

### Personal Research Agenda

My area of interest since the beginning of graduate study has been in the area of reading comprehension instruction and assessment in primary grade children. Reading instruction in the early grades has typically focused on word recognition skills, with reading comprehension instruction deferred until word recognition has been mastered. This approach compounds the difficulties of children who are slow to acquire these basic skills. Children in this category then frequently perform below expectations in both word reading and reading comprehension. Since these children tend to have more language-based learning problems than peers who achieve on grade level, they are in even greater danger of failure without early comprehension instruction.

Although it is important to teach reading comprehension skills from the outset, there are challenges presented by the lack of word reading skills and other academic deficits of children in the primary grades: an important research consideration is determining how to teach and to measure growth in reading comprehension in non-readers while preserving the unique characteristics of text (as compared to oral language).

I served for several years as a member of a research team under Joanna P. Williams at Teachers College, investigating various aspects of text comprehension instruction, including theme instruction in narrative and text structure instruction in informational text. My dissertation involved the development and implementation of instruction in informational text comprehension for first grade students in high-poverty schools in New York City. I wrote, taught, and evaluated a curriculum focused on basic understanding of the uses of text, genre distinctions, direction-following, and comprehension of signs and logos of high utility because of their strong associations with personal safety.

Over the past year, I have begun work on a related project with Ann Boehm, Ph.D., Professor Emerita at Teachers College, focused on the identification of the components of comprehension difficulty in preschool and primary grade children. The long-range goal of this project is the development of diagnostic assessment tools keyed to specific interventions. The current study considers the role of illustrations in aiding and/or interfering with the comprehension of books for young children.

My proposed research agenda will address the following questions:

1. What approaches to text comprehension instruction are effective in low SES primary grade classrooms? What precursor skills or components of comprehension should be taught for optimal results?
2. What is the optimal way to maintain the integrity of the association of reading comprehension instruction with text (that is, distinguishing it from listening comprehension), while making allowance for the low word identification skills of low SES primary grade children?

This work has direct implications for the practice of psychology in the schools. Today, school psychologists are called upon to serve as the leaders in the solution of academic achievement problems, often in a responsiveness-to-intervention framework. They must serve as experts in academic functioning with in-depth understanding of scientifically validated instructional practices, so that they are able not only to assess students' broad academic deficits, but also to recommend or provide useful instructional approaches in keeping with federal mandates on the individual and classroom levels.

Abstract: Vision of Multisite Collaborative Multi-Site Research Program

Reading instruction in the primary grades is typically focused on the development of word recognition skills with little attention given to preparation for reading comprehension. This leaves those children who are slow to acquire basic reading skills at a disadvantage. A three-site collaborative experimental study designed to develop and implement a kindergarten reading comprehension preparation curriculum for at-risk students is envisioned. Regular classroom teachers will implement the curriculum in one experimental classroom in each geographic area and the comparison (story retelling) curriculum in a second classroom in the same area; a third classroom will receive regularly planned instruction according to the school or district curriculum. The focus of the experimental curriculum will be on a set of precursor skills thought to be important in the development of later reading comprehension skills, including but not limited to literacy concepts and text language. Although the curriculum will emphasize connections to reading, participant students will not be expected to recognize words. All participant students will be pre-tested and post-tested on examiner-devised measures based on the curriculum and on standardized measures of comprehension. Children in the experimental classrooms are expected to outperform those in comparison and control classrooms.

Vision of a Collaborative Multi-Site Research Program

**Issues and questions to be addressed**

I envision a collaborative multi-site research program focusing on the development of a reading comprehension preparation curriculum for at-risk children (defined by environmental risk factors such as poorly performing schools and/or low SES communities) in the primary grades. Among the many precursor skills that have been implicated in the establishment of future reading comprehension skills are basic print concepts (Burgess et al., 2002; Knapp, 2002; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Purcell-Gates & Dahl, 1991), world knowledge, vocabulary (Birdyshaw, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2001), facility with grammar and syntax, working memory and text structure awareness. Some issues and questions to be addressed in such a study are: Which precursor skills are most effectively taught in terms of resource allocation (training time, instructional time, and financial outlay)? What instructional interventions foster most effectively the development of these skills? What is the optimal way to integrate a reading comprehension program into the overall reading curriculum for kindergarten children? What measure of the efficacy of the program (beyond experimenter-designed tests) should be implemented?

Based on preliminary data gathered from my dissertation project, I imagine extending some of that work, both in terms of depth and instructional time, and broadening it to include narrative as well as informational text. I would consider beginning instruction in print concepts at a more basic level, considering what I have learned about the paucity of such knowledge in the target population group. This would include a focus on the purposes of literacy, print conventions and genre distinctions, as well as the particular language of text ('book language'). I would also consider incorporating more opportunities for nonverbal response styles such as

acting out answers through “action responses” (Alexander, 1985; Smith, 1926, 1986) throughout the curriculum, given the relatively low language mastery of at-risk children.

### **Context and participants**

In an ideal scenario, this study would be implemented at three research sites using at least nine kindergarten classrooms in each of the three areas: lower SES large urban, smaller urban, and rural settings that also represent geographic diversity in term of regions of the United States. These settings should fall in the “at risk” category because of the overall school(s) reading performance and the socioeconomic status of the communities and each should be within the geographic radius of one of the research sites.

Participants would include classroom teachers willing to implement the experimental curriculum and a comparison curriculum (a reading comprehension program focused on story retelling only). One classroom in each site area would be randomly assigned to the experimental curriculum, one to the comparison curriculum and one to the curriculum already in place in their schools. The other participants would be the children in the designated classrooms. Following this rubric, there would be approximately 225 children (assuming 100% parental consent for participation) involved in the study. Questionnaire data would be collected from teachers about reactions to the program and its perceived strengths and weaknesses.

### **Budget estimate**

The budget for such a project includes the following:

1. Research assistance for the following tasks: curriculum development, pre-testing, teacher training, fidelity-of-treatment observations, post-testing, and data analysis. Assuming the need

for two research assistants per site, at 10 hours per week for 30 weeks at an average of \$12 per hour, this amounts to \$7200 per site (or \$21,600 for three sites).

2. Materials reproduction includes reproduction of curricular materials, teacher manuals and examiner-authored tests. The estimated costs per site are \$500 for instructional materials, \$150 for teacher materials, and \$150 for test reproduction; the total for materials reproduction for three sites is \$2400.

3. Standardized outcome measures for pre- and post-testing includes test kits and protocols for all participants. Specific tests have not been selected, but the expenditure per site is projected to be about \$600, or \$1800 total.

4. Travel costs for one meeting of study site directors; this is highly variable depending on the locations of the sites, but is estimated to be about \$1500 total.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of a multi-site research program**

A multi-site program would allow the program to be tested in a variety of geographic, educational, and socioeconomic settings, contributing to external validity. It would also allow for intellectual contributions from more than one researcher. Some disadvantages include the greater difficulty of ensuring consistency of implementation across multiple sites, the challenges of maintaining coordination among site supervisors, and the multiplication of difficulties obtaining access to multiple school districts.

References

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