

Help! I'm well beyond early intervention. Can you help my reading too?

There is a belief in education that problems in decoding words are resolved by middle elementary school, and that any subsequent difficulties at upper-elementary and secondary levels are best viewed as problems with understanding what is read. If that view is correct then an exclusive focus on developing students' vocabulary and comprehension skills is entirely appropriate.

It appears, however, that such a view is an inadequate interpretation of the progress of reading skills at higher grade levels. Several findings give cause for concern. First, children who initially struggle with reading, generally continue to struggle throughout their schooling. Of students identified as reading disabled in Year Three, 75% will remain so at Year Nine. The lowest 10% of readers will make no discernible progress in reading between Year Four and Year Ten. Their underdeveloped skills remain evident not only at the level of passage comprehension, but also with word decoding. In Australia it is reported that 30% of students enter secondary school unable to read or write properly, and 30% of students do not complete their schooling. That is a sad symmetry.

Equally worrying is a recent finding that, even for many students not considered slow or learning disabled, real deficiencies in word level reading can still be found. Though most of the students in this study could recognise common words in print, they were not sufficiently competent with irregularly spelled or unfamiliar words. The complexity of words increases markedly in upper elementary grades, and even more dramatically in the specialised subjects at the secondary level. Reading capacity adequate for the simpler words predominant in lower elementary grades may give the impression of good reading development. However, for many students, reading falters under the challenge of more rare, technical and abstract words. These are words that rarely redundant in a sentence, and hence they defy strategies such as interpreting from context. There are too many such words to enable reliance upon whole word strategies – memory constraints quickly intrude. Even very bright well-compensated adult readers acknowledged that they have had to laboriously remember word shapes, have little or no idea how to spell, and are constantly struggling with new words, especially technical terms related to their occupations.

These are classic symptoms of the need for a strong phonics emphasis in the instructional process; indeed, some have argued that it is most likely the failure of the school system to address the phonological nature of the reading problem that precluded satisfactory initial progress for these individuals. The aim of phonics teaching in a code-emphasis program is to make explicit to students the alphabetic principle. Teachers who pay lip service to the value of phonics instruction, and who limit their involvement to pointing out word-parts to students in the context of authentic literature as the situation arises (incidental or analytic phonics), create particular problems for at-risk students. The major problem involves the risk for such learners of teachers' failing to be explicit and unambiguous, and of neglecting the students' needs for a strong practice component.

Unless careful attention is paid to regularly assessing reading accuracy and fluency it is possible to incorrectly assume that a given older student's problem is simply one of comprehension. Unfortunately, many teachers have been dissuaded from assessing such skills because the (until recently) dominant model of reading development considers such decoding elements largely irrelevant to the process of skilled reading. There remains a concern that many teacher-training institutions continue to promulgate this perspective.

There is now research consensus that reading comprehension problems are most commonly due to problems in decoding words, and not primarily to inadequate higher level comprehension strategies. One cannot begin to anticipate adequate comprehension unless text is read fluently and word-level decoding processes are largely automatic. Readers have limited attentional capacity, and when they expend much

of their attention in decoding the words, there is correspondingly less attention available for comprehension processes. Focussing teaching activities solely on comprehension activities (such as extracting the main idea) misses the main cause of the problem - inadequate word-level skills.

In recent times a plethora of government and independent reports have highlighted the research consensus that teaching phonics strategies explicitly and systematically is the way to ameliorate the current unacceptably high rate of reading failure. The critical variable is not age but stage - whether child or adult - the path to facile reading is similar. Certainly older students and adults have a history that cannot be ignored - most relevant is the likelihood of unproductive habits strongly engraved by years of practice. They need to unlearn in addition to learning. Their lack of reading experience may have left them with vocabularies less well developed than those of their reading peers.

Additionally, many may be resistant to again addressing a skill area that has proved elusive in the past and provided for them only frustration and humiliation. One implication is the likelihood of slower progress, with the need for greater amounts of practice (accompanied by feedback) to ensure the new habits are used effectively. In a positive vein, adults are usually vastly more experienced with language in general and, when their decoding difficulties are relieved, comprehension of what they read may be expected to improve much more rapidly than for most young children.

The reports referred to above are not optimistic about the likelihood of older students making acceptable progress and instead highlight the need for systemic early intervention. This is an accurate interpretation of the research to date; however, the amount of research completed with older students is not great. Experience with older students and adults in the RMIT Clinic in Melbourne suggests that when a well structured code-emphasis program is introduced intensively (daily for 45 minutes), when the materials are interesting enough for the age of the student involved, when external motivation is available to overcome any initial reticence, when success is provided initially and at a high rate continuously, when adequate supervised practice and feedback is incorporated, and when the duration of intervention is sufficiently long – then there is good cause to be optimistic and enthusiastic when advising distraught families about the options for their older non-reading child.

It is a positive sign that an increasing number of secondary schools are recognising this problem, are sufficiently concerned to screen their students at entry, and provide excellent code-emphasis programs such as the Corrective Reading: Decoding program. Apart from noting increases in accuracy, fluency and interest in reading, such schools have been impressed by the improvement in comprehension in students completing the program (Level C). Given the recent research findings (such as those of the National Reading Panel), this outcome should be unsurprising, though most schools and parents) express delight at the change. Of course, decoding is not the only cause of poor comprehension, but improvement does allow students to lift their reading comprehension level to that of their listening comprehension level, a level often markedly higher. For students with oral language comprehension difficulties there is sister Comprehension program that has been successfully employed in the Clinic through parent participation, and teacher-directed in schools.

Highly related to good decoding skills are spelling skills. Students who spell poorly should always be considered for assessment of decoding skills. These students usually perform at a surprisingly lower level on pseudo-word than on real-word decoding. Even apparently capable readers who spell poorly may lack higher level decoding capacity - a knowledge of the morphemic (as well as phonemic) nature of English spelling; an awareness of intra-word patterns such as “ight”, “able”, “tion”; and also an understanding of the conventions of the different languages from which many of our words are derived. Some educators, however are constrained by their own philosophical beliefs, considering spelling to be unimportant or at least easily remedied by motivated students, and concern about it a sign of a rigid personality.

Interestingly, spelling skills tend to display improvement following successful decoding instruction. Presumably the drawing of students' attention to patterns of letters within words makes spelling a less arbitrary activity, and one in which they discover new success through a process of reverse-decoding. Of course, there is rather more to skilful spelling than this simple strategy, there are often numerous potential spellings for English words of which only one represents the convention. Nevertheless, the realisation that spelling conventions are not entirely capricious promotes students' attention to the construction of the words they write, rather than the cavalier "close enough" attitude often noted by teachers - an attitude often detectable when the same words are misspelled differently in one passage. For those students with serious residual spelling difficulties, a dedicated spelling program (Spelling Mastery) is also employed in the Clinic – again using a parent-training and monitoring model.

It is apparent from research that early intervention (pre-school, Kinder, Year One) holds the greatest hope for reducing the deleterious effects of serious reading failure currently believed to impede up to 40% of all our students. However, there is another group of unknown dimension (perhaps another 10-20%) whose progress becomes increasingly constrained the further they progress through secondary school. It is possible to enhance the prospects for both of these existing groups by intervening during their secondary schooling, and social justice requires us to provide for those students whom our system has failed. Intervention for these students is more difficult but real gains are achievable, and older students should not be ignored simply because early intervention is easier to implement and promote.