

**Southside Literacy Roundtable: February 24, 2010**  
**Low Level Literacy English Speaking Adults**  
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What is at issue for adults who do not read well enough to perform basic literacy tasks such as completing an employment application or maintaining a job, reading the newspaper, reading to/with their young children, working toward a GED or enjoying even easy reading popular fiction?

Research into adult non readers who have grown up in the US and attended public schools indicates that most of these adults had a reading difficulty by approximately the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and that the compounding problem of not being able to read overwhelmed any chance they had to succeed with the content areas of later grades which depended on the ability to read to gain new information.

Because low level reading adults lack the ability to associate the symbols (alphabet) used to prepare written materials with the sounds (phonemes) those symbols represent when combined into words decoding new words is impossible. Even if low level reading adults know the alphabet and the typically consistent sounds made by consonants, the variety of options for vowels and the rules that govern which vowel sound to choose is usually a complete mystery. The coping mechanism most often used by adult low level readers is memorizing whole words and guessing from context. Using reading skills instead of the habit of guessing is one of the key elements of instruction for low level reading adults.

The best results in teaching English speaking adults with low level reading skills is direct instruction in the basic decoding (breaking the word down from letters to sounds) and encoding (spelling the word heard and writing it down.) This instruction has to be both incremental and repetitious and the process takes time.

Studies which investigated the components that make up reading, the association between reading instruction and reading skill development, and the programmatic shape of adult low-level literacy

instruction have been completed since the late 1990s. The findings of these studies point us to the best practices for current adult education.

- Because low level literacy adult education must fit into family, employment, social commitments and sometimes health issues and because the very students who need the low level literacy instruction have the least flexibility for problem solving within these areas, educational programs work best if they have rolling admission. Rolling admission encourages immediate participation and removes waiting as a barrier. The courage to take the first step is a fleeting thing!
- Assessment of the student's specific reading component skills establishes the student's starting point in the proscribed curriculum. The assessment has to include sufficient identification of the reading skills not yet mastered.
- Teacher and/or Tutor training on using a developmental reading skills curriculum which is research based and incremental provides the systematic approach that supports the student's next steps in mastering reading skills.
- The encouragement and support of a referring agency is very important in moving the adult toward this next step in their continuing education. This encouragement and support needs to be transparent to the student; they need to know you think they will benefit from the reading instruction and that whatever their goal is (employment, GED, helping their children, etc.) is being advanced by this educational step.
- Since all agencies and programs know that low level readers are among the most compromised for
  - employment, earning power (VEC, One-Stop and job training)
  - financial independence (Social Services, Congregations, United Way)

- assisting their young children with pre reading skills and elementary homework (teachers, school systems, PTAs, Libraries)
  - gaining the first credential of a high school diploma (GED and Community College programs).
- referral for reading instruction supports the mission and program of all agencies serving low level reading adults.

In summary a curriculum with a scope and sequence that emphasized incremental reading instruction is essential and should be directly taught to the adult student. Training to implement the assessment and curriculum is essential for both the teacher and the tutor. Assessment that measures which specific reading skills have not been mastered allows for the greatest success in selecting the next instruction step for the student. Evaluation of progress is built into the assessment process over time and allows for outside evaluation and program documentation monitoring.

Adults with low level reading skills must build their reading skills over time and persistence in building these skills is a challenge for low level reading adults. Persistence is composed of hours of participation (intensity) and months of engagement per year (duration) and serves the same purpose in adult education that compulsory education serves in children's education. Research indicates that it takes approximately 100 hours for an adult to move one grade equivalency. The success rate for those working 100 hours is about 60% and the rate goes to 75% at 150 hours. Approximately 50 weeks of instruction twice weekly two hours each session or 200 hours can be expected to move an adult reader the 1.5 grade equivalency needed to master the basic components of decoding and encoding and begin the process of fluency and comprehension.

What we know about persistence with adult learners is that they may need to stop and restart several times to accrue the hours needed to make this progress. The program that provides basic reading instruction has to be open to reentry, reassessment to check on retention of previously learned skills and reinsertion into the curriculum accordingly. What we also know is that once the basic skills are in place, the adult student can continue to move themselves

forward in adult education continuing to work within a program or moving on to new programs areas that support employment, higher education and better support of their children's education .

The second question for low lever reading adult education is how to get adults to spend the 200 hours needed to make the progress that will move them toward becoming independent readers.

Persistence is a balance between motivation (knowing that improved reading will positively impact goals) and barriers (employment, family, transportation, health, and other commitments). It is a balance between benefits (employment or higher wages, helping your child, enjoying reading) and cost in either money or time. Which means it is a balance between support (what and who encourages the motivated adult) and the barriers (prior commitments, crisis, time or money).

The rolling admission lowers one barrier. The immediate access to assessment and movement into the curriculum lowers the next barrier. The incremental curriculum with demonstrable results transparent to the student is a high motivator. The student needs to hear from the referring agency that improved reading will positively impact the longer range goal of improving employment, helping their child and accessing the GED or Community College course of study. The student needs to understand that you believe this level or intervention will lead them to goals that improve their lives, their employability and their future.

How do you determine if the client you serve could make use of literacy services or GED services? A very simple request to read one or two of the attached questions aloud can help you identify an adult that has difficulty reading. If the adult reading these sentences has trouble pronouncing any of the two, three or four letter words, they need additional reading skills. If the adult has trouble breaking the longer words into syllables, they need additional reading skills.

Does this address include your zip code?

Do you have identification?

Can you read an application for employment and fill in all the information?

Does your family include any children under the age of five?  
Have you already been in any adult education classes?  
Do you want to check out books for your children?  
Would you like to improve your reading skills?

You probably think that the adult will be embarrassed about their reading skills and for some adults, this is an issue. However, the adult already knows they lack reading skills and what you are doing in your capacity at your agency or program is helping them to remove the barriers that keep them under or unemployed, in a very low income life style or unable to help their children. By encouraging them to improve their reading, you open the door success in all these areas. Your encouragement may be just what the adult need to take this next step. When they have improved their reading, they will be back to you to take the next employment or educational step. They will be better prepared to assist their children and hopefully break the cycle of low level reading in their family. Reading really does open the door to the future for both children and adults.

Reading instruction is composed of four components:

- Alphabetics
  - Automaticity in recognizing the symbols of the language (alphabet) and the reliable relationship of the symbols to sounds (a letter is consistent in the sound it stands for or as with vowels there are predictable sound choices.)
  - The ability to recognize and predict several key rules which govern how the vowels and their sounds make up either words or syllables.  
The Six Syllables Rules:
    - Closed—pattern: CVC—vowel sound short—example: hat
    - Open—pattern: CV or V—vowel sound long—example: go
    - Silent E—pattern: VCe—vowel sound (usually) long—example: cake
    - Vowel partners--pattern: VV—2 kinds: (1) talking/walking: first vowel long, second silent—example: bead; (2) unpredictable--examples: oil, August
    - R controlled or Bossy R—pattern: VR, VVR—sound /r/—examples: bird, courage, pearl, car, purple, her
    - Consonant-le—pattern: C-le—sound “ul”—examples: table, puzzle
    - Decoding or looking at letters and recognizing the sounds that are blended together to make a word or syllable.
  - Encoding or hearing a word or syllable and being able to determine what letters are used (spelling) when a sound or word is spoken.
- Fluency which is the speed and smoothness needed in reading to make separate sounds into words and then words into sentences and then sentences into meaning.
- Vocabulary is both understanding that a word has a meaning(s) and understanding the related mental models which give meaning to new words.
- Comprehension demonstrating understanding of printed material and/or compiling ideas into a written sample which displays any or all of the following:
  - Context of the printed material,
  - Fact versus opinion,
  - Inference when a text implies a meaning,
  - The ability to order the material or ideas, determine the main idea and the supporting details.