

Reducing Special Education Risk for Young At-Risk Urban Learners

Gwendolyn Cartledge



Some students who are referred for special education services may really just have needed more intensive instruction as they developed early reading skills during their kindergarten and first-grade years, according to Dr. Gwendolyn Cartledge, a professor in the Ohio State University School of Physical Activity and Educational Services. Cartledge, whose focus is on special education and mild disabilities, says that “schools need to identify young children, no later than kindergarten, who show risk for reading failure and work with them on these early critical reading skills during their formative years.” Cartledge’s focus on early reading intervention grew out of her realization that a combination of reading and behavior problems is the number one reason for special education referral.

Early reading intervention could prevent later reading disabilities.



Why Early Intervention Matters

“Before children learn to read,” Cartledge explains, “they become skilled at hearing and manipulating basic letter sounds. For example, the end sound of “cat” is /t/, the middle sound is /a/ and the beginning sound is /c/.” Eventually, when given the sounds, children can blend them into words or when given words, are able to segment them into sounds. Children also learn the alphabetic principle of being able to name letters and tell what sound they make. Cartledge says that these skills must be mastered by first grade in order to provide a strong basis not only for reading mastery, but also to

avoid some referrals for special education services. Lack of reading mastery affects all other subjects and even can influence behavior as the student’s frustration at academic challenges can manifest itself through inappropriate behavior. Thus, students may be referred to special education services for reasons stemming from mastery of early critical reading skills.

With extensive experience as an educator and with research interests addressing early intervention/prevention and the social development of children with disabilities, Cartledge set out to explore how early intervention could affect kindergarten and first-grade students who show reading and behavioral

risks. As part of a larger study, during the 2005-2006 academic year, Cartledge worked with 93 students from 3 Columbus City Schools: 61 treatment and 32 controls. At the beginning of the study, all but four of the control students and only two of the treatment students were at benchmark. Two of those schools had been designated as Reading First Schools, indicating that they had some of the lowest reading scores in the district. After identifying these schools, Cartledge began implementing her plan to give their kindergarten and first-grade students the chance to reduce their reading risk significantly.

In each school, Cartledge trained two instructional assistants (IAs)

61 treatment students

30 minutes of intensive instruction per day, 3 to 5 days per week, for 7 months, in small groups

32 control group students

to teach phonemic/phonological skills to the students. Two Ohio State University master's level graduate assistants (GAs) were employed to provide instruction to some of the students, mainly English language learners (ELL). Treatment students received 30 minutes of instruction per day, 3 to 5 days per week, for 7 months, in small groups. The instruction they received was secondary intervention, meaning that in addition to their regular reading classes the students also received small group (two to four students) intensive instruction by either an IA or GA. All of the instructors were trained to use *Early Reading Intervention* (Simmons & Kame'euni, Pearson Scott Foresman, 2003), which is designed to teach skills such as phonemic awareness and alphabetic principle skills to kindergarten and first-grade students. Students practiced oral reading skills so they could reach benchmark in oral reading by the end of first grade, which means that they could read 40 words per minute in context. "One of the treatment students is already reading 70 words per minute," Cartledge reports.

Early Success = Confident Students

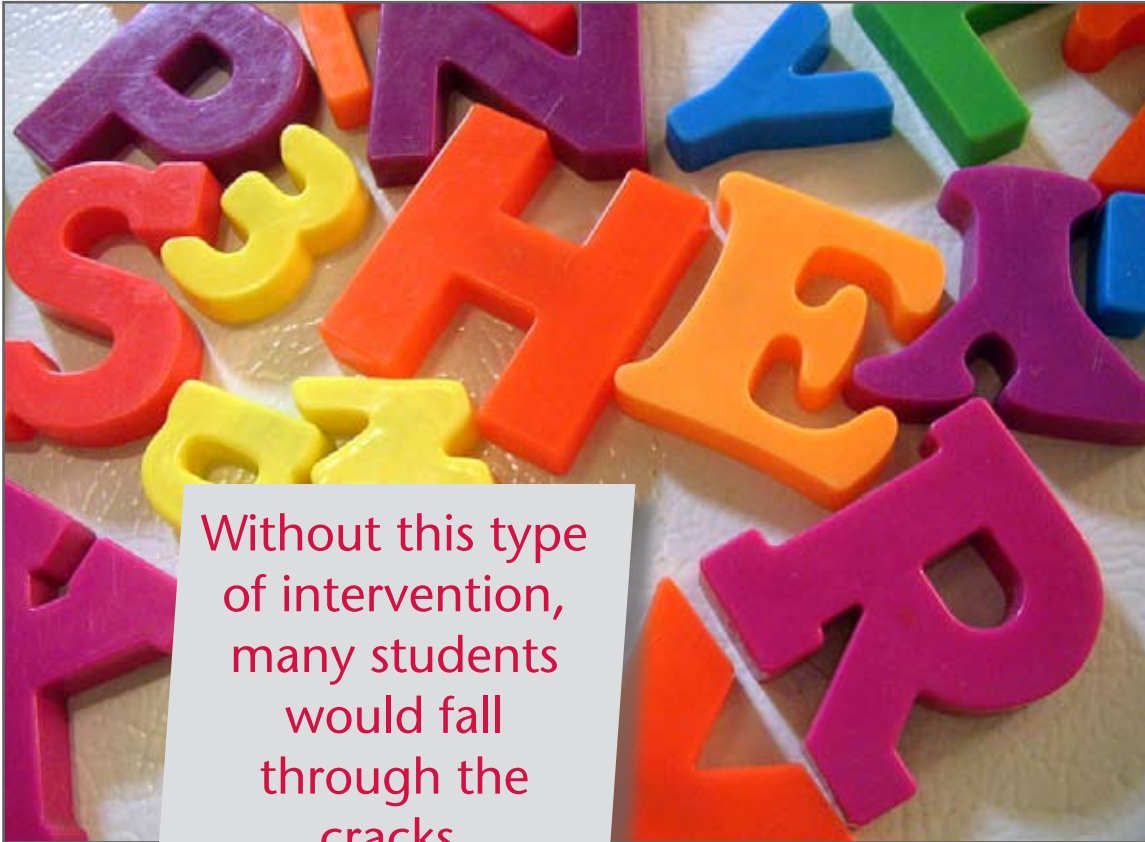
For the purpose of data analysis, Cartledge separated the treatment group into two subgroups: those for whom English is a learned language (ELL) and those for whom English is their first language. The data from Cartledge's study show remarkable progress among the treatment students. Treatment students averaged higher gains in word attack scores than the higher-performing control group, performing at levels nearly equal to their control-group peers in the spring. The greatest gains in progress in word attack skills occurred in the group for whom English is a learned language. Treatment students averaged greater gains

in letter-word identification than the higher-performing control group. In the spring of the first year, 42% of the treatment students were performing at benchmark, compared to only 3% of them performing at that level the previous fall. Interestingly, in the spring, only 65% of the students in the control group were performing at benchmark, compared to 87.6% in the fall; 47% of the treatment students improved from fall to spring; 28% of the control group regressed, compared to only 3% of the treatment students. Clearly, the treatment students benefited greatly from this Early Reading Instruction intervention.

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cracks. In the Columbus City Schools, more than two thirds of students are at or below poverty level, and students with English as a learned language are increasing. These students are more likely to come without solid early reading skills and without parents who are able to help monitor and teach these skills.

In order to continue making an impact, Cartledge plans to continue monitoring students for at least another year to see how the students are progressing and at what rate they are referred for special education services. She also wants to see if regression occurs in the treatment group or control group and how the schools will respond if that should occur. Cartledge maintains that teacher preparation programs must place more attention on early

intervention for students who demonstrate a risk for reading failure. Concepts relevant to early intervention and prevention need to be incorporated into teacher preparation programs so teachers will know how to handle the situation when, not if, they encounter it.

“The most skilled and experienced teachers need to be working in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms,” Cartledge says, “because that is where the foundation for becoming a successful reader is created. Experiencing success with early reading skills can lead to greater confidence in the classroom in all subjects. Continued education built on top of finely honed early reading skills prepares students for success in college and other life endeavors.” ■