

Reading Programmes That Work

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Suppose we wanted to tackle reading seriously? One way would be to look at programmes that work. Cultural differences among societies would caution us against wholesale adoption. However, we could look at programmes such as *Reading Recovery*, which began in New Zealand with Marie Clay—a programme targeting first graders (Standard 1 students) in the elementary school. Or we could look at *Prevention of Learning Disabilities*, a programme that targets the neurological aspects of learning, emanating from the Learning Disorders Unit of the New York University Medical Center.

In this article, I profile a programme called *Success for All*—a programme not without its critics, but a programme nonetheless, whose design, implementation, and reading instruction frameworks suggest pathways for effective indigenous reading programmes, not only for underachievers, but for learners on the whole. I have chosen *Success for All* because it began in one elementary school with a disadvantaged population, among whom there would have been a high percentage of Creole and non-English speakers; the challenge being to have all junior students reading at their grade level by Grade 3.

Success for All (SFA) began in 1987 and aimed at impacting at-risk learners in the elementary school system in inner-city Baltimore. It was developed by Robert Slavin, Nancy Madden, and their associates at Johns Hopkins University.

The main component of the programme is an intensive 90-minute daily, uninterrupted block of reading instruction, built into a restructured curriculum. Students of an *SFA* participating school are assigned to classes according to reading ability, regardless of age. Therefore, homogenous groups receive direct instruction at their instructional level from the teacher, whose energies are not divided by multiple abilities in one classroom. Students who lag behind their group are given an additional 20 minutes of one-to-one tutoring to keep them on track. Assessments are done every eight weeks and students are regrouped according to performance. Parents are incorporated through a Family Support Team, comprising key personnel such as social workers and the school implementation core group.

Before a school adopts the programme, it is required to show understanding of the design and materials, indicate that it has resources for implementation, and ensure 80% commitment from its staff. The school must appoint an on-site *SFA* facilitator to oversee implementation, intensive professional development of principal and staff, liaison with parents, and coaching. The reading and writing curriculum is highly specified, using prepared materials and manuals.

SFA incorporates most of the elements of multi-faceted language development such as accessible reading material and repeated readings of familiar text. Systematic phonics instruction, building of a strong sight word base, word attack skills, and word analysis are built around continuous text rather than skill and drill. Reinforcement of sound-symbol

relationships is pursued in the context of children's writing and the reading of authentic literature.

SFA is a comprehensive preventive programme rather than a remediation programme only. It shows the most dramatic positive results for students in the lowest quartile of their classes who, although they may read a year or two below their grade level, outperform their counterparts in non-*SFA* schools. Not to be overlooked is its Family Support Team component, which requires parents' participation in the intervention, resulting in improved school attendance, improved classroom behaviour, improved self-esteem, greater motivation towards learning, more time on task, and better classroom social skills accruing from team work and the *SFA*'s collaborative concept.

SFA has expanded beyond reading intervention among Grades 1-3 to address mathematics, social studies, and science. Its implementation has spread beyond at-risk learners in Baltimore to learners in elementary schools and a few secondary schools in many parts of the United States and overseas. Additionally four components of the programme have been developed in Spanish for bilingual classrooms.

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