

## **Implementation of Read Well as an Intervention for Economically Disadvantaged Students in Grades 1 and 2 Reading Below Grade Level**

Tiffany L. Chatman

Literacy is a vital component of the elementary educational program. Literacy skills provide the foundation for future success of students or conversely, lack thereof will lead to academic and lifelong challenges when these skills are not acquired early on. Research continues to show that students' potential for future academic and lifelong success rests upon gaining these core skills (Balkcom, 2014). In fact, future success is greatly reduced if students are not reading on grade level by the end of their third grade year. Furthermore, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds face more challenges academically and oftentimes lack the exposure to instruction that research indicates is critical for building early literacy. In order to address these gaps, students must be offered extensive literacy supports (Carlisle, Kelcey, & Berebitsky, 2013).

Many schools have attempted to address the literacy achievement gap by implementing scripted reading programs to support literacy skills. The push for these programs began after a study by the National Reading Panel (NRP) which supported "systematic phonics and phonemic awareness instruction in early grades" (Dresser, 2012, p.76). Though the NRP did not endorse a particular scripted program, the findings were utilized as a basis for implementing legislation such as No Child Left Behind (Dresser, 2012). No Child Left Behind mandates that reading instruction focus on the following five components: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. In order for schools to receive funding under NCLB, they must implement reading programs that align to the aforementioned areas (Stewart, 2004). Under NCLB, funding is made available to states to fund their most disadvantaged schools and provide professional development for teachers, instructional materials, and assessment tools (Owens 2010). As a result of the funding tied to aligning reading programs implemented in schools to the reading strategies outlined in No Child Left Behind, many reading intervention programs have emerged that

aim to incorporate these strategies into prepackaged literacy programs. One example of these literacy programs is Read Well.

Read Well is a K-3 reading and language arts program that aims to help students build the critical skills essential to be successful readers and learners (Voyager Sopris Learning, n.d.). It is a scripted program that provides students with explicit and systematic instruction in five areas that researchers have identified as crucial to reading with understanding and are mandated under NCLB: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies (Voyager Sopris Learning, n.d.). Due to the emphasis that Read Well places on explicit and systematic instruction in the five aforementioned areas which research has identified as critical for reading instruction, if economically disadvantaged students in grades 1 and 2 are provided instruction using the Read Well program, their reading achievement is likely to improve.

### **Read Well Program: The Research**

#### **Phoneme and Phonics Instruction**

Phonemes and phonics instruction are crucial to the development of early literacy skills and impact reading ability later on. Foorman (2007) conducted a study that examined the degree that explicit letter-sound instruction interacted with students' entering skill in phonemic awareness. They studied the reading development of 285 students in first and second grades in eight Title 1 schools. Thirteen of the teachers were part of implicit code standard instruction group. The other 53 teachers were a part of one of three types of classroom reading programs, which all included (a) direct instruction in letter-sound correspondences practiced in controlled vocabulary texts (direct code). Students that received direct code instruction (explicit letter/sound instruction) improved in word reading at a faster rate and received higher scores

the end of the year than students in the control group (Foorman, 2007).

Ball and Blachman (1991) also examined the importance of phonemic instruction. In their study, they studied the effects of training kindergarten students in phonemic segmentation and of instruction in letter names and letter sounds on their reading and spelling skills. They studied ninety students from three urban public schools in the U.S. and randomly assigned them to one of three groups. The first group received training in segmenting words into phonemes and in correspondences between letter names and letter sounds (phoneme awareness group). The second group received only the training in letter names and letter sounds (language activities group). The third group (control group) received no intervention (Ball & Blachman, 1991). The results of this study indicated that instruction in phoneme awareness combined with instruction connecting the phonemic segments to alphabet letters, significantly improved the early reading and spelling skills of the children in the phoneme awareness group (Ball & Blachman, 1991). Their research also showed that children with underdeveloped phoneme awareness were poorer readers later on.

Additionally, Hattie (2009) concluded that phonics instruction was important to the process of learning to read. He found that the effects of phonemic awareness were significant for students of all socio-economic backgrounds, with this type of instruction being just as effective for low socioeconomic students as with middle and high socioeconomic status students (Hattie, 2009). He also concluded that phonemic awareness helped to increase reading comprehension with an effect size of .34.

Furthermore, studies have found that scripted programs that incorporate effective reading strategies such as phonics instruction, decodable texts, and text rereads, have a positive impact on student achievement, particularly for disadvantaged students. One such study conducted by Murray, Munger, and Heibert (2014), compared the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Program and My Sidewalks on Reading Street Program as a first grade intervention, both of which are scripted reading programs. Fountas and Pinnell featured

leveled text and My Sidewalks on Reading Street featured decodable text. Both programs are used across the country, offer instruction in phonics and were used as an intervention for at-risk readers in the study. The findings of the study noted that the success of the scripted programs was based upon using a combination of leveled and decodable texts based upon student need (Murray et al., 2014).

Consequently, research indicates that direct phonics instruction, phoneme instruction, and the use of decodable texts are important for improving reading skills.

### **Small Groups and Direct Instruction**

Small groups and direct instruction are also important in reading instruction. Hattie (2009) conducted meta-analyses to examine the effectiveness of small group learning. The results of the meta-analyses indicate that small group instruction has a significant impact on student learning outcomes with an effect size of .49. The degree of effectiveness of small group learning is enhanced by the quality of the materials that are utilized and the instruction being adapted to student specific learning needs (Hattie, 2009).

Direct instruction has also been found to be instrumental in reading instruction and interventions. In the study conducted by Patching, Kameenui, Douglas, Gersten, and Colvin (1983), the researchers selected participants from four fifth-grade classes in two public schools in a community in the Northwest. Participants had to meet certain criteria to be included in the experiment: they had to demonstrate reading skills to read tests and workbooks without a lot word-recognition difficulty. Each participant was required to read to the experimenter at least one randomly selected passage from the screening test and the experimenter assessed each participants decoding ability (adequacy was the ability to read over 140 words per minute with a maximum five errors per 100 words). The second criterion was that participants had to earn a score of 6 or below on an 11 item screening test. The 39 participants (18 girls and 21 boys) who met the criteria were randomly assigned to one of three groups and each group was then randomly assigned to one of the three treatment conditions. The 13 participants in the

systematic-instruction (SI) group were instructed individually while participants in the other two groups (workbook with feedback and no intervention) completed their workbooks or worksheets at their desks within their classes and they were checked on individually by the experimenter. All interventions included three 30-minute instructional sessions. The results of the reading test given at the conclusion of the intervention showed that systematic instruction, delivered by an adult using modeling and explicit instruction of strategies, was significantly more effective than the same material in a workbook format or if the student received no intervention (Patching et al., 1983). Furthermore, Hattie (2009) stated research indicates that direct instruction has been the most powerful strategy to utilize when teaching reading skills, specifically, phonics skills.

Thus, small group instruction and direct instruction are also essential when teaching students to read and has been shown to be effective for instructing students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

### **Alignment of Research to the Read Well Program**

Read Well follows the philosophy that reading is a skill which must be learned. Thus, it is a systematic phonics program that incorporates core reading strategies that research has found to be important for literacy instruction. The developers of the Read Well program focus on phonemic awareness and letter sound associations which are incorporated in reading instruction within this program (Voyager Sopris Learning, n.d.). Daily decoding allows the teacher and students to continue to review letter/sound associations which include application of phonemic knowledge to phonics, and introduction of vocabulary that is used repeatedly by teachers and students. The Read Well program also incorporates small group and direct instruction.

Read Well is also a scripted program to provide instructional support in effective reading strategies to teachers that previous research has emphasized as important to reading instruction. Read Well is designed to be delivered in small reading groups and includes a variety of resources

for teachers to use in order to work on specific areas of reading that impact reading success including vocabulary development, decoding, comprehension, and fluency (Voyager Sopris Learning, n.d.).

Kennedy (2010) argued that the systematic approach is critical to student reading success, especially in high poverty settings. Consequently, Read Well's systematic approach to explicit reading instruction on phonics, phonemic awareness, small groups, direct instruction, decoding, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary makes it a viable reading intervention for students not making adequate progress in reading.

### **Disadvantages of Scripted Reading Programs**

#### **Barriers to Implementation**

Despite the advantages that research points to in support of scripted programs such as Read Well, there are challenges that have presented themselves as well.

**Fidelity and lack of flexibility.** One of the reasons for lack of results may be an issue of fidelity of implementation. In spite of the scripted nature of the programs, some argued that teachers, who have the ability, enhance scripted instruction as needed to meet the needs of their students (Dresser, 2012). Owens (2010) argued that, no matter the demands for implementation fidelity, many teachers maintain a certain amount of independence in what and how they teach their students to achieve positive outcomes.

Another factor that has been identified as a barrier to the successful implementation of scripted programs is a lack of flexibility due to the demand for program fidelity. In the study conducted by Griffith (2008), four participants were interviewed. Each of them were primary teachers who taught in Title I schools. The interviews were one to 2 hours and were conducted with each participant after they had implemented Voyager for seven months. The interviews were conducted individually, away from the school, to encourage the teachers to be transparent about their experiences and feelings towards the Voyager program (Griffith, 2008). The results of the study revealed that the teachers felt constrained by the program and that it did not allow them the flexibility to respond to different student

needs. Teachers commented on the restrictive nature of the timeline of the program. These time constraints not only impacted the reading portion of the day, but other areas of the curriculum as well. Griffith (2008) stated that because the Voyager time was protected from interruption and the prescribed instructional time was insisted upon by district personnel in order to ensure fidelity, other areas of the curriculum were often neglected.

**Teacher perception.** Teacher perceptions may also be a barrier to the successful implementation of scripted programs. In Griffith's (2008) study, he conducted a study on teacher morale in a school that mandated the implementation of a scripted program called Voyager Universal Literacy System. The results of the study not only revealed that the teachers felt constrained by the program because it did not allow them the flexibility to respond to different student needs, but they also reported that some aspects of the program were at odds with their personal educational philosophy. Due to the pressure to implement the program with fidelity and refrain from deviating from the script, the teachers in the study reported a negative impact on their morale (Griffith, 2008). The overall findings of this study suggest that if teachers are restricted by scripted programs and mandates that require them to teach in a way that contradicts their professional beliefs, their professional identities may be compromised and their views of scripted programs can be negatively impacted (Griffith, 2008). This is problematic because if teachers do not buy into implementing these programs, then the programs may not be implemented effectively.

Further research by Owens (2010) studied the Read Well program as the core reading instruction in classrooms. They enlisted highly qualified reading instructors to help deliver the program who were invested in using the program with fidelity in order to produce positive outcomes. The results of the study show at the beginning of the school year they attempted to implement the program with fidelity but, as the year progressed, they found their status as professional practitioners at odds with fidelity mandates. Eleven of the 12 teachers decided that the needs of their students outweighed administrative demands for

implementation fidelity and changed their use of the program to meet student needs. Like previous research, this study demonstrated that, in spite of how much teachers like or dislike a program, they maintain a degree of independence in how they use it. Based on their professional judgment and considerable knowledge and experience, they were responding to the individual needs of their students that the program seemed unable to meet. The findings of this study indicate that the use of scripted programs has the potential to diminish the professional competence, confidence and effectiveness of teachers due to the highly scripted nature of the program. Moreover, it showed that teachers will exercise a degree of autonomy based on their professional knowledge despite the scripted nature of the program which impacts program fidelity.

### **Scripted Programs Impact on Students from Low Socio-Economic Groups**

According to Owens (2010), the United States Department of Education acknowledges the challenge faced by disadvantaged students, citing research suggesting that poverty can have a negative impact on children's mental and behavior development as well as their overall health, which impacts their ability to learn. In fact, studies have indicated that poverty is the largest correlate of reading achievement (Owen, 2010). Unfortunately, some studies show that scripted programs do not address the reading difficulties of students from low socio-economic groups.

The study by Dresser (2012) provides evidence that scripted programs may negatively affect students' reading development. Dresser (2012) pointed to research in her study that indicates those students in schools where scripted programs were used for ten years or more lagged behind students in schools with non-scripted programs. She discussed studies conducted in California using the Open Court reading program which found no evidence that the program promoted higher early reading achievement among children from low socio-economic groups (Dresser, 2012). In contrast, their results showed that students in non-scripted programs outperformed students in schools using Open Court.



Camp and Aldridge (2007) wrote an article on the effect of scripted programs on students in poverty. They argue that the rigidity of scripted programs perpetuate Haberman's concept of the "pedagogy of poverty" (pg. 8). According to Camp and Aldridge (2007), students participating in scripted programs are given low-level tasks which make up the majority of the teaching-learning process in low-income schools. They assert that scripted programs encourage the continuation of such teacher practices and that children who need enriching learning environments the most, often receive quality and stimulating instruction the least due to being prescribed scripted reading programs.

Finally, Owens (2010) posited that although closing the achievement gap and improving academic outcomes for disadvantaged children was the primary objective of NCLB, there is little evidence that this objective has been reached, despite funding schools that incorporate reading programs that align to the National Research Panel's findings. In fact, failure to produce results might be attributed to failure to acknowledge the impact of poverty on academic achievement (Owens, 2010).

### **Limitations of Studies**

The previous studies provide further insight into the potential, or lack thereof, of scripted programs in general; however, they have some limitations that should be considered in evaluating their validity. The studies of Griffith, Owens, and Dresser all used a limited sample size (in some cases just four participants). Due to the limits in size of the study participants, it is difficult to generalize the results of the study. Additionally, there is a limited amount of research on the Read Well program and it is critical that more studies be done on this specific program while keeping in mind the successes and challenges of previously studied reading intervention programs.

### **Conclusion**

The Read Well program is backed by research that supports it as a viable program to improve literacy intervention. It is based on research that supports the systematic and explicit instruction of reading in key areas such as phonemic

awareness, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary development, small group instruction, direct instruction, letter/sound associations, etc. Based upon the studies that were examined in this paper, Read Well is a program that can be used to improve the reading skills of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with its focus on the skills that many students in this population show deficits. Again, Kennedy's (2010) research supports the argument that students in high poverty schools require systematic instruction which is a trademark of the Read Well intervention program.

In contrast to the studies that show the success of scripted programs, there are studies that indicate that scripted programs are not effective and have significant barriers to implementation. For instance, most of the research points to the need for program fidelity with regard to implementation as an important component to the success of scripted programs. The challenge is that teacher attitude towards the program impacts the degree to which teachers implement the program with fidelity and in some cases, supplement the programs with other resources. Furthermore, there is also research that argues that the extent that scripted programs are successful is also in question, particularly with regard to students living in poverty due to the "pedagogy of poverty" (Camp & Aldridge, 2007, p.8).

Despite the research that highlights the ineffectiveness of scripted programs, there is a substantial body of research that supports the strategies that Read Well incorporates into its program. Thus, it is important to assess whether it can be used as an effective intervention for students reading below grade level from all backgrounds, and specifically, students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

### **Future Research**

Given the importance of program fidelity to successful implementation of Read Well, additional research should be done on ways to minimize this barrier to implementation. Based upon previous studies, fidelity and teacher perception are areas of concern because teachers will exercise their autonomy, even with a scripted program or if they do not, their perception of the program becomes

tainted which may impact their willingness to implement the program with fidelity. Teachers appear to need to have a voice in the instructional programming of their students. If fidelity and teacher perception are the ongoing issues preventing success, then further research should be done to study ways to incorporate teachers into reading interventions and give them an active voice in the process. This could help to control for the types of activities and strategies that teachers use when they invariably practice autonomy in the implementation of the Read Well program. By allowing teachers to be a part of the process, it can help to make sure that the needs of the students are being met and may also address issues of fidelity.

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