

LEARNING TO READ

CONCERTED ACTION TO SUPPORT
READING RESEARCH





SUMMARY

PROTECTIVE MEASURES AGAINST READING FAILURE IN EARLY EDUCATION

FOR STUDENTS:

Develop phonological awareness

Be familiar with most of the letters of the alphabet

Develop word identification skills

Develop reading fluency

FOR TEACHERS:

Use a concrete teaching style that makes use of explanation, demonstration and support. This consists in:

- explaining to the students how to perform a task (explanation)
- showing them how to do the task by actually doing it or stating the steps involved (demonstration)
- supporting, assisting and supervising them while they attempt to perform the task (support)

FOR PARENTS:

Promote reading at home

Make children's books available at home

Interact with their children in activities involving the written word



LEARNING TO READ

Learning the language of instruction is an indicator of academic success, and reading comprehension appears to be the cornerstone for learning in other academic subjects. That is why difficulties experienced in learning the language of instruction lead to the identification of learning difficulties and are one of the main arguments school authorities use to justify their decision to have a student repeat a grade.¹

We know that students who repeat a grade in elementary school are far more likely to drop out of school than others and that the risk increases exponentially with each grade repeated.² Elementary 1 is the most often repeated year in elementary school (as is Secondary I in secondary school). Only 20 per cent of students who repeat Elementary 1 obtain a Secondary School Diploma. Also, more boys than girls repeat a grade. For example, in 2001-2002, 3.8 per cent of boys repeated Elementary 1, compared with 2.3 per cent of girls.

The cumulative effect of repeated years leads to a delay in students' progress through school. Students who experience difficulty learning to read in Elementary Cycle One gradually fall behind their peers in every subject. By the end of Cycle Three, they have fallen so far behind that few of them ever manage to catch up. For this reason, reading failure is a major

contributor to the dropout rate. It is becoming apparent that instructional measures must be taken in the early years of elementary school, and that these measures should be for the most part preventive.

A study³ was conducted as part of a concerted action to support reading research⁴ among students beginning to learn to read and write in Elementary Cycle One. The aim of the study by Giasson and Saint-Laurent was to determine why some students considered at risk of experiencing difficulties in learning to read still manage to succeed, while others not considered at risk actually experience difficulties. In it the authors attempt to identify the **protective factors**⁵ against reading failure in order to be able to act as quickly as possible, i.e. in Elementary 1, in order to prevent these difficulties from worsening. Teaching strategies proposed by the researchers and based on the results of their study appear in boxes in the text.

1. M. Pelletier, J. Lamarre and S. Rheault, *Boys' Academic Achievement: Putting the Findings Into Perspective* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2004), p. 13.
2. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Retard scolaire au primaire et risque d'abandon scolaire au secondaire* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1991), p. 39.
3. Jocelyne Giasson and Lise Saint-Laurent, *Facteurs de protection contre l'échec en lecture au premier cycle du primaire*. Summary report. Fonds FCAR-CQRS-MCC-MEQ-MFE concerted action. Support for reading research, Université Laval, March 2004. The report is available at the following address: <<http://www.fqrsq.gouv.qc.ca/recherche/index1.html>>.
4. This concerted action to support reading research is a follow-up to the *Politique gouvernementale de la lecture et du livre* (government policy on reading and books) aimed at identifying the factors and conditions needed to improve teaching strategies in an effort to promote reading and the sustainable development of reading practices, and was initiated in collaboration with the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications (MCC), the Ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance (MFE) and the Fonds pour la formation de chercheurs et l'aide à la recherche (FCAR).
5. Protective factors are factors that result in a positive change in a student's reactions in a situation that could eventually lead him or her to adopt inappropriate behaviours.

Which students are at risk?

Students are considered at risk when they present, very early on in their learning, certain characteristics that have previously been associated with reading failure. For example, they show little interest in reading or writing, have not been introduced to the written word at home and do not understand the purpose of reading. They have very little phonological awareness and often exhibit delayed language development.

These students' progress in learning to read was monitored from the beginning of Elementary 1 to the end of Elementary 2, and the influence of a number of factors on their success was studied. Some of these factors are related to the students themselves, such as phonological awareness, familiarity with the written word, motivation to read and gender (boy/girl). Others are related to the family, for example, literacy practices and parents' behaviour with respect to homework, while still others are related to teaching, such as teaching quality and style and the contribution of a reading specialist.

Many of these appear to be protective factors against reading failure.

DEVELOP PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS STARTING IN KINDERGARTEN

What is phonological awareness?

Phonological awareness is the ability to break down words into sounds and to orally manipulate different components such as phonemes and syllables.⁶

Phonological awareness has been recognized for several years now as one of the best predictors of reading success. The results of this study confirm that it helps students learn to read. Students with well-developed phonological awareness have an easier time learning to read. Moreover, reading improves phonological awareness, since there is a significant increase in phonological awareness, all students combined, in the first months of learning to read.

It can therefore be considered a protective factor, since students who succeeded at the end of the year demonstrated better phonological awareness at the beginning and in the middle of the year. In order to benefit at-risk students, phonological awareness should be addressed in kindergarten, or at least at the beginning of Elementary 1.

Not all phonological awareness activities, however, are beneficial for at-risk students. Phonemic segmentation, which consists in pronouncing a word by breaking it down into phonemes, is more useful in helping students develop reading skills than categorization, which consists in choosing from a list of several words, the one that does not begin with the same sound as the target word.

The researchers suggest developing phonological awareness among at-risk students by focusing on their segmentation skills, which are the most useful in learning to read.

They state that, in order to benefit at-risk students, phonological awareness should be addressed in kindergarten, or at least at the beginning of Elementary 1.



LEARNING THE LETTERS OF THE ALPHABET AT AN EARLY AGE

We know that many children, because they are regularly exposed to the written word, acquire knowledge and skills before even beginning school, making it easier for them to learn to read and write.

Their level of familiarity with books and their discovery of the alphabetical nature of language (scribbling and their familiarity with letters) can influence their formal introduction to the written word.

Of these factors, only the students' familiarity with letters makes it possible to determine in September which of them will succeed by the end of the year. It has long been considered one of the best predictors of reading success at the end of Elementary 1, as well as a protective factor against reading failure. The results of the study show that students who are familiar with only a few letters at the beginning of Elementary 1 are most likely to fail reading. Of course, these results should not be overly generalized, since not all students who do not know the alphabet when they begin school fail reading.

The students' first attempts at writing indicate that, at the beginning of the school year, the stronger students have not yet made the connection between the spoken word and the written word. They are at the same level as those who will still be considered at-risk at the end of the year. Moreover, in the first months of elementary school, the stronger students stand out from the average and weaker students.

In this study, however, the students' familiarity with books does not appear to be a clear indicator of students who will succeed or fail on the basis of having been more exposed to reading by their parents in early childhood.

Since familiarity with the letters of the alphabet is a protective factor against reading failure in at-risk students, the researchers propose that the alphabet be taught in kindergarten.

CONTINUALLY IMPROVE READING SKILLS

The development of reading skills in at-risk students was examined from the point of view of word identification, fluency and reading comprehension.

It is generally recognized that, in order to properly understand a text, the reader must be able to identify 95 per cent of the words. Students in this study who succeeded at the end of the year were able to do so, while those with difficulties recognized between 59 and 69 per cent of the words in a text. Texts intended for their grade level were too difficult for them. Moreover, students who failed reading and writing at the end of Elementary 1 had a much harder time identifying words throughout Cycle One. They did make progress, but they never caught up to their peers. Students who successfully learned to read and write had acquired good word identification skills by the middle of Elementary 1. The development of effective word identification strategies early on in the year can therefore be considered a protective factor.

Reading fluency, which is the ease or speed at which a student identifies words, either on his or her own or in a text, is also considered an essential characteristic of good readers. In this study, Elementary 2 students who were weak at the end of Elementary 1 did not achieve half the results of those who learned to read in Elementary 1. Fluency is a criterion for differentiating the stronger students from the weaker. Developing reading fluency appears to be a protective factor against reading failure. It is not enough that the students learn to identify words correctly; they must also do so with a certain amount of ease.

Reading comprehension is a student's ability to understand sentences and recall information contained in a text. Weaker students perform less well in comprehension than average and stronger students. Average students usually do well enough in text recall, but do not do as well as stronger students on comprehensive reading examinations. Comprehension is a clear indicator of who will succeed or fail as early as the middle of Elementary 1. Although the ability to decode a text rapidly is crucial, it is important to take comprehension into account when teaching students to read.

According to the researchers, teaching strategies focusing on the development of effective word identification strategies, as early as possible in Elementary 1, are indispensable for at-risk students.

It is not enough that the students be able to identify words correctly, they must also be able to do so with a certain amount of ease. The development of reading fluency is very important and, according to the researchers, should be given more emphasis in school. Fluency is developed throughout Elementary Cycle One, but it is important not to wait until the end of the cycle to take action.


Although teaching strategies must help at-risk students decode texts rapidly, the researchers deem it important that comprehension be included in the educational objectives.

DO BOYS AND GIRLS OBTAIN DIFFERENT RESULTS?

There was no difference between the results of boys and girls in reading and writing at the beginning or in the middle of Elementary 1. Differences began to appear in favour of girls only at the end of Elementary 1, and only with respect to writing. At the end of Elementary 2, there was a difference between boys' and girls' results in both reading and writing. There is therefore a progression in the difference between boys' and girls' results until the end of Cycle One. The same applies to the proportion of students who failed the reading examination at the end of the year: the gap between boys' and girls' results widened between Elementary 1 and Elementary 2. Also, twice as many boys as girls who were considered problem-free at the beginning of Elementary 1 failed their first attempts at writing.

The difference between boys' and girls' results was not apparent on every examination. Boys and girls performed similarly on word identification, fluency and reading comprehension tests. However, more girls succeeded in writing and in the one reading examination that required written answers.

Among at-risk girls and boys, the data revealed that boys were sent twice as often to a reading specialist, even though the evaluation results show that there was no difference between the girls' and boys' skills at the beginning and in the middle of Elementary 1.



There was no difference in examination results among boys and girls at the beginning or in the middle of Elementary 1. A difference appeared in favour of girls at the end of Elementary 1, but only in writing. One year later, at the end of Elementary 2, there was a difference in both reading and writing. In this respect, it appears that concern for boys' success should begin in Elementary 1.

According to the researchers, special attention should be paid to writing among boys, not only as a means of expression, but also in evaluation contexts in which they must answer comprehension questions in writing.

Girls were sent less often to a reading specialist, despite the fact that test results did not indicate a difference in boys' and girls' reading skills. According to the researchers, it would be important to consider whether at-risk girls are receiving the same services as at-risk boys.

IS MOTIVATION AN IMPORTANT FACTOR?

Motivation is often associated with reading success in elementary and secondary school. It appears that, in Elementary Cycle One, students are all motivated to learn to read. Motivation is not an indicator of who will succeed. At this level, therefore, motivation does not appear to be a protective factor. It has a far greater impact in Cycles Two and Three.

Although it is important to develop students' motivation to read, according to the researchers, in terms of prevention in Elementary Cycle One, it is more important to invest time and energy in the development of reading skills.

The ability of Elementary Cycle One students to learn to read is influenced by factors other than the students' own characteristics. It is also influenced by the teaching received.

The quality of teaching, the teaching method and its adaptation were studied in reading situations in Elementary 1 over a period of slightly more than a year using an observation checklist based on criteria identified in recent studies on exemplary teaching at the elementary level. These criteria involve the general classroom atmosphere, the students' level of commitment, the teaching of word identification and reading comprehension strategies, teacher-student interaction* and classroom management.

THE MOST EFFECTIVE TEACHING METHODS AND STRATEGIES

Quality teaching appears to favour students' progress. At-risk students in classes with better quality teaching made more progress in writing and phonological awareness and obtained better results at the end of Elementary 1. Also, those who made the most progress had teachers who promoted student involvement in tasks, interacted in a positive manner with students and had a good classroom management style. It therefore appears that quality teaching in the classroom favours students' progress. This applies only, however, to Elementary 1, since the data do not show the same relationship in Elementary 2.

* The sample for this study consisted only of teachers.

In this study, the combination of certain teaching methods favoured the progress of at-risk students. Teachers whose students made the most progress used a teaching method combining demonstration, explanation and support. They explained to the students how to perform a task (explanation), then showed them how by doing it themselves or by stating the steps involved (demonstration). In addition, they supported, assisted and supervised the students as they attempted to perform the task (support).

Furthermore, it appears that the least effective methods are those that emphasize instructions, i.e. in which the teacher gives the students abstract information or instructions without explaining them, and those that use closed questions, i.e. in which the teacher asks the students questions but is only interested in specific short answers. Concrete teaching (which combines demonstration, explanation and support) appears to be a protective factor against reading failure.

According to this study, it appears that Elementary 1 teachers rarely adapt their teaching to their students' needs. The impact of such adaptation on student success remains to be seen.

According to the researchers, the most competent teachers should be teaching Elementary 1. Expert teachers are essential in Elementary 1.

The researchers also state that Elementary 1 students considered at risk of experiencing reading difficulties need a teacher who uses a teaching style that combines demonstration and assistance.

READING SPECIALISTS

When we compare the strategies of regular teachers and reading specialists, we notice that, contrary to what one would expect, reading specialists do not spend more time teaching reading strategies than regular teachers. However, the general atmosphere is more pleasant with a reading specialist than in the classroom, and there is more adult-student interaction. The types of interaction do not appear to differ from those in the classroom and there appears to be more of a variety of teaching materials in the classroom. Contrary to what one would expect, teachers make use of a far wider range of books than do reading specialists.

Students who receive better teaching from a reading specialist, however, make more progress than those who receive inferior quality teaching.

Students who were sent to a reading specialist in Elementary 1 were truly those who were most in need. Students who were the weakest in September and who received these services, however, were still the weakest at the end of the year. The services received did not succeed in closing the gap between students who received the services of a reading specialist and those who did not. The same holds true in Elementary 2. At-risk students sent to a reading specialist were still weaker than at-risk students who were not. It is therefore difficult to state that the services of a reading specialist, as provided in the schools under study, is a protective factor.

Like teaching quality, the quality of services provided by a reading specialist is crucial for at-risk students. In the researchers' view, it is important that these students be assigned to the reading specialists with the most experience.

The researchers state that reading specialist services should be reviewed in order to better meet the needs of at-risk students.



PARENTS' INFLUENCE

Literacy practices in families of at-risk Elementary Cycle One students who succeed appear to differ considerably from those of at-risk students in the same cycle who have difficulties. Families of successful Elementary 1 students read more often at home and took more pleasure in reading and writing. Parents of good readers encouraged their children to read and write at home.

There was also a difference with regard to the number of children's books in the home: Elementary 1 students who successfully learned to read and write had more books at home. This has nothing to do with socioeconomic level, since all the families participating in the study were middle-class.

The number of adult books at home and the use of library services are not indicators of who will successfully learn to read and write.

The number of children's books at home, however, appears to be a protective factor.

At the end of Elementary 1, weaker students had more difficulty doing homework at home. They were more likely to refuse to do their homework, complain, put off doing the work, and be distracted and frustrated. They had twice as many problems as average students. They took considerably more time than their average counterparts to do their homework and required more adult assistance. Parents cited more behavioural problems among boys than girls with respect to homework. The difference between average and at-risk students was also apparent in Elementary 2.

Parents who provided their children with support, assistance and supervision with their Elementary 1 homework helped them make progress, particularly in the case of at-risk students. They behaved in a similar manner with both boys and girls.

According to the researchers, campaigns promoting reading can stimulate parents and get them to encourage their children to read at home.

Parents of at-risk students especially need the proper tools to help their children. The school should provide them with the necessary support. The researchers suggest setting up workshops or meetings to provide parents with information about how to help their children at home.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm the importance of prevention among students at risk of experiencing difficulties in learning to read. Teaching strategies must be developed for these students at the beginning of Elementary 1, otherwise their difficulties will persist until the end of Elementary Cycle One, or beyond.

The researchers emphasize the importance of providing special assistance for Elementary 1 teachers in the form of teaching, support and professional development materials. This assistance, however, does not appear to be as crucial for Elementary 2 teachers.

They add that reading specialist services, as they are currently dispensed to Elementary 1 students, are not a protective factor. In their opinion, the conditions in which reading specialists dispense their services do not allow them to make a considerable impact on student success.

Methodology

Eight schools participated in the study, including 21 Elementary 1 teachers (2000-2001), 19 Elementary 2 teachers (2001-2002) and 7 reading specialists (2000-2002). At the beginning of Elementary 1, 81 at-risk and 84 average students were identified. They were observed and evaluated until the end of Elementary 2. All 442 of the students were evaluated collectively at the beginning and end of Elementary 1 and 2.

Data was gathered through direct observation in the classroom, using booklets in which the teachers and reading specialists noted all of their reading activities for two ten-day periods each year, as well as questionnaires filled out at the end of each year. The parents of the target students filled out questionnaires about homework, their relations with the school and their literacy practices. Several of them participated in filmed homework and classroom sessions.



The document is available at the following Web site:
www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/publications/menu-rapports.htm

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