

Effects of the Reading First Program on Acquisition of Early Literacy Skills

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated effects of the Reading First program on first grade students' literacy acquisition as measured by the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). A matching procedure was used for three Reading First schools and three non-Reading First schools in two rural schools districts in Louisiana. The results showed that first grade Reading First students had better performances in reading than non-Reading First students at the beginning of the school year. However, differences in the adjusted means of DIBELS subtests (Nonsense Word Fluency and Oral Reading Fluency) were not statistically significant at the end of the school year. Also, all of the first graders in both Reading First and non-Reading First schools demonstrated significant gains in reading skills. As school districts required non-Reading First schools to implement some Reading First components in reading instruction, the findings indicated that Reading First practices, which were based on scientifically based reading research, helped produce positive reading outcomes in both Reading First and non-Reading First classrooms.

The development of early literacy skills of young children, with or without disabilities, has raised national concern (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). In 1997, Congress mandated the National Reading Panel (the NRP or the Panel). The NRP was charged to assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read (National Reading Panel, 2000). In response to this Congressional mandate to identify key skills and methods essential to reading achievement, the NRP issued a report in 2000 (National Reading Panel, 2000). The Panel reviewed more than 100,000 research studies on reading, citing five key areas of reading instruction that needed to be emphasized: (a) phonemic awareness, (b) phonics, (c) fluency, (d) vocabulary, and (e) text comprehension. These five critical areas of reading instruction were incorporated into the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the Reading First (RF) initiative as essential components of effective reading instruction (Learning Point Associates, 2004).

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and Reading First Initiative

Reading First (RF) was authorized under Title I, Part B, Subpart 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (Center for Child Development, 2006). The U.S. Department of Education (ED) (2002) stated that the RF program is the academic cornerstone of NCLB. It is the largest and most focused early reading initiative that the United States of America has undertaken in history.

RF is designed to close the achievement gaps between different groups of students by ensuring that more children receive effective reading instruction in the early grades (Center for Child Development, 2006). The purpose of the RF program is to ensure all children learn to read fluently by the end of third grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), thereby ensuring that every student can read at or above grade level by grade 4. This goal was established because children who are not proficient readers by the end of fourth grade are not likely to be proficient readers in their lifetime (Learning Point Associates, 2004). As a result, it is more constructive to ensure that students are good readers in the primary grades than to provide remedial reading instruction in higher grades. The RF initiative provides guidance on several key elements, which can be thought of as four “pillars” of an effective reading program (Learning Point Associates, 2004). The four pillars are: (a) valid and reliable assessments, (b) instructional programs and aligned materials, (c) aligned professional development, and (d) dynamic instructional leadership.

This study investigated effects of the RF program on acquisition of early literacy skills of young readers. First grade student reading performances in RF schools were compared with those in non-RF using Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) subtests. The subtests were Letter Naming Fluency (LNF), Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF), Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF), and Oral Reading Fluency (ORF). Specifically, differences in mean scores of the DIBELS Fall Benchmark Assessment and differences in mean scores of the DIBELS Spring Benchmark Assessment, between first grade students in the RF schools and those in the non-RF

schools were investigated. Additionally, we wanted to know whether children in RF schools have higher gains in early literacy skills than those in non-RF schools as measured by DIBELS and whether RF is effective in helping children to acquire reading skills.

Methodology

The study was quasi-experimental with a nonequivalent control group pretest-posttest. The pretests consisted of two DIBELS subtests administered during the Fall Benchmark Assessment in School Year 2007-08: Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF), and Non-sense Word Fluency (NWF), and one subtest administered in winter 2007: Oral Reading Fluency (ORF). The subtests administered in the Spring Benchmark Assessment were used as posttests. The first graders in the three Reading First (RF) schools served as the experimental group, whereas students in the three non-Reading First (non-RF) schools served as the control group.

A matching procedure was used for the schools in the research design. The RF schools and non-RF schools had similar demographics and school performance scores. The demographics included geographical location of the school districts, free or reduced lunch percentage, socio-economic status, and ethnicity of the school population. The sample consisted of 130 first grade students from three RF schools and 153 first grade students from three non-RF schools.

Reading Instruction in RF and Non-RF Schools

RF schools. The RF school district adopted *SRA/McGraw-Hill Open Court* in 2005. The daily reading instruction and intervention were based on a three-tiered reading model. The 130 first grade RF students received 120 minutes of core reading instruction every day in inclusive classrooms where the whole group and small group instruction were delivered. During the small group instructional time, the students worked at reading centers, where differentiated instruction was delivered to each student in all 5 areas of reading instruction.

Moreover, the RF schools had a 30-minute intervention block on their daily schedule. The students who were at grade level worked on reading enrichment activities while the teacher provided intervention for Tier 2 students who needed strategic intervention. The students identified as at-risk in the DIBELS subtests received 30 minutes of intensive intervention from the reading interventionist or paraprofessional in the inclusive classroom during this intervention block. Each group consisted of 3 students. The *Voyager Passport* was used as a supplementary reading program for intensive intervention. All lessons were scripted and presented by paraprofessionals who were trained by the publisher to deliver the intervention. The Tier 3 students received another 30 minutes of intervention from the interventionist or paraprofessional during the day in the reading lab.

The reading coach and reading interventionist administered the DIBELS Ongoing Progress Monitoring (OPM) every three weeks to determine whether a student was responding adequately to intervention. The OPM was brief DIBELS measures. The information from these assessments was used to create a progress chart recording the reading performance of a student. The Florida Center for Reading Research (2006) recommended that if a particular student was not demonstrating adequate progress as determined by the aim line of OPM, the teacher modified the instruction in the student's reading program to accelerate reading achievement.

Non-RF schools. The non-RF school district used the *Scott Foresman Reading Program*. The district changed its reading instructional strategies within the past three years, from whole group to small group instruction. Reading centers were incorporated into the reading block. Before School Year (SY) 2007-08, 160 minutes were utilized for reading and English Language Arts/Writing instruction. In SY 2007-08, the school district adopted some RF practices in its non-RF schools. Core reading instruction was extended to 120 minutes for Reading and Spelling and 30 minutes for ELA/Writing. DIBELS was used to identify instructional needs of the students.

Non-RF schools also followed the three-tiered instructional model. The school district trained its paraprofessionals to become interventionists. Two non-RF schools participating in this study utilized paraprofessionals to provide 30 minutes of intervention to the Tier 2 students who needed strategic intervention. The non-RF schools also used *Voyager Passport* as their supplementary reading program. Students identified as at-risk received two 30-minute intensive intervention sessions from their classroom teacher. In this way, they had 60 minutes of reading intervention a day.

The district assigned one reading coach to provide professional development for classroom teachers in the non-RF schools. The certified teachers in non-RF schools administered the OPM every two weeks to students who needed strategic and intensive intervention. The district reading coordinator led an assessment team to conduct the DIBELS benchmark assessments three times a year.

Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study was Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), 6th Edition (Good & Kaminski, 2002). DIBELS contains various subtests to measure the reading abilities of students (Moats, 2003). In this study, four first grade DIBELS subtests were examined: (a) LNF, (b) PSF, (c) NWF, and (d) ORF. These subtests were chosen because individualized instructional recommendations were based on the subtest scores and the risk status of the students.

Letter Naming Fluency

Moats (2003) stated that Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) is a powerful indicator of risk for reading failure. Students are presented with a random mixed of uppercase and lowercase letters and asked to name them as many as they can within one minute. The

lowest 20% in a district are at high risk for failing to achieve literacy benchmarks, whereas the group scores between the 20th and 40th percentiles are at some risk.

Phoneme Segmentation Fluency

Phonemic Segmentation Fluency (PSF) is a direct evaluation of phonemic awareness (Moats, 2003). Moats asserted that by the end of kindergarten, most children can separate and pronounce the sounds of a three-phoneme syllable. Those who cannot may be exhibiting phonological processing difficulties, which is a warning sign for reading difficulty. The examiner gives the student a word or syllable with three or four phonemes and asks the student to say the individual sounds that make up the word. For example, the examiner says “sat” and the student says /s/ /a/ /t/. The score is the number of correct phonemes produced in one minute.

Nonsense Word Fluency

Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) is a standardized, individually administered assessment of the alphabetic principle (Moats, 2003). This subtest measures a child’s ability to link letters with sounds and use that knowledge to decode three-letter syllables that form nonsense words. In this subtest, the child reads randomly ordered VC and CVC words. The child receives credit for producing individual sounds or the correct pronunciation of the word. For example, the examiner will give the child credit for reading “raj” as a whole word or for saying /r/ /a/ /j/ in isolation.

Oral Reading Fluency

Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) is a standardized, individually administered assessment of accuracy and fluency with connected text (Good, Kaminski, & Dill, 2002). It consists of benchmark passages at each grade level to measure accuracy and speed in oral reading. This subtest is used to identify children who need additional assessment and intervention and progress monitoring in reading. Student performance is measured by having students read a passage aloud for one minute.

Results

Fall Assessment

The study examined three DIBELS subtests that were administered in fall 2007: Letter Naming Fluency (LNF), Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF), and Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF). Using a one-way ANOVA, the LNF mean scores of RF schools and non-RF schools showed the effect of the RF program was significant, $F(1,281) = 45.586$, $p < .001$. A significant difference existed for mean scores of PSF between RF schools and non-RF schools ($F(1, 281) = 29.947$, $p < .001$). The ANOVA also showed significant differences for mean scores of NWF between RF schools and non-RF schools

($F(1, 281) = 45.630, p < .001$). The DIBELS subtests mean scores of first grade RF students in the Fall Benchmark Assessment were significantly higher ($p < .001$) than those of non-RF students. Effect sizes were small, ranging from .096 to .140. Means and the standard deviations for Fall subtests are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

One-Way ANOVA of Means of RF and Non-RF Schools for DIBELS Subtests in Fall 2007

Subtests	RF Schools			Non-RF Schools			F	ES (η^2)
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD		
LNF	130	48.35	14.709	153	35.63	16.643	45.586***	.140
PSF	130	48.48	13.847	153	37.42	19.183	29.914***	.096
NWF	130	38.62	16.082	153	25.44	16.585	45.630***	.140

LNF = Letter Naming Fluency; PSF = Phoneme Segmentation Fluency; NWF = Nonsense Word Fluency

*** $p < .001$

Spring Assessment

A univariate ANCOVA was conducted on the subtests administered in spring 2008 using mean scores in the Fall Benchmark Assessment as the covariate. The ANCOVA results indicated that the Fall PSF mean score was a significant covariate, $F(1, 280) = 36.936, p < .001$. There was a significant difference between the group means of PSF in the Spring Benchmark Assessment ($F(1, 280) = 20.722, p < .001$). The adjusted mean of PSF in non-RF schools (Adjusted mean = 61.351) was numerically greater than that of RF schools (Adjusted mean = 53.511). The difference between the adjusted means was significant, favoring the non-RF schools ($p < .001$); however, the effect size was small (.069).

The ANCOVA results showed that the Fall NWF mean score was a significant covariate, $F(1, 280) = 97.643, p < .001$. However, the difference between the group means of NWF in Spring Benchmark Assessment was not significant ($F(1, 280) = 1.647, p > .05$). Table 2 displays adjusted means and standard errors of the subtest NWF administered in spring 2008. The adjusted mean of NWF in RF schools (Adjusted mean = 71.079) was numerically greater than that of the non-RF schools (Adjusted mean = 67.417). However, the difference between means of NWF was not significant.

The ANCOVA results indicated that the Winter ORF mean score was a significant covariate, $F(1, 280) = 97.643, p < .001$. However, the difference between the

group means of ORF in Spring Benchmark Assessment was not significant ($F(1, 280) = 2.594, p > .05$). Table 2 provides the adjusted means and the standard errors of the subtest ORF administered in spring 2008. The adjusted mean of ORF in non-RF schools (Adjusted mean = 46.657) was numerically greater than that of the RF schools (Adjusted mean = 43.880). However, the difference between the means of ORF was not significant. To summarize, the findings indicated no significant differences in the means of Spring NWF and Spring ORF between RF schools and non-RF schools. However, the difference between group means of Spring PSF was significant ($p < .001$), favoring non-RF schools.

Table 2

The Adjusted Means and Standard Errors of DIBELS Subtests in Spring 2008

Subtests	N	RF Schools			N	Non-RF Schools			Partial Eta Squared
		Posttest Means	Adjusted Means	SE		Posttest Means	Adjusted Means	SE	
PSF	130	48.48	53.511	1.238	153	59.87	61.351***	1.137	.069
NWF	130	77.12	71.079	2.150	153	62.29	67.417	1.970	.005
ORF	130	53.22	43.880	1.237	153	38.72	46.657	1.135	.009

LNF = Letter Naming Fluency; PSF = Phoneme Segmentation Fluency; NWF = Nonsense Word Fluency

*** $p < .001$

Gain Scores in Early Literacy Skills

Correlated t -tests were used to determine if there were gains in the scores of DIBELS subtests between fall 2007 and spring 2008. Three subtests were examined: (a) PSF, (b) NWF, and (c) ORF. First grade students in RF schools and non-RF schools demonstrated noteworthy gains in their reading skills from fall 2007 to spring 2008. The magnitude of improvement (effect sizes) for RF schools ranged from .452 (PSF) to 1.516 (ORF). The magnitude of improvement for non-RF schools ranged from 1.091 (PSF) to 1.708 (NWF). Tables 3 and 4 display the results.

Table 3

Paired Samples Statistics for RF Schools on DIBELS Subtests

DIBELS Subtests	Fall/Winter 2007	Spring 2008	Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	Degree of Freedom	<i>p</i>	ES
PSF	48.48	55.25	6.769	5.155	129	.001***	.452
NWF	38.62	77.12	38.492	17.019	129	.001***	1.493
ORF	33.81	53.22	19.415	17.288	129	.001***	1.516

*** $p < .001$

Table 4

Paired Samples Statistics for Non-RF Schools on DIBELS Subtests

DIBELS Subtests	Fall/Winter 2007	Spring 2008	Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	Degree of Freedom	<i>p</i>	ES
PSF	37.42	59.87	22.444	13.496	152	.001***	1.091
NWF	25.44	62.29	36.843	21.128	152	.001***	1.708
ORF	18.22	38.72	20.503	17.244	152	.001***	1.394

*** $p < .001$

Effectiveness of RF Program in Improving Reading Skills

As seen in Table 5, nearly 80% of first grade students in RF schools scored in the Low Risk category in Fall LNF, which is a measure of alphabet recognition. Also, a high percentage of students met the benchmark goals in PSF (89%) and NWF (85%). Therefore, 88.5% of students were in the *Benchmark – At grade level* instructional category in Fall 2007 (see Table 6). Across all subtests, the highest percentage of students in the Low Risk/Established category was found in PSF, showing particular strength in phonemic awareness. In spring 2008, 98% of the students met the benchmark goal. Moreover, the students maintained similar performance in NWF. Eighty-five percent of the students reached the benchmark goal in fall 2007 and spring 2008. As for the ORF, about two thirds of the students met the benchmark goal on this subtest. In other words, one third of the students demonstrated a need for additional instructional support or intensive intervention to meet future benchmark goals. The instructional recommendations matched the findings (see Table 6).

Table 5

Percentages of RF Students in Each Descriptive Level of Performance for Four DIBELS Subtests

	Fall		Winter		Spring	
Letter Naming Fluency (LNF)	At Risk	4%				
	Some Risk	18%				
	Low Risk	78%				
Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF)	Deficit	4%			Deficit	0%
	Emerging	7%			Emerging	2%
	Established	89%			Established	98%
Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF)	At Risk	2%			Deficit	2%
	Some Risk	13%			Emerging	13%
	Low Risk	85%			Established	85%
Oral Reading Fluency (ORF)			At Risk	4%	At Risk	9%
			Some Risk	29%	Some Risk	24%
			Low Risk	67%	Low Risk	67%

Table 6

Percentages of Students Categorized Under the Three Instructional Recommendations

RF Schools			
Benchmark/ Instructional Support	Fall	Winter	Spring
Intensive – Need Substantial Intervention	.8%	9%	9%
Strategic – Additional Intervention	10.7%	25%	24%
Benchmark – At grade level	88.5%	66%	67%

Discussion

Acquisition of Early Literacy Skills

The DIBELS subtests mean scores of first grade RF students were significantly higher than those of non-RF students in fall 2007. Students in RF schools demonstrated better reading skills in alphabet recognition, phonemic awareness, and alphabetic principles than students in non-RF schools. These findings were consistent with the summer 2005 progress report on Louisiana RF program, which stated that kindergarten students in Louisiana RF schools demonstrated a positive trend in reading performances (Center for Child Development, 2005). Therefore, it was not surprising to find that first grade RF students would have better reading performances than those students in non-RF schools at the beginning of the school year.

Our research indicated that although the students in the non-RF schools started the school year with significantly lower scores in the DIBELS subtests than those of the RF schools, their reading skills improved during the school year, especially in phonemic awareness. These findings support prior research which demonstrated that phonemic awareness can be learned (National Reading Panel, 2000; O'Shaughnessy & Swanson, 2000; Schneider, Ennemoser, Roth, & Kusper, 1999; Torgesen, Alexander, Wagner, Rashotte, Voeller, & Conway, 2001).

Gains in Early Literacy Skills

The findings indicated that both RF students and non-RF students demonstrated significant gains in reading skills. These findings were consistent with recent studies regarding extended reading instructional time and intervention (Coyne, Kame'enui, Simmons, & Harn, 2004; Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, & Francis, 2006; Harn, Linan-Thompson, & Roberts, 2008; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008). Moreover, the findings of the present study added another piece of evidence to previous research on the use of paraprofessionals as intervention implementers (Allor & McCathren, 2004; Lane, Fletcher, Carter, Dejud, & DeLorenzo, 2007; Vadasy, Jenkins, & Pool, 2000; Vadasy, Sanders, & Peyton, 2006; Vadasy, Sanders, & Tudor, 2007).

Reading First and Acquisition of Early Literacy Skills

The findings of this study showed that no significant differences existed in DIBELS adjusted means between RF and non-RF students in phonics skills and in oral reading fluency by the end of the school year. Although the components of reading instruction measured in this study were different from that of the *Reading First Impact Study: Interim Report*, the findings were similar (Gamse, Bloom, Kemple, & Jacob, 2008). The Reading First Federal Advisory Committee contended that RF was "an implementation project designed to disseminate what has been learned through research to improve the reading achievement of students in high-poverty, low-performing schools" (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 7). It seemed likely that the effects of the RF

program were spread to non-RF schools in the Impact Study. However, to an extent, the findings of the impact study could be interpreted as “a rather remarkable achievement of the Reading First legislation: it does appear that the federally provided funds were effectively leveraged by states and school districts in efforts to more broadly impact early literacy learners attending their high needs schools” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 7). The Louisiana Literacy Plan was designed to address the learning needs and improve the literacy rates of students in PK – adult education in the state (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006). The plan stated that “the instructional model, research-based programs and strategies, and professional development components are highly aligned with the model used in Louisiana’s Reading First model” (p. 4).

The spreading of the effects of the RF program to non-RF schools was inevitable. Shanahan (2008) contended that if the RF schools and the comparison group schools were engaged in similar practices, why would people expect outcome differences in one of the groups? Therefore, instead of concluding that the treatment did not work, perhaps the treatment worked in both sets of classrooms. From this perspective, the findings of the present study provided evidence that the reading instructional strategies and interventions that were based on scientifically based reading research (SBRR) helped improve the reading skills of young children in both the RF schools and the “less” RF schools. The findings also supported the contentions made by the Reading First Federal Advisory Committee that the dissemination efforts of the RF program were successful (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

High percentages of students maintained the Low Risk/Established category throughout the school year as measured by the DIBELS LNF, NWF, and PSF indicators. Specifically, 98% of the students met the benchmark goal in PSF and 0% of the students were identified as *at-risk*. The results indicated that the students would have a low risk of future reading difficulties in the areas of alphabetic principle, phonics, and phonemic awareness.

The percentage of the students achieving the benchmark goal in oral reading fluency remained the same at the end of the school year (67%). These findings were consistent with *Louisiana’s Reading First Program: 2007 Annual Evaluation Report*, where 60% of first grade RF students achieved the benchmark goal in Louisiana (Center for Child Development, 2007). The overall findings indicated the RF program met the learning needs of children in early literacy acquisition.

Conclusions

This study confirmed that the Reading First (RF) program met learning needs of young children in early literacy acquisition. With the widespread partial replication of the RF practices in non-RF schools, this study provided evidence that the practices produced similar results in both sets of classrooms. The first graders in both the RF and non-RF schools demonstrated significant gains in their reading skills. The findings were consistent with the recent research regarding extended reading instructional time and intervention (Coyne, Kame’enui, Simmons, & Harn, 2004; Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, & Francis, 2006; Harn, Linan-Thompson, & Roberts, 2008; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008).

Moreover, from a legislative perspective, RF was a federal initiative which disseminated research-based reading instructional strategies into high-poverty, low-performing schools to help improve reading achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The findings indicated that the dissemination efforts of the RF program were successful.

Implications for Practice

This research established that extended instructional time and intervention lead to successful reading outcomes for young children. This study provided evidence that DIBELS is an effective tool to identify and assign students to tiered-based intervention. In addition, well-trained paraprofessionals are effective intervention implementers in early literacy acquisition.

Furthermore, this study confirmed that the dissemination efforts of the Reading First (RF) program were successful. The researchers support the recommendations made by the Reading First Federal Advisory Committee to the members of Congress and other policy-makers which include: (a) continuing to provide funding for RF, (b) incorporating funding and authority for rigorous evaluations in future legislation, and (c) extending and improving innovative plans that were part of the RF legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

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