

Supporting Struggling Readers in an Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract

Today's special education movement towards inclusion has created an urgent need toward providing struggling readers with remedial skills as well as ways to access the general education curriculum. In order to help these struggling readers acquire the skills to read and continue to progress in all academic areas, teachers need to have the knowledge of remedial programs available for teaching reading skills and strategies to assist these struggling readers gain access to the entire curriculum.

There are numerous if not overwhelming articles and books that offer strategies and programs that support and teach struggling readers. The purpose of this study is to research and compile in a cohesive manner best practices for teachers to help struggling readers in an inclusive environment.

Introduction

After graduating with a dual credential in general education and special education, I took a job as a Resource Specialist in a public school district in Northern California. I found that the classes I took for my degree did not cover the multitudes of reading skill-building programs that are necessary to provide the remedial skills that students who are identified with reading difficulties need in order to learn to read. In addition to the lack of access or an understanding of many of the remedial reading programs, I found it difficult to provide these same students with access to the general education curriculum.

In order to provide general education teachers with strategies to assist students and the students with the proper tools needed to be successful in the classroom, I decided the only way to better prepare myself to teach struggling readers was to research and explore why students who are not at the same level as their peers are expected to learn alongside their peers, what causes some students to struggle with reading abilities while others seem to learn effortlessly, and mainly, how can I better provide the instruction these struggling readers need.

As noted by Cimera (2003), in the United States, there are around 5 million students who are actively enrolled in the special education program. Of those 5 million students enrolled approximately 2.7 million of these students are identified as Learning Disabled. In addition, Drummond (2005) writes that it is estimated around 10 million students have difficulty learning to read. With such an astonishing number of students in need of remedial reading support it seems the most responsible thing to do as an educator is to seek a better understanding as to why some students don't acquire reading skills as easily as their typically developing peers, but more importantly, what are proven ways to provide students the tools

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to participate in a general education environment. As Drummond (2002, Introductory section, para. 2) points out, “the good news is that 90 to 95 percent of reading impaired children can overcome their difficulties if they receive appropriate treatment at early ages.”

Statement of Problem

Struggling readers have a difficult time learning remedial reading skills while also accessing the general education curriculum in an inclusive setting. Struggling readers for the purpose of this paper are students who are reading significantly below grade level.

Remedial reading skills can be defined as basic skills such as phonemic awareness or letter-sound association needed in order to decode words or the basic skills needed to comprehend information once it has been read. Once a student has been identified as a student with special needs, they typically receive services from a special education teacher but remain in a general education classroom for all of their instruction. When a student receives most core instruction in a general education classroom alongside their peers, it is referred to as an inclusive setting or inclusion.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this review of the literature is to identify effective strategies for teaching struggling readers who are placed in an inclusive setting the remedial skills that will allow them to become more proficient readers, while also providing general education teachers strategies that allow students access to the general education curriculum. General education teachers and special education teachers find it difficult to support struggling readers in a classroom where all other eighteen to twenty students are reading at, close to, or above grade level. One problem is finding the time to increase the remedial skills for reading

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that the struggling readers lack. Another hurdle is the fact that most of these struggling readers cannot even read basic directions, math problems and other information needed to access the general education curriculum.

Research Question

What are best practices and programs that teach not only remedial reading skills to students placed in an inclusive setting, but also allow these students access to the general education curriculum? More and more today students are placed in a general education classroom without basic reading skills that allow them to participate in many academic areas. In addition, teachers are busy providing instruction to, on average, eighteen to twenty other students and don't have the time to seek out best practices and strategies for teaching these struggling readers.

Theoretical Rationale

In 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education*, a case by the Supreme Court found that separate was not considered equal (Cimera, 2003). Through the years there have been many defining moments that have shaped and continue to shape special education as we know it today. However, perhaps the most defining court ruling of them all was the passing of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act that was created in 1974 (Cimera, 2003). This particular law has been amended and renamed over the years and is now known as IDEA'97. (Patterson, 2005) "IDEA'97 mandates that students with disabilities be educated with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate in the least restrictive environment (p. 67)." Least restrictive environment today is most often interpreted as the general education classroom. (Nichols, 1996)

In order to create an environment that allows all students to succeed in a general education classroom, general education teachers need to be provided with strategies that allow all students access to the general education curriculum. Specifically, general education teachers need strategies that will assist struggling readers gain basic reading skills, while also providing access to information used during class time instruction. Many general education teachers lack the skills and strategies to assist students with special needs. (Lemann, 2004) Lehmann (2004,) also describes time as a "highly precious commodity" (p. 21). General education teachers already have so many responsibilities it is difficult for them to seek out the resources needed in order to properly assist special needs students. (Lehmann, 2004)

Background and Need

There is a need for developing a systematic approach for assisting struggling readers who are included in general education classes as demonstrated in a study by Woodruff, Schumaker, & Deshler (2002). In this study the authors discuss the fact that students with special needs, specifically learning disabled students are failing the general education curriculum. As would be expected these same students are dropping out of high school at alarming rates. Perhaps one of the reasons that these high school students become so discouraged is because material presented in the text books used in general education classrooms is becoming more difficult to comprehend. Compounded with a fact that many of the learning disabled students in tenth grade are reading at around the fourth grade level this dropout rate should not come as a tremendous shock. (Woodruff, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2002)

The study itself involved 124 high school students attending two separate high schools. One school was the site where an intensive reading strategy called “Word Identification Strategy Instruction” was taught in order to help the students gain access to materials taught in the general education curriculum. The other school was the comparison site. Results from the study showed that all individual students who were taught the word identification strategy made gains in their scores ranging from .6 to 6.1 grade levels. (Woodruff, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2002)

Since elementary students are also expected to participate and gain access to the general education curriculum there is a need to discover strategies to help them become proficient readers. In helping young struggling readers develop reading strategies, educators will in turn help provide better access to the curriculum. The delicate balance is finding

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effective programs to build their reading skill while also maintaining alignment with the standards.

Review of the Literature

In a review of the literature, it was found that several factors lead to the placement of struggling readers in a classroom along side of students without reading difficulties. The first part of the review discusses the definition and history of special education and how schools have evolved toward educating all students together. The second part of this review explores the suspected causes of struggling readers. The final part of this review explores the best practices and strategies for supporting struggling readers in a typical general education classroom.

Defining and History of Special Education

Special Education as we know it today is no longer the act of educating students with special needs in a separate room away from their typically developing peers. According to Cimera (2003), “In its simplest terms, special education is a federally mandated entitlement program that attempts to provide qualifying students with an appropriate individualized education (p. 3).” This is very different from 1972 when according to Douvanis and Hulseay (2002) in the article *The Least Restrictive Environment Mandate*, there were around eight million children with disabilities and about one half of them were not receiving any educational services at all. Now, not only are schools required by the federal, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to receive educational services, but schools are also instructed as to what kind of program the student is to receive and where that instruction is to be provided. According to Patterson (2005), under IDEA’97 “Students are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE)” (p. 63). Also According to Patterson (2005),

“IDEA’97 defines FAPE as special education and related services that are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; meet standards of the state educational agency; include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the state involved; and are provided in conformity with the individualized education program (p. 63).” Once a free and appropriate educational plan has been determined, schools must make sure that plan is delivered in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). According to Douvanis and Hulsey (2002) Congress elected not to define LRE but rather left it up to the courts to shape the definition. However, it is written by Douvanis and Hulsey (2002), “The concept of the least restrictive environment refers to the IDEA’s mandate that children with disabilities be educated to the maximum extent appropriate with nondisabled peers (p. 2).” In addition, according to Nichols (1996) “Students with special needs are increasingly taught in the least restrictive environment, which often means the general education classroom (p. 1).” And to further drive home the point according to Jarrett (1999), “Until recently, students with learning disabilities were typically pulled- out of the regular education classroom for a better part of each day to receive special instruction in mathematics, reading and other core instruction. However, today’s movement toward full inclusion means that students are increasingly remaining in the regular classroom for most if not all of the day (p. 9).”

Evolution of Special Education

In order to better understand why students who struggle with reading are placed in an inclusive setting along side their typically developing peers without reading difficulties, one needs to know how the pendulum has swung from no services for students with special

needs to completely immersing struggling readers into a general education classroom with students at or above normal reading abilities. According to Cimera (2003) it appears that services for disabled persons have been around since Neanderthal times. He writes that the “birth of modern special education” (p. 8) began in France around 1799 as Itard began working with a “wild boy”(p. 9) known as Victor. Dr. Itard did not find a cure for Victor, but he did make an attempt to educate him.

Cimera (2003) continues to explain that the emergence into the United States began around 1848 by Seguin. He documents many altering factors and circumstances that have helped create special education as we know it today. One important case mentioned in his timeline for special education is *Brown vs. Board of Education*. (Cimera, 2003) This was one of the landmark cases in education that found separate was not equal. Today most people in the field of education are at least familiar with the precedents set by *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

In addition to major court rulings there have been influential people who have helped further the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Cimera (2003) credits President John F. Kennedy as an influential person who helped propel special education because of his own sister’s disability. Cimera (2003) writes that, “Before his death in 1963, Kennedy advocated for the causes of individuals with disabilities. In doing so, he moved the argument away from the economic issues raised by World War I and II and began focusing on the education of children with disabilities as a civil right (p. 10).”

Currently, emerging from Public Law 94-142, Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Patterson, 2005) we have the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), which was reauthorized by President Bill Clinton in 1997 to protect the rights of students

with special needs. (Patterson, 2005) Patterson (2005) continues to write, “The 1997 provisions of the law have been called the most significant changes in federal special education law since the original passage of the Education for All handicapped Children Act of 1975 (p. 62).”

Suspected Causes of Reading Difficulties

There are many discussions and research today in regard to reading difficulties and causes associated with them. Balajthy and Lipa-Wade (2003), write, “...the underlying causes of difficulty with Stalled Readers can be varied and complex: instructional practices, reading materials, general language skills, home environment, and so forth.” (p. 161) In the process of this literature review the re-occurring themes for suspected causes for reading disabilities are Learning Disabilities, specifically Dyslexia, Attentional Disorders such as ADD or ADHD, lack of proper instruction or experience with language, and processing disorders such as visual processing and/or memory.

Balajthy and Lipa-Wade (2003) acknowledge that other professionals in the field believe there is only one cause contributed to learning to read which is known as dyslexia. Dyslexia as explained by a website article (Bailet, 2006) is a learning disability and type of language processing disorder that describes students who are smart enough to learn but have difficulty learning how to read.

Another suspected cause for reading difficulties is the presence of an attentional disorder such as ADD and ADHD. French and Landretti (1995) write, “Simply stated, an attention deficit is a breakdown in the attentional regulatory system. In terms of learning to read, such a breakdown can result in low achievement grades and erratic performance (p. 11).”

Finally, the literature reveals that lack of proper teaching and prior language knowledge can contribute to reading difficulties. Teaching of course does not only refer to what is learned in a classroom. Lyons (2003) writes that, “Vygotsky (1978) argued that instruction (teaching) leads to the development of the child’s mind and contributes to emotional growth and well-being (p. 49).” Lyon (2003) continues to describe Vygotsky’s idea of Zone of Proximal Development as “...as the distance between the child’s actual development (the task the child can do independently) and the child’s potential development (the tasks the child can do with adult help or in collaboration with more capable peers) (p. 48).” Children who have not had teachers, including parents as teachers, who provide the additional support to further develop a child’s Zone of Proximal Development may experience reading difficulties when they begin reading. (Lyon, 2003)

Reading Strategies for Assisting Struggling Readers

As pointed out by Nichols (1996) much of the instruction for students with special needs is happening in the classroom setting, referred to as inclusion, along side their non-disabled peers. But what strategies are in place to help students be successful in the inclusive setting? The current literature review reveals that strategies in the area of communication, motivation, and scaffolding will help struggling readers be more successful in the general education classroom.

Communication

Communication and collaboration between general education and special education teachers are key strategies for assisting students identified as needing remedial reading skill building. Patterson (2005) writes that, “Classroom teachers need to recognize the importance of communication and collaboration not only as good practice in education, but

also as the key components in procedural safeguards (p. 67).” The International Reading Association (2000) also states that, “What appears to be most effective is for the reading specialist’s instruction to support, supplement, and extend excellent classroom teaching (p. 7).” This approach is different from earlier models of teaching students with special needs where special education teachers were the ones responsible for providing much of the instruction and remediation while general education teachers were simply hosting the student with special needs in the classroom.

Motivation

As Lyons (2003) states, “Motivation is arguably the most critical ingredient for long-term success in learning to read and write (p. 84).” Motivation as defined by Lyons (2003) is what makes us act in certain ways. Motivation is further broken down as extrinsic motivation or intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation deals with internal drives and completing tasks for self-satisfaction. Extrinsic motivation is completing a task because there will be a reward at the end other than self-satisfaction. Lyon (2003) also writes that, “Although the motivation literature points out that intrinsic motivation is critical to student learning, the U.S. education system is organized and administered in a way that supports and promotes extrinsic motivation (p. 79).”

So what can teachers do to create more intrinsic motivation in stalled or struggling readers? One suggestion by Lyon (2003) is to let the student know that you the teacher are truly interested in what the student does or says. Another suggestion by Lyon (2003) is to help and allow students to choose books about topics that are reflective of the student’s own interest. And finally, Lyon (2003) explains that teachers must monitor their own feelings and

projections toward student success. Teacher should create a safe and welcoming environment for students. In doing so teachers will be able to convey high expectations of the students.

Scaffolding

Lehmann (2004) states that, “Scaffolding is a critical part of working with special needs learners (p. 23).” She continues by describing scaffolding as difficult to understand. However, Lehmann (2004) then writes, “Simply stated, scaffolding is all the things teachers do, and all the tools teachers provide, to help learners be successful (p. 24).” The important elements of scaffolding as described by Lehmann (2004) are summarized below:

- Talk with students about what they already know about the lesson to be taught.
- Use pictures or actual objects of what concepts you are trying to teach.
- Ask students to notice similarities and differences when teaching about objects.
- Have students draw or write about what they have learned.
- Have students discuss amongst table groups or partners about the new concept

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

As indicated by the literature review, the special education pendulum has swung from virtually no services for students with special needs thirty years ago to completely immersing students with special needs into an inclusive general education classroom. Classroom teachers are now becoming the primary provider of educational needs for students with special needs. However, general education teachers do not receive adequate training or strategies to help these students learn basic reading skills while also providing access to the general education curriculum.

Studies show that as students move up to the high school level they continue to struggle with reading skills. Specifically, many ninth and tenth graders are still reading at a fourth grade level. One study of struggling high school students pointed out the need for a direct intense reading program that will teach basic reading decoding and comprehension skills. By building these basic reading skills, students will have better access to the curriculum.

Furthermore, there are strategies and programs that will teach struggling readers in the classroom. However, general education teachers lack the proper time to research the massive amounts of information available.

Limitations/Gaps in the Literature

The study reviewed in the literature was geared toward an intensive reading program for struggling readers at the high school level. There was a lack of studies in regard to intensive programs for elementary age students other than those offered by the distributors of programs that must be purchased by schools.

In addition, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that focus on the success rate of students with special needs who are placed in an inclusive environment. There are many moral and ethical reasons why students with special needs should be taught with their typically developing peers. However, there does not appear to be quantitative research that indicates whether including all students during classroom instruction time is advantageous for students in the long run.

Implications for Future Research

Since least restrictive environment is more and more considered the general education classroom, future research should include studies that indicate what is the proper amount of training and courses needed to help general education teachers reach these struggling readers. In addition, future research should explore what is the best way to remediate reading skills in elementary school students before they reach the high school level.

Overall Significance of the Literature

There are many laws in place to protect students with special needs in the public school system. However, teachers need better strategies and training to help struggling readers be more successful in the general education classroom. Struggling readers need better remediation at the elementary level before they reach high school. Once a student reaches the high school level they are more likely to become a high school dropout.

Project

List of Remedial Reading Programs

Below is a chart of several remedial reading programs with information for skill development, targeted age group, brief description, and contact information. The listed programs are only a small fraction of available reading programs available to educators. These programs were not chosen because they are considered superior to any other programs offered. They are mainly used in resource or learning centers but can be used by general education classroom teachers during small group or center times.

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Reading Program	Skill Development	Targeted Age group	Description	Contact Information
Edmark Reading Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word Recognition 	Level 1: 1.0 level Level 2: 2.0 or 3.0 level	Research based program that teaches 350 sight words that are incorporated into stories. Supplemental materials available	Pro-Ed 8700 Shoal Creek Boulevard Austin, TX 78757-6897 www.proedinc.com
Read Naturally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonemic Awareness • Phonics • Fluency • Vocabulary • Comprehension 	K-6	Short passages read by students that are timed and measured in words per minute. Passages are read and proper fluency is modeled by teacher or CD. Students read same passages consecutive times to increase fluency. Comprehension questions are presented at end of passage. Supplemental materials available.	Read Naturally 750 S. Plaza Drive #100 Saint Paul, MN 55120 (800) 788-4085
Great Leaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sound Awareness • Letter Recognition • Phonics • High Frequency Words 	K-2	Systematic and structured worksheets and activities that build basic reading skills.	Diarmuid, Inc P.O. Box 357580 Gainesville, FL 32635 www.greatleaps.com

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Fry Instant Word Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sight words 	K-3	<p>Activities and worksheets using the first 300 sight words.</p> <p>Each packet contains 10 new sight words and activities to help reinforce word recognition.</p>	<p>Teacher Created Materials 6421 Industry Way Westminster, CA 92683 www.teachercreated.com</p>
Signs for Sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonics • Spelling 	<p>Level 1: 1st grade Level 2: 2nd & 3rd grade</p>	<p>Program that uses dictation of individual sounds presented to students to create words. Letters are written out for students to circle to form the word.</p>	<p>Bechthold Publications 2761 Oakmont Drive, San Bruno, CA 94066 (650) 875-6613</p>
Language!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading • Writing • Spelling • Vocabulary • Grammar • Speaking 	Intermediate, middle and high school	<p>Comprehensive program that is research based. Worksheets and activities move sequentially through units. Helps students in all areas of Language Arts. Supplemental materials available.</p>	<p>Sopris West 4185 Salazar Way Frederick, CO 80504 (800) 547-6747</p>
Think-Alongs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehension 	<p>Level A- K-1 Level B- 2nd Level C- 3rd Level D- 4th</p>	<p>Collection of stories and short passages to be read aloud by teacher. Teacher models reading comprehension strategies while students follow along.</p>	<p>Harcourt Achieve Attn: Cust Serv. 5th Fl 6277 Sea Harbor Dr. Orlando, FL 32887 (800)-531-5015</p>

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Sound it Out	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Basic Phonology• Word Structure	Varied. Students should have mastered individual consonant names and sounds.	Book that offers definitions and examples of basic phonology. Provides lists of words for drill practice.	Sunset Products 157 Santa Ana Ave. Long Beach, CA 90803 (310)-433-0697
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