

Study helps predict which kindergartners will have reading difficulties

March 25 2015, by Mike Krings

For years, teachers have seen students who were promising readers in the primary grades begin to experience challenges in third and fourth grades as reading materials became more difficult. University of Kansas researchers conducted a study with the goal of identifying how to better predict in kindergarten who might have reading difficulties in the future and to determine what extra instruction should include in order to help ensure their later success as readers.

The researchers worked with more than 350 Lawrence kindergartners to see whether they could predict which students might have future [reading difficulties](#). They also provided reading interventions focused on both aspects of learning to read words (phonics and letter identification) and comprehension ([vocabulary](#) and story understanding) with a group of students that showed some difficulties with language and reading-related assessments in kindergarten.

"It was a study that asked, 'Can we identify in kindergarten what language and reading-related elements will predict children's ability to read later on?'" said Diane Corcoran Nielsen, professor of education. "And the results emphasize the importance of talking to your children and reading to your children."

Of the identified students, a little more than half received a 26-week intervention that emphasized vocabulary and story recognition in addition to instruction on aspects of word recognition, a common focus for kindergarten intervention. The remainder of the students received

intervention that focused on word recognition.

The study, authored by Hugh Catts, of Florida State, formerly of KU; Nielsen; and Mindy Sittner Bridges and Yi-Syuan Liu, both with KU, is in press in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*.

For many years, the standard approach when teaching young students to read has been to assess and focus primarily on aspects of word recognition, providing extra instruction to children with reading difficulties. The approach is important because word recognition is vital to learning to read, but the focus also should include vocabulary and comprehension-related instruction, researchers said.

"If teachers put their eggs in the phonics basket, that's good, because learning to read words is essential to reading, but it's not enough," Nielsen said. "Vocabulary knowledge and story comprehension in preschool and kindergarten are good predictors of how students will perform down the road. So they must be given equal attention in the preschool and primary grades."

Students who received the enhanced intervention took part in lessons that emphasized vocabulary, story understanding and re-telling stories, in addition to the standard practice of focusing on letter recognition, letter sounds and how they work together to make words. The researchers found that how students fared at the beginning of kindergarten on measures of language and aspects related to word recognition were good predictors of which students might have reading problems in third grade. In addition, they found that how the students responded to the enhanced intervention could provide additional information on who might have reading difficulties later.

The findings illustrate the importance of taking a broad, inclusive approach in identifying [students](#) who might have future reading

problems and what their early instruction should include. There are many excellent teachers instructing young readers across the country.

However, there are challenges, namely a lack of time, to put as much focus as possible on vocabulary and story understanding in addition to traditional intervention. By covering all bases early, teachers help young readers make better progress as they grow, meaning the improvements can justify the investment of time and extra effort.

"The findings say, 'Spend some time on aspects of [word recognition](#) in [kindergarten](#), but don't neglect the other areas, because even if it doesn't pay off right away, it will later on,'" Nielsen said. "We know that the children who walk in the door with better vocabulary and story comprehension will likely be better readers down the road. The problem is that although there's no quick and easy way to address student challenges in vocabulary and story comprehension, they still must be addressed."

Provided by University of Kansas

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