



The Secret to Reading Proficiency for Struggling Readers

A Brief Guide to key lessons from research by

Dr. Joseph K. Torgesen

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“The Prevention of Reading Difficulties”

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Summary Statement

Dr. Joseph K. Torgesen, a well respected education researcher, presents compelling evidence that most reading difficulties can be prevented if the appropriate phonemic awareness skill training is provided in K-3 grades. His research presents compelling evidence that was proven in a school setting.

Results from Studies

Dr. Torgesen reports on a variety of studies, including several under his supervision. He reports on one particular study at Hartsfield Elementary in Tallahassee, Florida (page 20). “Over a 5-year period, this school worked to implement a balanced reading curriculum in kindergarten through Grade 3 and to establish significant amounts of preventive reading instruction for children who were performing below grade level in the first and second grade. The school serves a population of children who are about 65% minority (mostly African American), and 60% of the children are eligible for free or reduced lunch support.”

“... the most phonemically explicit instructional condition produced the strongest reading growth for all children, but the effects were particularly striking for children with the weakest phonological skills entering first grade.”

“...during the 5-year implementation period, the percentage of children performing below the 25th percentile at the end of first grade dropped from 31.8% to 3.7%.”

Weak phonemic awareness skills were the primary cause of reading difficulties

Despite reading instruction that was adequate for over 2/3 of the students, it was insufficient for about 1/3 of the students to become proficient readers. Dr. Torgesen’s research identified that weak phonemic awareness skills were the primary cause of reading difficulties.

Solution—provide intensive, explicit and more supportive phonemic training

“To adequately address the fundamental problem that too many children are leaving elementary school with reading skills inadequate for the next higher level of instruction, we must change the way we work to teach reading in three ways. First, we must insure that classroom instruction in kindergarten through Grade 3 is skillfully delivered with a balanced emphasis on word-level and reading comprehension skills. Second, we must have procedures in place to accurately identify children who fall behind in early reading growth, even when they are provided excellent classroom instruction. Third, we must provide these at-risk children with reading instruction that is more intensive, more explicit, and more supportive than can be provided in a classroom of 20 to 30 children.” (page 13)

Explicit instruction and practice to build phonemic awareness and phonemic decoding skills are particularly important for children who enter first grade low in talent or preparation for learning to read. Both Foorman et al. (1998) and Juel and Minden-Cupp (2000) found that explicit instruction and opportunities for extended practice with phonemically decodable texts were particularly beneficial for children at risk for reading failure. (page 14)

“Children who enter first grade with weaknesses in knowledge about letters, letter-sound correspondences, and phonological awareness require explicit and systematic instruction to help them acquire the knowledge and strategies necessary for decoding print.” (page 14)

“Of three interventions that were tested on children who were selected because of phonological weaknesses, the most phonemically explicit one produced the strongest growth in word reading ability. In fact, of the three interventions tested, *only* the most explicit intervention produced a reliable difference in the growth of word reading ability over children who were not provided with any special interventions.” (page 15)

Cognitive Skill vs. Learned Skill; Training to Support Teaching

It is important to note that phonemic awareness is an innate cognitive skill. Phonics and reading are learned skills. Traditional reading instruction was insufficient to teach reading when phonemic awareness skills were weak. Explicit training was required to strengthen weak phonemic skills. Once weak skills were strengthened, traditional teaching worked. Children needed sufficiently strong phonemic skills to make sense of phonics instruction.

The research is established but many students continue to struggle with reading

Why hasn't this research translated into a broad-based success story? Why are so many children still failing to become proficient readers?

First, most educators and parents are not aware of this research. Secondly, the intensive, explicit training required is resource prohibitive in most schools.

So the challenge is not whether it can be done, but rather how to marshal the resources to spread the good news and find affordable and effective ways to accomplish the needed training.

Phonemic Training and Core Skills Brain Training

Despite even intense phonemic training, some children still struggle. According to Torgesen, “...none of the interventions were sufficient to produce adequate reading growth in *all* children. Across all the interventions, the average estimate of “population failure rate” was 5%.”

Phonemic awareness is a cognitive skill, and other weak cognitive skills can contribute to a child's struggle with reading. Broader cognitive skill testing and training can provide the learning foundation for a total solution.

The CogRead Literacy Campaign

Cognitive First is a nonprofit whose mission is to help our country empower the potential of the Torgesen research, to help every child become a proficient reader. Cognitive First recognizes that the solution requires a cognitive skill development approach as a fundamental prerequisite for traditional reading instruction to realize its full potential.

Children with weak phonemic awareness skills in most cases will not become proficient readers until that deficit is addressed. Cognitive First, in its CogRead literacy initiative, has teamed with a leading online training company to provide the assessment and training tools needed to help every child become a proficient reader.

The CogRead Literacy Support Offer

Cognitive First is working to raise grants to help schools gain access to their program. Limited matching grants are available to help schools get started. Please visit our website for more information.

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