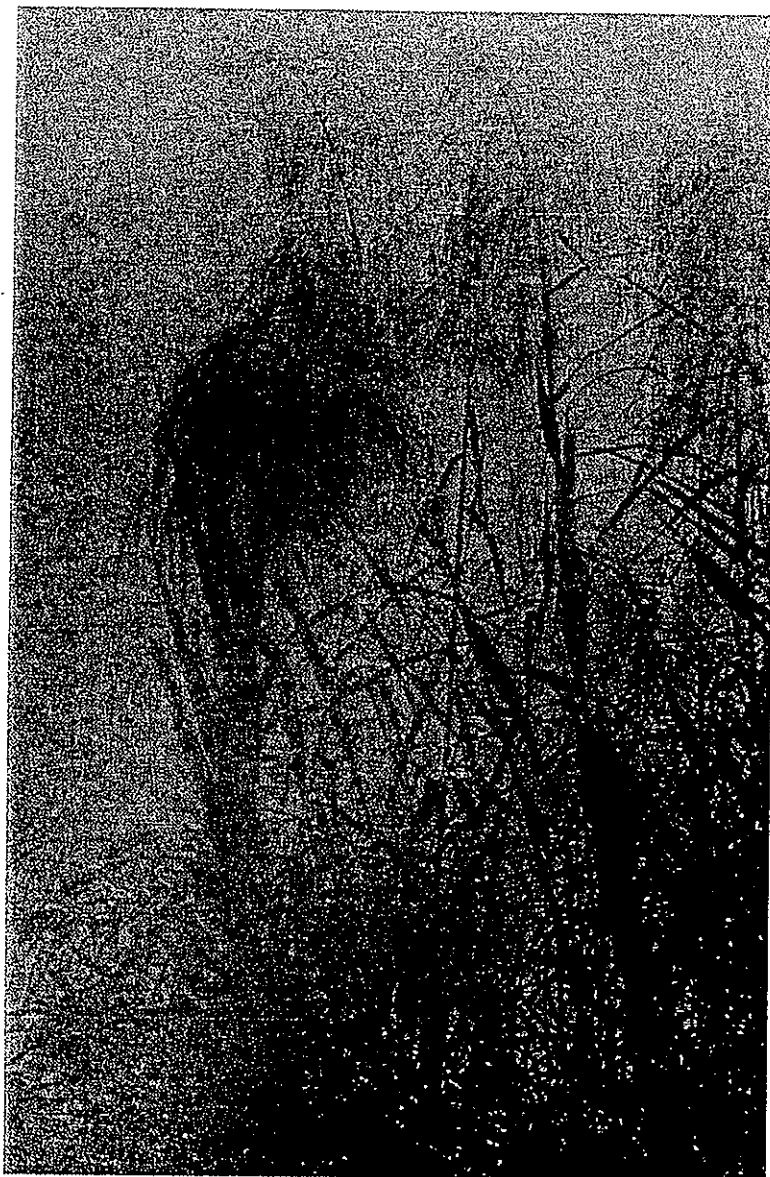


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# Effects of the *failure free* Reading Program on Students with Severe Reading Disabilities

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## Abstract

Reading problems are among the most prevalent concerns for those who teach students with learning disabilities. In the present research, 39 students with severe reading problems were taught word recognition and comprehension skills using the *failure free* Reading Program. The intervention is based on principles identified in research on 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-word identification, word attack, comprehension, and dictation was evident after intensive intervention. Discrepancies between intellectual ability and reading achievement decreased in more than half of the students. The *failure free* Reading Program seems to hold promise for improving reading in students with learning disabilities.

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About 80% of students with learning disabilities have difficulty reading (Kirk & Elkins, 1975; Lerner, 1993; Lyon, 1985; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1995). Many of the ills of society have been associated with reading disabilities (e.g., chronic unemployment, school dropout, juvenile delinquency), and teachers have long been involved in adapting instruction to meet the needs of students at risk of failure in reading (Hiebert, 1994; Sleeter, 1986; Smith, 1934/1965).

Data on the effects of general approaches to enhancing reading skills are favorable (Tindal, Algozzine, & Ysseldyke, 1996). For example, several studies have been completed on the effects of previewing and various practice techniques. Generally, these studies show that listening to a story prior to reading it is very effective and is more effective than silently reading it (Rose, 1986; Rose & Beattie, 1986; Rose & Sherry, 1984). Additionally studies have focused on previewing with peers

(Salend & Nowak, 1988), using tapes (Freeman & McLaughlin, 1984), paragraphs versus word lists with concept attentional cues or motivational statements (Sachs, 1983, 1984), simply repeatedly reading a passage (van Bon, Boksebold, Font Freide, & van den Hurk, 1991; Weinstein & Cooke, 1992), or one-to-one tutoring (Wasik & Slavin, 1993). All these general techniques seem to be effective in improving students' oral reading fluency.

A few studies have also been completed that reveal significant improvement in students' oral reading performance when specific error correction and feedback strategies are used. For example, Rosenberg (1986) and Rose, McEntire, and Dowdy (1982) studied word supply and drill practice, with results showing the need to include correction procedures that go beyond simply supplying the word to students when they make an error. Similar effects are obtained when students simply receive feedback (Perkins, 1988; Thorpe, Chiang, & Darch, 1981).

A variety of special, more global methods not typically used in general education classrooms have been developed and also used with students with severe problems reading. For example, multisensory stimulation approaches (e.g., VAKT, Fernald, and Orton-Gillingham methods); neurological impress methods (rapid-unison reading by student and teacher); intensive phonics instruction; and whole language approaches have been popular over the years (Lerner, 1993). Reading Recovery (Clay, 1985) is among the most recent additions to this area of study.

For the most part, data on the effectiveness of these broadly described and widely implemented programs for remedial reading instruction are equivocal or unconvincing. Consider the following: (a) The Slingerland method was not found to be any more effective than a traditional basal program (Lovitt & DeMeir, 1984); (b) studies of direct instruction curricula reveal contradictory outcomes, with some

studies showing no significant effects (e.g., Kuder, 1990; O'Connor, Jenkins, Cole, & Mills, 1993) and others showing significant effects (e.g., Polloway, Epstein, Polloway, Patton, & Ball, 1986); and (c) despite implementation with 78,000 students from 1984 to 1993, data from Reading Recovery research sites produced an unconvincing scenario on its effectiveness with age cohorts (Hiebert, 1994).

A newly developed commercial product, the *failure free* Reading Program, is grounded in much of the research on effective reading instruction and tutorial programs (cf. Lerner, 1993; Lockavitch, 1995; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). Its primary goal is to provide a basic understanding of the reading process to students with pronounced reading difficulty by (a) employing age-appropriate materials; (b) promoting independence in reading; and (c) using repetition, a consistent approach, and immediate performance feedback. The program controls three factors critical for reading progress: repetition within a meaningful context, easy and predictable sentence structures, and meaningful story content. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effects of a pilot implementation of the *failure free* Reading Program with a group of students with learning disabilities. Although the factors that differentiate this approach are sometimes evident in remedial classroom instruction, their packaging and the simultaneous nature of their presentation represented a unique intervention in this research.

## Method

Special education students with severe reading disabilities used the *failure free* Reading Program to supplement instruction for approximately 7 months. Pretest/posttest comparisons of reading achievement and ability-achievement discrepancies were completed to evaluate the effects of the pilot program.

## Participants and Setting

Thirty-nine students from a suburban school district in a southwestern state participated in this study. The total school enrollment was approximately 30,000 (the 23rd largest in the state) in 18 elementary campuses, 6 intermediate schools (Grades 6 through 8), and 3 comprehensive high schools. Approximately 12% of the students in the district received some type of special education service, including speech-language therapy, co-teaching 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; the 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 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 student's 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 com-

putation used in determining the severe discrepancy.

The specified area of discrepancy for the participating students was reading.

The students were randomly selected from among the lowest-reading students in several elementary schools to participate in this pilot project. The gender ratio was 4:1, with boys representing 79% of the sample. The average age of the participants was 10-1 years (121 months;  $SD = 12.9$ ), with the youngest student being 8-1 years old and the oldest, 11-11 years old. Each student was participating in third-, fourth-, or fifth-grade special education programming and reading 2 or more years below grade placement. To participate in the program, each student's intelligence had to fall in the average range (see Table 1); overall, the sample demonstrated below-average intellectual ability, and reading discrepancies were substantial (i.e., more than 1 standard deviation's difference). As a measure of the severity of the reading problems evident in the participating students, discrepancies between Letter-Word Identification standard scores and WISC-R Full Scale IQ scores were calculated. At the beginning of the study, 67% of the students exhibited severe (greater than 1 standard deviation) discrepancies between ability and achievement (i.e., letter-word identification).

## Procedure

The *failure free* Reading Program was developed to give students with severe reading difficulties the opportunity to immediately experience success in appropriate age- and grade-level materials (Lockavitch, 1995). The *failure free* materials are specifically designed to allow teachers to assign nonreading students age- and grade-appropriate reading passages regardless of current levels of reading performance. The product includes a

teacher's manual with scripted lessons, instructional readers and independent reading booklets at varying levels of difficulty, and 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 the *failure free* Reading Program provide high rates of vocabulary repetition in sentences that are not complicated with inverted phrases, 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.

The students participated in a daily instructional period of 30 minutes maximum, with a teacher trained in the *failure free* Reading Program. Though the program provides both printed material and computerized software material, this particular sample was instructed using the printed material only. The approach reduces reading to its simplest form by controlling for context of the material, sentence structure, and story content. The primary instructional procedure involved previewing material to be read; listening to the teacher read; answering factual, inferential, and learning questions; reading the material; and reviewing the material. Although 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 by having students read controlled passages from this carefully scripted commercial program.

The students entered the program in September. The scores for each student's most recent performance on the WISC-R (Wechsler, 1974) were secured

**TABLE 1**  
Intellectual Ability, Reading Discrepancy Scores, and Reading Achievement Scores for Participating Students

Score	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
WISC Verbal	92.46	13.85
WISC Performance	97.28	11.15
WISC Full Scale	94.08	10.96
WISC Verbal-Discrepancy	15.02	13.24
WISC Performance-Discrepancy	19.84	12.51
WISC Full Scale-Discrepancy	16.63	11.38

Pretest reading ability			
Subtest	Mean raw score	Mean grade equivalent	Mean age equivalent
Letter-Word Identification	2	1.6	7-3
Word Attack	4	1.4	6-11
Comprehension	8	2.0	7-8
Dictation	9	1.8	7-7

*Note.* Discrepancies represent differences between IQ scores and average standard scores across subtests of the Woodcock-Johnson. Participating students were in the third, fourth, and fifth grades.

from school records. Each student was pretested using the following subtests of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement (1977 version): 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. Comparisons of reading performance and ability-achievement discrepancies (Verbal, Performance, and Full Scale) 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. An 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 sub-

test; improvements were greater than 1 standard deviation unit for the sample in each area. Letter-word identification improved 10 points (14%), word attack improved 9 points (11%), comprehension improved 12 points (15%), and dictation improved 13 points (17%). 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 Verbal, Performance, and Full Scale) and reading achievement were significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) in all areas evaluated. Decreases in comprehension discrepancies were the most substantial (63%–85%). In all cases, average posttest discrepancies were less than 1 standard deviation different, and most were a one-half standard deviation unit or lower. At the con-

**TABLE 2**  
Posttest Reading Ability and Pretest/Posttest Achievement  
Standard Score Comparisons

Subtest	Posttest reading ability		
	Mean raw score	Mean grade equivalent	Mean age equivalent
Letter-Word Identification	4	2.4	8-4
Word Attack	6	2.1	8-0
Comprehension	12	3.5	8-4
Dictation	13	2.9	8-9

Subtest		Pretest	Posttest	Obtained <i>t</i>
Letter-Word Identification	<i>M</i>	73.97	83.77	-5.74*
	<i>SD</i>	9.01	11.71	
Word Attack	<i>M</i>	81.33	88.36	-4.67*
	<i>SD</i>	10.20	11.66	
Comprehension	<i>M</i>	77.95	89.85	-6.75*
	<i>SD</i>	9.45	14.35	
Dictation	<i>M</i>	76.51	86.67	-7.44*
	<i>SD</i>	11.41	14.40	

\* $p < 0.01$ .

clusion of the study, 31% of the students exhibited severe discrepancies in reading achievement (i.e., letter-word identification); this represented more than a 50% drop from the beginning of the school year in the number of students exhibiting this level of discrepancy.

## Discussion

Improving reading performance has received continuing interest in efforts to meet the needs of students at risk of school failure, as well as in schools' continuing commitment to see that all students learn basic skills (Lerner, 1993; Wasik & Slavin, 1993; Wood & Algozzine, 1995). The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effects of a structured pilot program designed to improve the reading achievement of students with learning disabilities. Significant improvements in reading were evident as a result of this intervention. In terms of overall magnitude, the improvements were comparable

to those reported for large-scale, preventive, early intervention programs designed to accelerate the progress of young readers who had failed to profit from reading instruction (cf. Center et al., 1995).

A common element in most definitions of learning disabilities is the identification of a gap between what the student is capable of learning and what the student has actually learned (Lerner, 1993). This discrepancy is highlighted in the operational portions of guidelines used to identify students with learning disabilities in most states (Frankenberger & Fronzaglio, 1991). In the present study, the numbers of students with severe discrepancies between intellectual ability and reading performance decreased more than 50% after they participated in a structured remedial program.

A limitation of this research was the absence of a control group; however, the effect of this omission was minimized by the results of previous research. For example, O'Shea and Valcante (1986) compared the stabil-

ity of discrepancies between ability and achievement for students with learning disabilities and their low-achieving peers. The performance of students receiving special education for learning disabilities was approximately at grade level in second grade but 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. The discrepancy for both groups was 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 who previously met eligibility criteria no longer were qualified for learning disabilities services.

In a review of five tutoring programs, Wasik and Slavin (1993) identified eight components of the reading process that were emphasized in successful approaches: perceptual analysis of print, knowledge of print conventions, decoding, oral language proficiency, prior knowledge, lexical access, syntactic analysis of sentences, and prose comprehension. The *failure free* Reading Program is grounded in these factors and the belief that "reading is relating" (Lockavitch, 1995, p. 78):

Students must be able to relate to what they read. They must be able to relate to the text, the sentence structure, and the story's content. When they can relate, successful reading will take place. When they can't relate, reading failure will occur.

The *failure free* Reading Program instructional approach follows a simple, direct method using carefully constructed passages of connected text and addresses the disadvantages of many global tutoring programs (e.g., one-to-one instruction, extensive training needs, cost) by emphasizing

TABLE 3  
Pretest/Posttest Discrepancy Comparisons

Subtest/ discrepancy		Pretest	Posttest	Obtained <i>t</i>
LWI/ WISC Verbal	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	18.49 15.39	8.69 16.12	5.74*
LWI/ WISC Performance	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	23.31 13.54	13.51 14.90	5.74*
LWI/ WISC Full Scale	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	20.10 13.19	10.31 13.95	5.74*
RWA/ WISC Verbal	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	11.13 15.76	4.10 15.61	4.67*
RWA/ WISC Performance	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	15.95 14.35	8.92 15.15	4.67*
RWA/ WISC Full Scale	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	12.74 13.81	5.72 14.08	4.67*
CMP/ WISC Verbal	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	14.51 12.76	2.62 17.13	6.75*
CMP/ WISC Performance	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	19.33 14.39	7.44 18.69	6.75*
CMP/ WISC Full Scale	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	16.13 12.20	4.23 16.71	6.75*
DCT/ WISC Verbal	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	15.95 14.07	5.79 16.74	7.44*
DCT/ WISC Performance	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	20.77 13.23	10.62 15.41	7.44*
DCT/ WISC Full Scale	<i>M</i> <i>SD</i>	17.56 12.23	7.41 14.72	7.44*

Note. LWI = Letter-Word Identification; RWA = Word Attack; CMP = Comprehension; DCT = Dictation.  
\* $p < 0.01$ .

the following: (a) group administration, (b) ease of use, and (c) cost-effectiveness. Although additional effectiveness research is needed, it seems that such an approach can be successful with students with learning disabilities in reading.

As Hiebert (1994) indicated, "research that supports higher levels of literacy in schools where students read and write frequently, where goals and performance standards are high and clear to all, and where teacher networks support fidelity to instructional principles already exists" (p. 24). Future research should establish ways to maintain and use features of effective instruction in low-literacy classrooms and schools. Additional research demonstrating the effectiveness of the failure free Reading Program

when it is compared to traditional, control conditions and comparable remedial programs is clearly warranted; however, a more serious question that remains is, Why are components of effective reading instruction not being implemented with more regularity and consistency in all elementary school classrooms, not just those designed to provide special education or remedial, pilot interventions?

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