The Effectiveness of Laubach Way to Reading When Used with High School Students Diagnosed with Cognitive and Behavioral Disorders

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INTRODUCTION
Interest in the Laubach Way to Reading (LWR) series developed naturally from first author Charles Johnson’s teaching experience. While Charles was working as a secondary special education teacher and simultaneously on his master’s degree, he began teaching a high school student with learning difficulties who was pregnant, nearing graduation, and had struggled with reading throughout her school years. She told Charles that she wanted to learn to read well enough to read children’s books to her baby. Charles asked his professor what he could use to help this student and was referred to LWR, a reading series published by New Reader’s Press, the publishing division of ProLiteracy. He followed the prescribed direct instruction teaching methods while using the workbooks with this student. By the time she graduated the following spring, she was reading at a sixth-grade level for the first time. This experience so moved Charles that he decided to explore the use and effectiveness of LWR with struggling high school student readers for his master’s degree thesis (Johnson, 2006). This paper summarizes the results of that study.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
Students who have been diagnosed with learning difficulties also typically struggle with learning to read (Lerner, 1985) which can lead to academic failure, personal problems, and behavior problems (Polloway & Smith, 1982). Lyon (1996) and Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) suggest that approximately 5% of the total public school population suffers from at least one learning disability, and roughly 80% of that group has a primary deficit in reading. Additionally, Snow et al. estimate that half of all students who receive special education services have learning disabilities. Similarly, the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that “more than eight million students in grades 4–12” struggle with reading (as cited in Fisher & Ivey, 2006, p. 180). Another estimate by Jacobs (2008) suggests that perhaps six million adolescents are being “left behind academically” and are thus “disadvantaged” when entering the job market (p. 8). If reading deficiencies continue into high school, students are more likely to become discipline problems and eventually drop out (Fisher & Ivey, 2006; Montgomery & Rossi, 1994). Fuchs (2009) wrote that in “2007 one quarter of students with learning disabilities dropped out of school” and that “only 46% of students with learning disabilities had regular paid employment within two years of leaving school” (paragraph 70).

It almost goes without saying that the transition from adolescence to adulthood, from high school to the workplace, is potentially disastrous if one still cannot read. How does a functionally illiterate person enter adult society? The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2003) estimated...
that roughly 30 million adults in the U.S. are deficient in reading skills (http://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp). Hall (2005) reports an estimated annual high school graduation rate in the U.S. of approximately 68%. Hall argues, though, that the percentage is uncertain due to a lack of uniformity and accuracy in reporting graduation rates across states. Eisen (2003) suggests that up to 60% of manufacturers could not keep up with demand without a more literate workforce. In 2009, Deloitte Consulting, in association with Oracle and The Manufacturing Institute, estimated a continuing 32% shortage of literate, highly skilled workers to meet the demands of production management and consumer satisfaction (The Manufacturing Institute, 2009). According to ProLiteracy, 30 million U.S. adults (14% of the adult population) can only read at a 5th-grade level or lower. An additional 63 million people over age 16—29% of the country’s adult population—don’t read well enough to understand a newspaper story written at the eighth-grade level. Also, more than 65% of state and federal prison inmates can be classified as low literate (http://www.proliteracy.org/page.aspx?pid=345). While one might quibble over some numerical discrepancies across the national spectrum, the general assessment of literacy in the U.S. presents a rather grim landscape.

Providing reading instruction for high school students with reading disabilities is a “moral obligation” (Hinchman, 2008, p. 12) that poses a unique challenge. Typically these students experience significant difficulty reading books targeted at their age or grade level and are only capable of reading books designed for more immature students. It can be very discouraging, even demeaning, for a high school student to be relegated to reading “baby books” (Knight, 1998). Most initial reading curricula are written for primary-grade students. There is common agreement, however, on the importance of “reading to learn” in academic and life success. We agree with Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) that students who struggle with reading are complex individuals who have a right to be literate, to be cared for educationally, and not to be subjected to stereotyping.

The state of literacy in the U.S. and this moral commitment to educate have inspired national efforts to understand and remedy disparities in reading achievement. For example, the National Research Council (NRC) (Snow et al., 1998) identified areas critical to early success in reading; the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) developed evidence-based recommendations for improving reading instruction; the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) required all children to become proficient in reading; and Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education in the Obama administration, announced a $100 million federal investment in reading comprehension research on June 16, 2010 (Duncan, 2010, June 16). Starting in 1983 with the wide attention given to A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), there have been national efforts to increase reading achievement in schools in support of life-long reading. Secretary Duncan’s 2010 focus on reading comprehension demonstrated that literacy remains central to national policies for educational reform. Achieving increases in literacy (reading success) with adolescents (and with students with learning disabilities) is not an intractable problem despite there being no commonly agreed upon solution or curriculum.

The meta-analysis of experimental and quasi-experimental studies discussed in the NRP Report (2000) emphasized instructional approaches organized into general categories of reading proficiency: phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, fluency, and comprehension (vocabulary and text). While the NRP study specified evidence-based approaches to reading improvement covering grades K–12, Roberts, Torgesen, Boardman, and Scammacca (2008) argue that older struggling readers with learning disabilities are less in need of phonics instruction and more in need of “word study” and “motivation” integrated with fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (p. 64). Their case is made even stronger in the face of the NRP’s admission that, at least with respect to vocabulary instruction, studies were not considered “if they dealt exclusively with learning disabled or other special populations” (p. 14). Roberts et al. say that adolescence “is not too late to intervene” to get students reading on grade level (p. 68). Yet, despite the clarity and appeal of their “elements of effective instruction for older students with LD in reading” (p. 68) listed above, there does not seem to be an abundance of middle and high school age-appropriate reading instruction. Kotula (2003) indicated as much several years earlier, as has Jacobs (2008) more recently. Beyond the sixth grade, adolescent students who haven’t learned to read well enough to be successful in school do not have what they need: materials at the appropriate reading level that capture student interest.

This summary shows that adolescents who struggle with reading are the face of an issue that demands attention.
Teachers need materials and instructional training with age-appropriate curricula so they can make a difference. It was in this context that we identified LWR as having a curriculum appropriate for secondary students, since it is directly focused on reading skill development but is written for adults. The purpose of this study, then, is to investigate the effectiveness of the LWR curriculum with high school students who have learning difficulties.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design**

We used a design with both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Two high school classes participated; there were 39 students in the first and 29 in the second. We pretested both classes with the Scholastic Reading Inventory® (SRI). Then we used the LWR curriculum for two semesters with each class. At the end of the study, we used the SRI again in a post-test. In addition, for the second class we collected data from a questionnaire, random student interviews, student reflections, and teacher observations to explore participants’ perceptions regarding the reading intervention.

**Setting**

We conducted the study at a high school in a medium-sized city in the Midwest. Enrollment for the 2005-2006 academic year was more than 1,500. The high school had the highest dropout rate in the district (6.95%), the highest poverty rate (45.9%), the highest minority population (21%), and the highest mobility rate (45.1%). It also had the lowest attendance rate (90.8%). Most of the 225 special education students at the school read below grade level. Seventy-two percent of the students involved in our study qualified for free or reduced lunch.

Study participants were in basic English special education classes where a direct instruction teaching strategy was employed daily. Class sizes typically were kept to a minimum (under 20) in order to meet the goals and objectives of each student’s individualized education plan (IEP). Most classes consisted of a special education teacher and a paraprofessional. It should be noted that university practicum students and pre-service teachers generally participated in instruction and quite often acted as observers; they did participate in the English classes during this study. The teacher to student ratio during the study was approximately 2:15.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Disability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Learning disability in reading or reading comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Intellectual disability</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Emotional disturbance or behavioral disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Speech or language disorder</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Traumatic brain injury</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Other health impairment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Participants**

A total of 68 students were involved in the study, 39 during the 2004-2005 academic year and 29 in 2005-06. See Table 1 for a list of their disabilities. All 68 students had specific deficits in recognition and reading comprehension as documented in each student’s IEP. Table 2 shows the gender and racial makeup of the two cohorts.

We randomly selected five students from the second group to interview. All five participated in a pre-intervention interview, and four of them participated in the post-intervention interview. One student moved before the study was completed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Native American</td>
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<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Independent Variable

The independent variable in this study was direct instruction (DI) in reading using LWR. LWR was developed for adults with little or no reading experience. The series uses a small-group direct teaching approach to the systematic development of basic reading and writing skills. The curriculum consists of four skill books that progress in difficulty. A Teacher’s Edition at each skill level gives complete lesson plans. Each 30-45 minute lesson includes vocabulary development, phonetic analysis of words, structural analysis of words, a reading passage, comprehension questions, and writing prompts. Lessons follow a scripted, explicit, and systematic progression that structures the student’s learning experience. Reading and writing difficulty gradually increase in review lessons, stories, and homework. Teachers stay alert to errors and correct them immediately. A certified ProLiteracy trainer introduced the curriculum to all teachers, paraprofessionals, and practicum students who participated in the study.

Direct instruction (DI) is defined as “teaching essential reading skills in the most effective and efficient manner possible through repeated practice and systematic instruction” (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 2004, p. 4). Longitudinal research indicates that intense direct instruction in reading for students with disabilities increases the likelihood of reading acquisition and mastery (Chard & Osborn, 1999; Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1994). Both Bock, Stebbins, and Proper (1977) and Watkins (1997) argue that DI is superior to 12 other models in teaching basic reading and math skills. Darch, Gersten, and Taylor (1987) and Kozioff, LaNunziata, Cowardin, and Bessellieu (2000) reported that students who receive DI have higher graduation rates, lower dropout rates, and higher entrance rates into college.

Gersten (1985) listed the areas of DI that distinguish it from other approaches: “(a) the explicit teaching of the ‘general case’ problem-solving strategies whenever possible; (b) an emphasis on small-group instruction as opposed to students working alone; (c) a systematic technology of correction procedures; (d) principles for cumulative review of previously learned material; and (e) insistence on mastery of each step in the learning process” (p. 42). Gersten (as cited in Tarver, 1986) also indicated that “DI reading and language programs consistently produce higher academic gains than traditional approaches in both mainstreamed settings and self-contained classrooms across a range of handicapping conditions” (p. 373). According to Tarver, DI produced significant participant gains in word recognition, reading comprehension, reading speed, and spelling when compared to eclectic reading programs. Tarver also argued for using DI “in build[ing] effective instructional programs for learning disabled students at the secondary level” (p. 37). Grossen (2004) reported practical significant gains with DI in reading with at-risk middle school students. DI in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, guided oral reading, comprehension, and computer-based reading is considered most effective for students with disabilities (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002).

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in our study was reading achievement as measured by the Scholastic Reading Inventory® and the Lexile Framework® for Reading. Each participant in Cohort 1 took a written test before and after the study; Cohort 2 took the same tests on computers (the computer-based assessment was not available until 2005).

The Lexile Framework® for Reading is a system that measures both texts and student reading ability using the same metric, or Lexile (L). For example, when we know both a text’s Lexile measure and a reader’s Lexile measure, we can estimate that reader’s success or failure with that text. SRI results are reported as scaled scores from beginning reader (less than 100L) to advanced (1500L) (Scholastic, Inc., 2001, p. 11).

The SRI computer-based assessment is an “objective assessment of a student’s comprehension level” (Knutson, 2006, p. 1). Each student in the second cohort was assigned a testing station in the computer laboratory for individual assessment. Specific skills measured were silent reading comprehension, finding the main idea, using context clues to find meaning, understanding vocabulary, and understanding the sequence of events. These skills all aligned to specific objectives in LWR Books 1-4. Each student began testing by taking a reading interest inventory offered by the software publisher. After completing the inventory, the students read directions and passages silently and answered comprehension questions. The skill level required for reading passages in the computer-based SRI begins low and progresses as the student takes the test. A typical student spent 20 minutes testing, but more advanced students took longer because the computer-adaptive program increased in difficulty to match the students’ reading levels.
After finishing the test, students received personalized lists of reading material based on their interests and their measured reading levels. The teacher received a printout showing each student’s Lexile® score and test results.

We measured participants’ attitudes toward recreational and academic reading with pre- and post-learning questionnaires adapted from McKenna & Kear (1990). The teacher read the first questionnaire aloud, and students answered each question by marking a response on a five-point Likert scale. Questions included “I like getting books as presents” (recreational) and “I like reading my school books” (academic). The teacher planned to read the second questionnaire aloud as well, but the students were able to read all the questions on their own by then, and they marked their own choices. We scored the questionnaire by totaling the combined responses for recreational and academic reading.

**Qualitative Data Collection Procedures**

We videotaped the short, structured pre- and post-intervention interviews with the randomly selected participants from Cohort 2. Each interview lasted about seven minutes. We designed the interview questions to briefly explore the interaction of reading interest, feelings about reading, and reading experiences:

- How do you feel about reading books?
- What kind of help would you like?
- What is the hardest part about reading?
- Tell me about what it is like when you read by yourself?
- Do you feel good about yourself when you read?

Teacher observations and reflections were recorded in a double entry journal. We also collected written student reflections on how LWR had impacted them.

**Data Analysis**

We hypothesized that using the LWR method would result in statistically significant gains in comprehension test scores from before and after the intervention. In addition, we hypothesized that student attitudes toward recreational and academic reading would improve significantly. We entered the data into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, ver. 11.0) software. Then we calculated descriptive statistics for the SRI scores and the attitude survey and did paired-sample t-tests to look for any statistically significant differences ($p < .05$). We also did a chi-square test for Cohort 2, since $n$ was less than 30.

We performed an inductive analysis (Gay & Airasian, 2003) on the teacher-directed student interviews and observations. The analyst worked with the actual interview recordings rather than verbatim transcripts, transcribing relevant passages. The interviewer took notes during the interviews and we analyzed those in conjunction with repeated viewing of the interviews themselves. We cross-referenced interview data with the journal and observation entries. Insights from this informal analysis were integrated with student reflections and organized into a narrative expressing central student and teacher experiences.

**RESULTS**

In the quantitative part of the study, the SRI post-test showed a big improvement in Lexile scores for both cohorts (see Table 3). However, differences in scores on the attitude questionnaires were not statistically significant.

Paired-sample $t$-testing showed that post-intervention scores on the SRI for Cohort 1 ($n = 39$) were significantly higher than pre-intervention scores ($t(38) = 5.95$, $p < .001$). For Cohort 2 ($n = 29$) the results were similar: post-intervention scores were again significantly higher than pre-intervention scores ($t(28) = 3.93$, $p < .001$).

Because Cohort 2 had fewer than 30 students, we also calculated a chi-square goodness of fit for that group and found a statistically significant positive deviation from no gain ($\chi^2 (1) = 5.828$, $p < .05$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Cohort 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-test</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Pre-test</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$ (SD)</td>
<td>557.95L (317.79)</td>
<td>684.14L (358.78)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post-test</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>707.08L (329.75)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain Score</td>
<td>149.13L (329.75)</td>
<td>786.66L (317.81)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gain Score</strong></td>
<td>102.52L</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Our qualitative analysis included pre- and post-intervention interviews, student self-reflections, and teacher reflections. In the discussion below, all names are pseudonyms and all passages from interviews and student writing are verbatim.

Three major strands emerged from the qualitative data: increased self-confidence, increased motivation to read, and increased desire to learn to read better. Academic behaviors changed positively. We observed actual reading improvements. Additionally, the students we interviewed felt that instruction in reading using LWR was more helpful than what they had experienced in the past. They felt that the instruction made a significant impact on both their learning and their lives. Finally, teachers and staff remained motivated throughout and indicated that they cared more about teaching reading when they used the LWR method.

Interviews
The analysis revealed that the students became increasingly aware of their own reading deficits and that their improvement in reading was directly linked to reading instruction. For example, Kerri said in the first interview that she wanted help with “saying my Ls and Rs and hard-to-pronounce words.” After the intervention, she responded “Nothing” to the same question. After instruction in LWR, Kerri’s SRI score improved from 472 to 731 (from second- to fifth-grade level). Not only was this a major shift for Kerri, but she also developed an expanded sense of herself as a reader. Cameron, a student diagnosed with autism, indicated that he wanted help with “the ways of pronunciation” in his first interview. In the post-intervention interview, he gave a much more elaborate response, identifying “segmenting, blending, part of speech, and orthography: How the letters come together. Whenever the letters come together. Whenever letters make sounds that don’t pronounce. Help with bigger words and how nouns come together, spelling and pronunciation” (Johnson, 2006, p. 56). The detail Cameron provided about his continuing needs is extraordinary and shows increased self-awareness that fuels improvement in reading beyond what he was taught with LWR. His SRI scores improved from 822 to 895 (sixth to upper seventh grade).

When asked what type of reader they were, students shifted their perceptions from negative to positive. Kerri went from having no favorite books to saying “I’m the best reader. I feel good about myself when I read good, I like reading books.” Kyle indicated that he liked books in the first interview. In the second interview he mentioned that he now pursues chapter books: “I read some chapter books now like Harry Potter”. Kyle had also talked at the beginning of the class about how embarrassed he was when he read in front of others. He wanted to be a better reader. After instruction he said: “I feel good about reading. In a bad situation I read. It makes me a lot better, it makes me feel good”). Like Kyle and Kerri, the other students’ feelings about reading, whether at home or at school, changed for the better.

Student Reflections
Fifteen students in the second group completed self-reflections midway through the year, and 13 of those completed self-reflections in May as well. They responded to the prompt, “How Laubach Way to Reading (LWR) has impacted me.” Analysis of this data indicated that students understood the importance of learning how to read, that they were aware of their own reading deficits, and that improving upon those deficits was directly linked to effective reading instruction.

Monique wrote about the importance of learning how to read.

It has help me spell better. I can read at a normal level and I am starting learn how to read a lit faster. ... I think that LWR has really impacted my life. The day before in reading I read a whole page very good I was happy with myself for reading that much I think that LWR has really impacted my life because I can read better than I did before.

Monique measured her own reading success by how well she read passages. To read a whole page with few or no mistakes was significant to her. There is a growing self-confidence in her words – she wrote that she was “happy” with herself and that she was performing at a more “normal” level. Such sentiment strongly suggests that she was aware of improvements over the school year that she had not experienced before. She attributes her success to instruction in LWR.
At the end of the year, John wrote:

LWR has impacted my reading ways that I can’t explain with words. I used not be able to read hard words but now I can. I’m reading bigger books than I used two. Now that I started this program I’ve extended my reading harder and longer. I’m reading books that I wouldn’t even imagine reading.

John felt that he had enriched his reading skills. It seems a door opened for him that stimulated his imagination and led him to work harder and learn more. His attitude and self-perception about his reading ability changed dramatically. The fact that John can now express himself in writing is significant because he, like many other students with reading difficulties, also experienced writing difficulties.

Rodrigo related his reading achievements to his future aspirations:

I have read a little better than when I first started school. I think it will help me more if I keep doing it. I hope it helps so I can go to college that way I can be something in my life. LWR is a good way to help people be a better reader in their life. Thank you Mr. Johnson for helping me to be a good reader and you are kind to do this for us. Thank you.

Rodrigo’s self-reflection clearly attributed his reading success to LWR and to his teacher. The fact that he wanted to go to college and be “something better in [his] life” shows the importance he now placed on reading. Rodrigo stated that his teacher “was kind to do this for us.” He recognized that the teacher’s kindness was a part of the instructional process and was central to his success. He identified himself as a better reader and connected that to his teacher’s caring and instructional approach. Rodrigo zeroed in on core ingredients for good teaching and learning: student recognition of the teacher’s concern for student development integrated with subject knowledge.

Students became motivated and came to care more about their own and other’s reading improvement. Nikki wrote:

LWR has impacted my reading a lot. I can read better than before. I think I have improved a lot in that sort of thing. I can read much better and I am not afraid to read out loud. I have notice that is helping some of my friends Reading ability too. I really do think LWR is a good solution to help people with their reading disability. I think that it can not only improve your reading but improve your speech to.

Seemingly, Nikki was motivated to read better not just through her own success, but also because of the successes and opinions of her peers. Nikki’s recognition that she needed help was important for her self-advocacy. That she was successful in spite of her learning disability adds immeasurably to her motivation and self-esteem. Nikki’s comments also suggest a maturing attitude toward reading: caring for the accomplishments of others as well as one’s own.

Teaching these students using LWR methods made a significant positive impact on their reading. The fact that they recognized their own reading successes and difficulties in relation to their disabilities showed that they genuinely cared about improving not only in school but also in life. This was not an attitude they presented at the beginning of LWR reading instruction. The students wrote of increases in self-understanding and becoming motivated to succeed. Reading success and the accompanying recognition of their need for help enhanced the ability of these students to self-monitor and supported their academic gains. The students took more responsibility for their learning than they had before, were more motivated, and cared more about improving their reading. Their perceptions of themselves as readers shifted from negative to positive. Further, the data indicate that although these students recognized their disabilities, they also realized that they could overcome them. They wrote of hope; for some, it was hope for the first time. Harry wrote, “I think it (LWR instruction) is making me read good.” Josh, a junior with learning disabilities in multiple areas, initially commented to the teacher, “No one has been able to teach me since kindergarten. What makes you think you can teach me?” Josh’s initial SRI score was a 0 (beginning reader level) but it improved to 295 (second grade level). Josh still struggles in all of his classes but he is now passing. He hopes to go to college on a wrestling scholarship.
Teacher observations

In their observations and reflections, teachers highlighted aspects such as on-task performance and a reduction in disruptive behavior. They also noted reading improvements. They recorded such observations and reflections throughout the study. The successes the teachers experienced led them to become increasingly invested in teaching reading to these students. One paraprofessional commented that she was “pleased to be part of the training.” Another said she “felt important” as a result of being trained to help these students. A third said, “Our students can actually read things in the halls when they need to, like tardy forms when they are tardy, and be accountable now. They used to hide their illiteracy by being disruptive and getting into trouble on purpose instead of telling an adult ‘Man, I can’t read!’”

Discussion

The qualitative data indicate that student and staff attitudes toward reading improved with instruction in LWR. Overall, when given the right tools, these students with cognitive and behavioral disorders took responsibility for their own learning, became motivated, and cared about bettering themselves. These results suggest that improvements in reading fluency and comprehension with older students diagnosed with learning and behavioral disabilities are possible and meaningful to both students and teachers.

In U.S. society, reading and academic success are generally related to identity development and motivation to learn when young. This study demonstrates that—when working with adolescents—we can improve the teaching and learning of specific reading skills such as comprehension and fluency. Direct instruction, when coupled with caring teachers and expanded access to reading material at the right developmental level, can help students build meaningful relationships with text.

Santa (2006) sculpts a vision for adolescent literacy that encompasses

- improved relationships and community in the classroom
- direct instruction coupled with “teacher modeling”
- increased student self-awareness of how they learn best to enhance metacognition
- integration of such literacy instruction into subject matter instruction.

The gains we have observed using DI and LWR with students who have disabilities are consistent with literacy practices like those proposed by Santa. In addition, Santa’s emphasis on teaching more from the heart to reach individual students is consistent with what we have seen regarding the central role that caring for student learning has played in improving students’ reading. Caring, relevant materials, and teacher expertise have also been singled out by Parris and Block (2007) as essential elements for improving adolescent literacy. Time and again, students in this study said it was the teacher who cared that kept them going.

LWR targets reading skills. What we observed but did not document nor make part of this study was the spreading effect of reading success back in the regular classroom. While we suspect that metacognition, increases in confidence, and specific reading skill improvements helped these students learn the secondary curriculum, we don’t know to what extent these gains supported other complex learning. We do strongly suspect that, for students who have learning disabilities, reading gains made through DI and structured reading skill development are compatible with other programs that emphasize creative use of graphic organizers, task analysis, and other flexible strategies to support complex content learning (Baker, Gersten, & Scanlon, 2002).

That we spend so much time in school trying to engage students in specific subject matter areas like science, mathematics, and literature but still see many adolescents lacking basic skills and remaining uninspired is a major academic problem. We agree with Hinchman (2008) that future research should “help us understand and even celebrate details of older youth’s literacy practices” (p. 28). What we need now is in-depth work to investigate the dynamic integration of reading skill development and subject matter learning in settings with struggling adolescent readers and caring teachers (Noddings, 1992).

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