Article Review #1

Kourtney J. Gorham (200305927)

The University of Regina

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Dr. Scott Thompson

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Article Review #1: “How to Reach First-Grade Struggling Readers”

**Fundamental Question**

*What approach to reading instruction did the authors advocate for?* The article “How to Reach First-Grade Struggling Readers: An Integrated Instructional Approach” by Solari, Denton, & Haring (2017) discusses using an integrated reading framework as part of a Response to Intervention (RTI) Tier 1 and 2 support. An integrated reading framework involves both foundational reading skills and comprehension instruction (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). Solari, Denton, and Haring (2017) consider phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency to be foundational reading skills. An integrated reading framework also includes reading and writing in context (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). Instructional methods include modeling, guided release of responsibility, immediate feedback, scaffolding, and explicit teaching of reading and comprehension strategies. Instruction is provided by the classroom teacher in whole-group and small-group configurations. The whole-group lessons are short, about 20 minutes or less in length, and occur daily (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). Teachers use both non-fiction and fiction cross-curricular texts to teach new vocabulary words, guide comprehension discussions, and model before, during, and after reading strategies (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). For instance, they recommend the decoding strategy of getting children to identify the parts of the word they know, sound it out, and then check the context (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). In small groups, students then practice the strategies that they have learned with the potential for immediate feedback, so that incorrect habits are not formed. These lessons can be differentiated with picture cards and graphic organizers to expand students’ comprehension (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). In small groups, students get to focus on specific phonics and phonological awareness skills, such as spelling and word decoding.

**Part-Whole Questions**

*What is the reason to research this approach?* This study was conducted because the authors found that “intervention programs [tend] to focus primarily on foundational skills or word-level instruction, with considerably less time spent on developing comprehension, vocabulary, and writing” (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017, p. 153). Furthermore, many programs rely heavily on decodable texts with readers who are struggling, despite evidence that reading in context is best (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). This article promotes non-decodable texts for all learners. The integrative reading framework aims to promote explicit, systematic instruction – instead of a linear approach - as it has shown to be most effective (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). Ultimately, reading continues to be an area of debate and concern for many of our learners. It can be challenging for classroom teachers and specialists to determine if a student’s reading challenges are biological or due to lack of opportunities and appropriate instruction, but nonetheless, we have a duty to respond to the needs of all students.

*What are the potential problems or conflicts associated with this study and what are the possible solutions?* The article discusses a reading program called *Reading Rules* that falls under the integrated reading approach. The program was developed in 2016 by Denton and it focuses on comprehension and foundational reading skills for Grade One learners. The program can be administered by a classroom teacher or specialist teacher. For the experimental trial of the program, students were identified by their teachers as at-risk for reading. Then, these learners were randomly assigned to receive regular instruction plus the *Reading Rules* program (experimental group) or the regular instruction only (control group). The experiment was implemented by the classroom teacher over 17 weeks. The teacher implementing the program received professional development and coaching before implementation and was able to observe other teachers during reading instruction (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). The students in the experimental group made greater gains in the areas of word reading, decoding, comprehension, and fluency in comparison to the control group (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). However, specific results, the statistical significance of these results, and how the scores were derived was not included in the article. Furthermore, I question whether the gains made by the experimental group can be attributed to the reading program itself or the extra reading instruction time that they were provided in comparison to the control group. Sharing this additional information, and any conflicts of interest, could strengthen their argument for this approach.

**Hypothetical Question**

*If this strategy occurred in schools, what would happen and what would be different?* The theory behind integrative reading programs has some research evidence to support it. Denton and Mathes (2003) and Vellutino, Scanlon, and Lyon (2000) found that using a comprehensive approach to teaching reading reduced reading issues for at-risk readers and the severity of issues for those with diagnosed Learning Disabilities. However, how would this theory work in practice? They mention that an integrative reading program, and Tier 2 interventions in general, can be administered by the classroom teacher or a specialist teacher. I would argue that a specialist teacher would be best positioned to implement Tier 2 interventions. Simply put, a classroom teacher with 25 students can allot 5 minutes per student if literacy timetabling is 2 hours in length. Obviously, this time is increased by doing a variety of whole-group and small-group instruction methods and by prioritizing those who need additional supports. However, with the increase of behaviors in our classrooms and the variety of needs, having a specialist teacher provide Tier 2 reading instruction, in addition to the Tier 1 evidence-based reading instruction that the classroom teacher provides in the classroom is most feasible. The specific elements of the program would be feasible to do as they were presented.

**Critical Questions**

*Was this strategy applicable or inapplicable?* Solari, Denton, and Haring (2017) recommend that those readers who are identified as struggling should be in Tier 2 “small groups across the entire school year” (p. 155). While this may work in theory, in practice Tier 2 instruction is something that must be prioritized based on need. Interventions typically occur over an 8- to 12-week period, rather than across the entire school year. However, to solve the gap between the theory and practice, a specialist teacher could start the intervention and then the classroom teacher could carry on some of these practices during and after intervention. This could be better executed if there are times during the intervention period where the specialist teaches the class, while the classroom teacher implements the Tier 2 intervention. Using educational assistants in creative ways can also free up additional time for those in need. Ultimately, time is a premium for both classroom teachers and specialists, and this can be the trickiest part of successfully setting up interventions with fidelity.

*Do I agree or disagree with this reading approach and why?* While I support this approach to reading instruction, there were some elements that I did not agree with. For instance, their definition of foundational skills did not seem to include vocabulary and oral language, despite mention of these skills throughout the article. Furthermore, they recommend that “foundational skills in the early grades should be taught as a prerequisite to more complex reading skills such as comprehension” (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017, p. 150). I agree with this but view comprehension as a foundational skill. I see it more so as a 6-piece puzzle of literacy skills that works together in a non-hierarchical manner. Since comprehension is the purpose of reading, it is foundational. They also mention that strategies should progress from easy to hard, but this can become linear instruction, which they were trying to avoid. Furthermore, what is a ‘hard’ strategy or concept for one student, may not be hard to another. Thus, I prefer to introduce strategies to the whole group for exposure and to assume competence of all learners. Then, I tailor strategies to the needs of the small group and based on how individual students respond to instruction. Some of the strategies listed, such as graphic organizers and picture cards, should be made available to all learners, not just the Tier 2 intervention group. I believe that if a strategy is appropriate for one learner, it is likely beneficial to most (i.e. using visuals). In the end, the integrative reading framework seems to be a promising approach that should be considered in the context of the specific population and situation.

Works Referenced

Solari, E. J., Denton, C. A., & Haring, C. (2017). How to reach first-grade struggling readers: An integrated instructional approach. *Council of Exceptional Children,* *49*(3), 149-59.