

The Enhanced Reading Opportunities Study

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Final Report: The Impact of Supplemental Literacy Courses for Struggling Ninth-Grade Readers. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, July, 2010. (NCEE 2010-4022)

THE RESEARCH IN BRIEF:

Take an experimental group of 5500 ninth graders who are at least two years below grade level in reading and match them with 5,500 in the control group in schools and districts across the United States. For the experimental group, pull them into an intensive reading skills class all year over and above their regular language arts classes. Give them hours of intense instruction in reading. At the end of the year, they score higher on their reading than does the control group. Cheer! However, measure their reading scores a year after the experiment, and they are on farther ahead than the control group. Frown! The program costs approximately \$2,000 per child. That's \$11 million.

What do we know? That one year of intense reading instruction does not work with young teens.

If this does not work, what would?

- More years of intense reading instruction and support?
- Give up and just encourage the regular language arts teacher to keep doing the best she can?
- Take a whole different approach? What approach?

SO WHAT?

Those who favor the direct instruction route will quickly respond that either the intervention teachers did not teach properly or the experiment was not long enough. However, in the study, monitors

visited classes and were satisfied that almost all the direct instruction was being done the way that the special teachers had been taught to teach. That leaves the second approach where one year of extensive support just has to be continued until the maximum number of students succeed.

Detractors of this approach would say that if what you are doing does not work, then do something else. How long will you spin your wheels before you give up?

Admittedly, kids who are at least two grade levels below in their reading probably have a lot of other problems such as lack of motivation, boredom, family dysfunction, or many other factors. If you do not know how to read well, then everything in school is a struggle and it is so easy just to give up.

We will talk about Krashenizing the reading program soon, but, first a story.

I shall never forget a teacher-librarian who was a part of a faculty who were motivated to get every child to pass the reading test at grade level. Every teacher volunteered to take a half dozen struggling readers and tutor them after school. They were given a drill curriculum to teach and given training on how to accomplish the task. Our teacher-librarian did this for two years and like her fellow teachers was achieving minimal success. So, the third year, she decided to do something with her kids in a don't ask, don't tell mode. And what do you think she did? You already know. She flooded these kids with all kinds of stuff they were interested in reading and they just had fun together all year reading, talking, reading, talking. Well, you know the result. They all passed the test. I wish I could have followed up to see if this kept on working.

Krashen has always maintained that free voluntary reading with lots of access is the secret. The National Reading Panel disagreed, and so when No Child Left Behind was passed, everything was focused on reading skill.

I called the director of this research study and we talked about the fact that it had not worked well but was very expensive. I asked if free reading had been tried recently. She did not know of a study, although she said that in this research, the students who were given a bit more choice in what they read did score higher. She then suggested that a research study be proposed to the Department of Education with such an approach (hint, hint to all the researchers out there).

Recently, the United States Department of Education has been funding gold standard studies. These are like randomized trials in medicine. The study we are examining here is a gold standard study.

A recent report from Accelerated Reader published top forty lists for various age-level kids on what kids read the most. An examination of the titles that have the highest number of tests taken show two kinds of books being read: popular series fiction and books required by English teachers. Those who read the series books were reading titles far below the lexile levels for their grade. I could find no nonfiction books on the lists. There is obviously a whole raft of questions and discussions around the AR approach.

Enter another major event. The Common Core Standards sponsored by the National Governor's Conference has now been adopted in 37 of the states in the United States. These standards are asking the nation's children and teens to read much more nonfiction and to reach for ever more complex texts. A complex text is one so pregnant with meaning that you might read a passage and then think for a while before pushing on to another idea in the text. By the time that young people are in the upper elementary years, they should be reading mostly nonfiction. (For a longer discussion of the Standards, see the article by Loertscher and Marcoux in this same issue of *Teacher Librarian*, on page 7.)

We all know that boys read less than girls; that minorities and kids in poverty

read less well than their white middle-class contemporaries; and we know that the African American male child/teen reads at the bottom.

In a time of thin or no budgets, it is difficult to stock a learning commons with reading materials that kids want to read in the format—print or digital—that they want to read it. But if teacher-librarians are at the table where reading is being discussed, I am wondering if we would be as brave as our teacher-librarian that I quoted earlier?

How many of us would have an opportunity to work closely with several classroom teachers, the reading coach, or any others and create our own gold standard action research study? If we can scrounge money from anywhere, have Kindles or Nooks, lots of magazines, and the pop in-

formational books our experimental group would gobble up. What if we had digital book clubs as well as brown bag lunches or after-school reading clubs, and just push interests as hard as we could? What would our results be after a year of such experimentation? If there are any readers out there who have had action research studies going, we editors would like to hear from you. And we need a group of researchers to get together and propose an \$11 million research study. What if we had \$2,000 per child for a year to conduct our own Krashenized reading program?

It is a challenge worth considering. Continuing to drive through the same old mud puddles of skill, drill, and kill "ain't cuttin' it."

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