, phrases, and sentences. Supervised oral reading practice is included, and cloze activities using single words and phrases (e.g., I am going to the ____.), scrambled sentence activities (e.g., going am park I the to), matching activities (e.g., I am going to the [store park school].), and other, similar reading recognition tasks are completed with the teacher providing supportive and corrective feedback. Actual reading passages are designed to increase competence and confidence through increments in content. For example, a student starts reading a brief phrase or sentence (e.g., Today we went to the park.). Each following sentence extends each preceding sentence (e.g., Today we went to the park with mother.), providing multiple occasions for practice. Frequent, intensive opportunities to read, as well as high rates of fluency and supervised engagement within the context of vocabulary-controlled, high-interest reading materials, were the targets of this aspect of the program. Experts in reading include these skills as essential to remedial programs.

3. *An independent print-based practice lesson (10–15 minutes).* Pencil and paper activities similar to those used during the guided instructional activities (e.g., cloze, scrambled sentence, matching activities) are used to reinforce each lesson and provide practice in reading text presented in different formats. Spelling activities are also included to reinforce relationships between reading and writing as well as provide additional exposure to sound–symbol relationships and provide opportunities for monitoring progress. Again, these skills are widely recognized as essential

in comprehensive reading improvement programs.

The students entered the program in September and were pretested using the Wechsler Intelligence Test for Children-Revised and the following Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement (1977 version) subtests: Letter Word Identification, Word Attack, Reading Comprehension, and Dictation. At the end of the school year, the students were retested using the same four subtests. Progress in the program was monitored using a series of curriculum-based assessments. At the end of the school year, comparisons of reading performance and ability-achievement discrepancies were completed; the level of significance for all statistical tests was 0.01.

## RESULTS

Posttest reading ability and pretest/posttest achievement standard score comparisons are presented in Table 2. Average grade equivalent improvement of 9 to 18 months was evident in posttest reading ability scores. Pretest/posttest comparisons of standard score improvements were significant ($p < 0.01$) on each reading subtest except Dictation; improvements were greater than one-half standard deviation unit for the sample in each area. Letter Word Identification improved 6 points (7%), Word Attack improved 8 points (9%), and Comprehension improved 11 points (13%). As illustrated in Center, Wheldall, Freeman, Outhred, and McNaught (1995), the magnitude of these differences was comparable to that resulting from implementations of a large-scale remedial intervention (i.e., Reading Recovery).

Pretest/posttest discrepancy analyses are presented in Table 3. Reductions in discrepancies between ability (WISC-R Full Scale) and reading achievement were significant ($p < 0.01$) in all areas evaluated except Dictation. Decreases in Word Attack and Comprehension subtest discrepancies were most substantial. In all cases, average posttest discrepancies were less than one standard deviation different and most were a one-half standard deviation unit or lower. At the conclusion of the study, 17% of the students exhibited severe

## TABLE 2

POSTTEST READING ABILITY AND PRETEST/POSTTEST ACHIEVEMENT STANDARD SCORE COMPARISONS

| Reading Ability Subtest | | Percentile | Grade Equivalent | Standard Score |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Letter Word Identification | M | 33.48 | 3.32 | 90.60 |
| | SD | 27.30 | 1.74 | 15.18 |
| Word Attack | M | 38.42 | 3.39 | 93.32 |
| | SD | 28.19 | 2.67 | 15.75 |
| Comprehension | M | 37.20 | 3.65 | 93.22 |
| | SD | 28.38 | 2.06 | 15.54 |
| Dictation | M | 32.17 | 3.19 | 88.10 |
| | SD | 25.95 | 1.52 | 17.37 |

| Reading Ability Subtest | | Pretest | Posttest | Obtained t |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Letter Word Identification | M | 84.60 | 90.60 | −3.68* |
| | SD | 18.81 | 15.18 | |
| Word Attack | M | 85.43 | 93.32 | −4.85* |
| | SD | 17.15 | 15.75 | |
| Comprehension | M | 82.48 | 93.22 | −5.89* |
| | SD | 20.85 | 15.54 | |
| Dictation | M | 85.17 | 88.10 | −1.51 |
| | SD | 15.91 | 17.37 | |

M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.
*p < 0.01

discrepancies in reading achievement (i.e., average reading performance); this represented greater than a 50% drop from the beginning of the school year in the number of students exhibiting this level of discrepancy. More specifically, Letter/Word Identification posttest discrepancies were equal to or lower than pretest discrepancies for 77% of the students; Word Attack posttest discrepancies were equal to or lower than pretest discrepancies for 80% of the students; Comprehension posttest discrepancies were equal to or lower than pretest discrepancies for 87% of the students; and Dictation posttest discrepancies were equal to or lower than pretest discrepancies for 70% of the students.

## DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of a structured program designed to improve the reading achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse elementary school students who were at risk of serious reading failure. The results demonstrated significant improvements in reading performance as an academic outcome of this intervention. In terms of overall magnitude, reading improvements were comparable to those reported for large-scale preventive early intervention programs designed to accelerate the progress of young readers who have failed to profit from reading instruction (cf. Center et al., 1995).

# TABLE 3

PRETEST/POSTTEST DISCREPANCY COMPARISONS

| Subtest/Discrepancy | | Pretest | Posttest | Obtained t |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Letter Word Identification/ | M | 21.52 | 16.40 | 2.98* |
| WISC Full Scale | SD | 13.59 | 10.88 | |
| Word Attack/ | M | 6.47 | −1.42 | 4.85* |
| WISC Full Scale | SD | 17.54 | 16.55 | |
| Comprehension/ | M | 9.42 | −1.32 | 5.89* |
| WISC Full Scale | SD | 20.42 | 16.54 | |
| Dictation/ | M | 6.73 | 3.80 | 1.51 |
| WISC Full Scale | SD | 15.63 | 18.34 | |

M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.
*p < 0.01

One common element in most definitions of learning disabilities is the identification of a gap between what students are capable of learning and what they have actually learned (Lerner, 1997). This discrepancy is highlighted in the operational subsections of guidelines for identifying students with learning disabilities in most states (Frankenberger & Fronzaglio, 1991). In this study, the number of students with severe discrepancies in reading decreased more than 50% after students participated in a structured remedial program.

As Torgesen (1995) pointed out, professional knowledge of word-level reading problems has three implications for instruction. First, a body of research suggests that children at risk for school failure need early, direct instruction in alphabetic reading skills. Second, these students need direct instruction in integrating phonological skills in context to practice finding the correct pronunciation of words. Third, students who are at risk need instruction in phonological awareness prior to, or simultaneous with, phonics and connected text reading. These implications are evident in the seminal work of the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow et al., 1998) and are also evident in the intervention evaluated in this study.

Poor reading skills have been blamed for many of society's ills (e.g., chronic unemployment, dropping out of school, juvenile delinquency; Kirk & Elkins, 1975; Lerner, 1997; Lyon, 1985; Snow et al., 1998). It is apparent that many students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are at continuing risk for reading failure (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998). Improving reading performance has been a continuing area of focus in efforts to meet the needs of these learners as well as in the commitment of schools to see that all students learn basic skills (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000a, 2000b; Snow et al., 1998; Wasik & Slavin, 1993; Wood & Algozzine, 1995).

## LIMITATION

A major limitation of this study was the absence of a control group for comparison; however, as we indicated in our earlier work, the effects of this omission are minimized by results of previous

research. For example, in earlier research, O'Shea and Valcante (1986) compared the stability of discrepancies between ability and achievement for students with learning disabilities and their low-achieving peers. The performance level of students with learning disabilities was approximately at grade level in second grade, but it was almost 2 years below grade level in fifth grade. Reading discrepancy scores for students with learning disabilities and their low-achieving peers were similar in second grade but different by fifth grade. Discrepancies for both groups were 34% *higher* in fifth grade compared to second grade. Improvements in reading achievement in the current study resulted in significant *reductions* in discrepancies between intellectual ability and reading performance scores. In many cases, students with learning disabilities who previously met eligibility criteria were no longer qualified for special education services.

## RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE ISSUES

Recent research examining the instructional practices that support literacy in culturally and linguistically diverse students with learning disabilities highlights the importance of interactive learning that is print-rich and incorporates a variety of materials and activities. Failure Free Reading engages students in active literacy experiences and controls three factors critical for reading progress: repetition and practice within a meaningful context, using easy and predictable sentence structures, and meaningful story content. It is grounded in a set of fundamental beliefs:

- America's schools are full of students who have failed to learn to read at acceptable levels based on their age and grade. Target students for this program are the lowest-performing of these readers. No students are excluded and all students, regardless of current reading level, are welcomed.

- Over the years, many theories regarding the cause(s) of reading failure have been popular. Knowledge about reasons for previous failure and/or the extent of it are not critical to success in this program. Students with all per-

sonal, cultural, educational, and instructional histories are welcomed.

- A critical factor for success in reading is having sufficient background knowledge and vocabulary to render written texts meaningful and interesting. In this program, students move quickly into meaningful connected text to experience reading at age-appropriate levels.

- Reading success is highly related to repetition. (Some low readers require 50 to 100 repetitions before recognizing some words.) Good readers have had sufficient practice in reading to achieve fluency with different kinds of text. High rates of structured practice in reading predictable content in controlled sentences are a hallmark of this program.

- A stumbling block to reading success is a failure to transfer the comprehension skills of spoken language to reading and to acquire new strategies that may be specifically needed for reading. In this program, students practice comprehension as well as word recognition.

## CONCLUSION

Over the years, reading improvement bandwagons have come and gone. At times, debate over their value has achieved monumental proportion (e.g., phonics vs. whole language) with little left after all the rhetoric has cleared but the expected swing of the pendulum (cf. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000a, 2000b; Snow et al., 1998; Winzer & Mazurek, 1998). Failure Free Reading has had the same goal for more than 15 years: Provide a basic understanding of the reading process to nonreaders and those with pronounced reading difficulty by employing age-appropriate materials, promoting independence in reading, and using a consistent approach with repetition and immediate performance feedback (Lockavitch, 2001). It appears, at least as a result of the positive outcomes of this research, that the program is working.

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