

The quiet crisis of upper-level illiteracy

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SCHOOLS - Opinion

Older students are struggling with basic word recognition.

THERE is a belief in education that problems in being able to identify words are resolved by middle primary school and that any subsequent difficulties at upper-primary and secondary levels must relate to problems with the understanding of what is being read.

In Australia it has been reported that 30 per cent of students enter secondary school unable to read or write sufficiently well to adequately cope with the curriculum, and also 30 per cent do not complete their schooling. That is a sad symmetry. For disadvantaged students, the illiteracy figure may be as high as 60 per cent.

Surprisingly to many, research with secondary students has found real deficiencies in word-level reading, even for many students not considered slow or learning disabled. Though most of these students can recognise common words in print, they are not sufficiently competent with irregularly spelled or unfamiliar words. Their reading is often slow and their understanding is impeded by this lack of fluency.

A prerequisite of adequate comprehension is that text is read accurately and rapidly, indicating that getting the words off the page is largely automatic. Humans have limited available attention, and when they expend much of it in simply identifying the words, there is correspondingly less attention available for comprehension.

The complexity of words increases markedly in upper-primary grades, and even more dramatically in the specialised subjects at secondary level. For many students, their capacity to identify words falters under the challenge of these more unusual, often multi-syllabic, technical and abstract words.

Laboured word identification leading to comprehension failure is a classic sign of the need for a strong phonics emphasis in the instructional process. The aim of phonics teaching in a code-emphasis program is to make explicit to students the alphabetic principle. Despite the inconsistencies in the English language, there are great benefits for students in understanding how letters map onto sounds. A big obstacle to developing an appreciation of this alphabetic principle is a failure of teaching to be explicit and unambiguous, and of neglecting the students' needs for a strong oral reading component to develop fluency.

Unless careful attention is paid to regularly assessing reading accuracy and rate, it is possible to incorrectly assume that an older student's problem is simply one of comprehension.

Focusing instruction solely on comprehension activities (such as how to extract the main idea) misses an underlying cause of the problem - inadequate word-level skills. There may well be language-based comprehension deficits to address additionally with some students, but alone such assistance is insufficient.

Several recent government and independent reports have pointed to a research consensus that teaching phonics strategies explicitly and systematically is crucial in ameliorating the high rate of reading failure, whether for beginners or the perennially struggling. The critical variable is not age but stage - whether child or adult, the path to facile reading is similar.

The problem should not be underestimated. Older students and adults may have unproductive habits strongly engraved by years of practice. Their lack of reading experience may have limited their vocabularies. Many may be resistant to again addressing the skill area that has proved elusive in the past, and provided for them

only frustration and humiliation. Their progress is usually slower than for young children, requiring greater amounts of instruction and practice than is available to them within a typical secondary timetable.

It is apparent from research that early intervention (preschool, kinder, year 1) holds the greatest hope for reducing the effects of serious reading failure.

However, older students should not be ignored simply because early intervention is easier to implement and promote. Social justice requires us to provide for those students whom our system has failed in their earlier years.

Compromising effective assistance in secondary and primary schools is the lack of adequate training for teachers in the most effective, research-supported approaches to teaching reading at their level.

Of course, schools have limited financial and teaching resources. A belief that student literacy problems should be resolved during students' primary years can also lead to mere token assistance and to short-term programs vulnerable to premature discontinuation.

Until serious policy commitment and effective training become the norm, too many of our secondary students will suffer from the gradual loss of contact with the curriculum that eventuates when their basic skill deficits go unremarked or are addressed in a well-intentioned but ineffectual manner.

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