

# Preparing teachers to remediate reading disabilities in high school: What is needed for effective professional development?

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## Abstract

In this paper, we ask what constitutes effective professional development for teachers faced with struggling readers in high school. Metacognitive teacher training, instructional coaching, mentorship, and collaborative learning are considered. We describe a professional development model preparing high school teachers to teach PHAST PACES, a remedial reading program. A metacognitive teaching style and specific skills for teaching comprehension and decoding strategies were emphasized. Teachers provided high positive ratings regarding the usefulness of the training, and attributed to the training an increased sense of efficacy in improving student outcomes and understanding reading problems. A comparison of student outcomes for teachers' first and subsequent classes suggested that the professional development model promotes better outcomes on more complex skills.

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## 1. Introduction

Approximately two-thirds of all US students with disabilities scored below the basic level in reading in the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress. Regardless of whatever special services they were receiving, 71% of students with disabilities in 4th grade, 68% in 8th grade, and 68% in 12th grade read below the basic level and could not

understand the NAEP text materials (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Some 2.3 million US students are specifically identified with a reading disability (RD), and struggling readers represent 80% of American students with learning disabilities (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Despite the high prevalence of reading problems and learning disabilities, a national survey of teachers in US public schools revealed major concerns about how to address the needs of disabled students in the classroom. Only 32% of teachers whose classes included students with disabilities felt well-prepared to address their academic needs (US Department of Education: National Center for

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Education Statistics, 2001). Clearly, there is an enormous need for specific programs to improve the training and professional development of teachers of students with disabilities. If students with disabilities are to be taught the reading skills they need to fully participate in society, research is needed to identify how teachers can be taught to understand the causes of reading failure and to be prepared to implement the best instructional practices and combinations of practices for their effective remediation.

Recent research on effective instruction has taught us a great deal about how to prevent reading acquisition failure and RDs in at-risk children. There is very little evidence, however, regarding intervention for the hundreds of thousands of students still struggling with reading when they reach high school. Is reading remediation effective into high school? How well prepared are high school teachers to address the needs of students in 9th and 10th grade who lack adequate decoding skills, reading fluency, and reading comprehension abilities? Can a professional development model be designed to allow teachers to effectively remediate RDs in the high school environment? These questions motivate the present paper.

The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) emphasized the need for instruction that encompasses multiple dimensions of proficient reading skill: phonemic awareness, phonics/decoding, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and vocabulary development. As Fletcher, Denton, Fuchs, and Vaughn (2005) suggest, multiple reports now support the conclusion of the National Research Council Report that teachers must *integrate* instruction involving multiple domains of reading skill (decoding, word recognition, fluency, and text comprehension) for their students to become truly proficient readers (Snow et al., 1998). Few studies have been reported, however, that provide a controlled evaluation of multiple component reading remediation programs with these specific instructional emphases. And *no* evidence exists regarding how to provide teachers with the training, resources, and mentorship they need to provide this type of integrated multiple component remediation.

The problem is particularly acute when the complex instructional needs of older struggling readers are considered along with the current skills set of secondary school teachers. Research is required to provide an evidence base to guide the professional development required for teachers to

be prepared to offer *comprehensive* effective remedial reading instruction for disabled readers in secondary school. As Fisher, Schumaker, and Deshler (2002) have insisted:

Clearly in order for students with high-incidence disabilities to meet the expectation that they comprehend the complex written content associated with subject-area classes, educational practices must be altered. Specifically these students must be taught the strategies they need to comprehend written information, and their teachers must learn to present information in such a way as to enhance their students' comprehension (2002, p. 353).

As part of our research developing and evaluating interventions for students with severe RDs (Lovett, Lacerenza, & Borden, 2000; Lovett, Lacerenza, Borden et al., 2000; Lovett & Steinbach, 1997; Lovett, Steinbach, & Frijters, 2000; Morris et al., submitted), we have encountered questions regarding professional development to prepare teachers to address the decoding, text reading, fluency, and reading comprehension deficits of elementary and high school students with RDs. We have developed and are piloting a professional development program that trains teachers to teach a multiple component reading intervention program specifically designed for disabled high school readers. To date, this professional development project includes teachers of students from 9th and 10th grade who meet criteria for RD and require special education services. The teachers learn how to teach a remedial reading program called PHAST PACES. The PHAST PACES Program addresses multiple sources of dysfluent reading and impaired reading comprehension, and focuses on the decoding, reading rate, and comprehension problems of adolescent students with RD. This intervention is adopted as a scaffolding structure for the professional development project because of its demonstrated efficacy in our intervention research. PHAST PACES students have demonstrated significant gains relative to control students on multiple measures of reading achievement and transfer-of-learning in a small efficacy study conducted in four different high schools. The PHAST PACES Program and the initial efficacy study have been described in a separate report (Lovett, Lacerenza, Kunka, & De Palma, 2007).

The professional development model is characterized by a strong emphasis on the teachers developing metacognitive models of effective literacy

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