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Adaptation of the Wilson Reading System for Braille Readers

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Teachers at Perkins School for the Blind have been teaching braille to students of all ages for many years. As part of this experience, the teachers at Perkins have seen many capable students of different ages struggle to learn to read and write braille. In particular, they observed students who were unable to sound out or decode words because of their own difficulty in determining what sounds to use. In an attempt to help these students improve their reading skills, teachers investigated a variety of print reading programs, and attended a Wilson Reading System introductory workshop. After

beginning to use Wilson, this program was found to be a successful alternative reading program to help those students who were not reaching their potential. As teachers began using the program with more and more students, we learned that Wilson was also a helpful teaching tool for students who had other learning challenges in addition to decoding difficulties—such as weak language skills, poor comprehension skills, behavioral and attention difficulties, low motivation, and poor executive functioning skills. Wilson Language Training staff members provided invaluable support to Perkins throughout this journey, including by visiting our campus to provide additional training, answering numerous questions via telephone calls, and even providing us with electronic files of some of their instructional materials to help with the braille transcription process. As a result of the success students were experiencing through this instructional reading approach, Perkins planned a workshop that was open to all vision educators in New England. The workshop was copresented by a Wilson trainer and Perkins teachers, who demonstrated the various adaptations and modifications needed for braille readers. Given the significant amount of time it took individual teachers to prepare the instructional materials for braille readers, Perkins invited representatives from the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) to attend the workshop with the hope that they would be interested in producing this program in braille and large print, thus making it more readily available to teachers and students with visual impairments throughout the United States. There were many positive responses to the workshop, and the collaboration between Perkins, APH, and Wilson began.

THE PROGRAM

The Wilson Reading System was created by Barbara A. Wilson and first published

in 1989. The program is based on Orton-Gillingham philosophy and principles, as well as phonological coding research. It involves reading instruction that is focused on phonemic awareness and segmentation skills, alphabet principle of sound and symbol knowledge, word structure and analysis knowledge (phonics), reading accuracy and fluency, and spelling. It also addresses writing, vocabulary, and reading and listening comprehension. It is a highly structured, cumulative program that includes explicit teaching of all concepts using multisensory activities. Teachers who want to implement this reading program must first receive training through Wilson. More information is available through the website <www.wilsonlanguage.com>.

Reading instruction through this program starts at the smallest unit of sounds (phonemes) and moves to syllables, words, multisyllable words, phrases, sentences, and passages. It also teaches vocabulary and comprehension. Every decoding and encoding concept and skill is explicitly taught to the point of mastery and automaticity in Wilson, which helps to avoid any learning gaps. Introducing reading concepts in such a slow, sequential manner also allows teachers to slowly and deliberately introduce and teach braille contractions as they appear within the words used in each part of the program. In addition, Wilson utilizes key words (represented visually through pictures) to help students learn and remember the sound and symbol connections. Teachers found that this important learning tool could be easily adapted through the use of small objects. Wilson utilizes a student notebook as a student reference tool throughout the program. Teachers found it was easy and helpful to modify this notebook through a traditional paper approach, or by using students' electronic notetakers or other personal computer technology.

IMPLEMENTATION

We would like to share two examples of how our students learned to read through the Wilson Reading System. The first example was completed by a teacher of students with visual impairments who worked with elementary-age students in Perkins' Lower School as a lead classroom teacher. The second example was written by a teacher of students with visual impairments who taught English and language, braille, and reading to high school students in Perkins' Secondary Program.

First example

Several years ago, I began working with a 9-year-old boy who, after many years of braille instruction, was still unable to read beyond the readiness level. He was able to determine the correct dot configuration, but was often confused when decoding a word. He had difficulty determining if he should sound out the letters or speak the whole letter contraction. He was inconsistent in his use of the correct vowel sound with many familiar words he had previously learned. Given his many years of frustration, he became very anxious when a reading session began. When presented with a page of braille, he would immediately pull his hands away. I realized that I needed to use another approach, had worked with the Wilson Reading System with sighted children, and thought that it might work with Jack (a pseudonym). I needed a program that would provide success and would help build his confidence.

Wilson uses pictures to help children remember the letter and vowel sounds. I found small objects to take the place of pictures, and Jack quickly caught on to the mantra of letter-keyword-sound. The

introduction of interesting objects that he could hold in his hands made his reading lessons more bearable for him. The first three steps in Wilson provide instruction on short vowel sounds and use only a few whole-letter braille contractions. Emphasis is placed on sound blending for word decoding, and the program employs a finger-tapping approach to help with blending as well. Wilson's 10-part lesson plan includes a short review of skills, along with a multisensory approach to help keep the student focused. The repetitive, predictable structure of each lesson assisted in developing Jack's confidence and speed in decoding words and decreased some of his frustration. Initially, he worked with just decoding single words on cards. Afterwards, he learned to complete braille worksheets, which I created to correspond with the words and concepts in each Wilson sub-step. He was required to read a row of words and locate and mark the one word that was different. By keeping the worksheet instructions simple, Jack learned to tolerate tactually scanning the braille material, and increased the amount of braille with which he was willing to work. His speed in word recognition improved with the added practice. Eventually, he was introduced to worksheets that required him to read groups of sentences and mark the one that was different.

Jack also had problems with reading comprehension. The Wilson Reading System includes short passages and instructs students to retell the story in their own words to support comprehension. This oral language task was very difficult for Jack to do. An adaption to this portion of the program was made by creating questions with a multiple-choice format. Jack

needed to learn to recognize the words "who," "what," "where," "when," and "why" written in contracted braille and to understand what these words meant. The strategy of having him read the questions first and then reread the passages many times helped to increase his overall comprehension, decoding accuracy, and fluency.

Despite all his early challenges, Jack is now a young man who is able to read a variety of materials. Reading has provided him with another avenue to access information and to function more independently in school, at home, and in the community.

Second example

In 2001, I was assigned a student for reading instruction. I was told that he knew most of the braille contractions, but that he could not decode words. He knew many sight words, but any word with more than one syllable was foreign to him. After working with Josh (a pseudonym) for a few weeks, I realized that he needed a structured, multisensory program. That is when I discovered the Wilson Reading System. A friend who was using it for a child with a learning disability had seen great results. The only problem was that all the materials were in print. I began brailleing the sound cards, word cards, and syllable cards. That took hours of my time, but it was worth it. Josh learned about vowels by learning key words. He began to tap out one-syllable words. Before long, he was able to read whole words, sentences, and short stories. I was able to have the Wilson Student Readers scanned into braille through a grant from the American Foundation for the Blind. We had a Wilson trainer come

to Perkins, and she presented the introductory 10-hour workshop. Now, initial training in Wilson is 15 hours.

As I learned more and more, I saw Josh blossoming. Before he came to Perkins, he was told that he would never be a successful reader. As you can imagine, Josh's self-esteem was low. There were days when he was frustrated and complained. As time passed, Josh began to feel successful and the complaints stopped. Josh had excellent comprehension, and he worked on learning the consonants, vowels, digraphs, blends, and rules of syllabication. He was decoding three to four multisyllable words.

Josh graduated from Perkins in 2004, and he was the graduation speaker. He read from a braille copy of his speech. What a proud day it was for his parents, teachers, and especially Josh! He is now a college graduate and is employed as an adaptive computer technician. A few years ago, Josh visited Perkins. When he visited my classroom, he made a statement that I will never forget. He said that I had given him the greatest gift, the ability to read, and he would treasure it always. Josh was my guinea pig, and he knew it! He paved the way for my colleagues and me to adapt the Wilson reading materials for the visually impaired.

DISCUSSION

As these examples illustrate, there are many reasons teachers at Perkins have loved using the Wilson Reading System. First, it is not an overly visual program and is relatively simple to translate into braille (though extremely time consuming). Second, and most important, many students quickly experienced success with this instructional approach. The short, repetitive, and predictable nature of each lesson, along

with the experience of success from the beginning of the program, helped many Perkins' students to approach their braille lessons with more open, positive attitudes.

As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons teachers at Perkins appreciated Wilson was because the print program was easily made accessible to students with visual impairments, given a few simple adaptations and modifications. For example, Wilson uses sound cards and magnetic tiles that are color coded to represent a consonant, vowel, or glued sound. Braille dots are placed on the top of these cards to represent the sound type instead of relying on color. On the Wilson word cards, we were able to present the word in both uncontracted braille and contracted braille. This method allows students to first recognize word structure, which is a critical component to accurate decoding, before the word structure is hidden within contractions. Wilson Student Readers were produced in a standard braille translation, and nonsense words were always presented in uncontracted braille. In addition, two braille translations of the Wilson Student Workbooks were created. The first version is standard braille. The second version involves more significant modifications to simplify the format and eliminate the need for special symbols, transcriber notes, picture captions, and the like. Teachers at Perkins created supplementary braille worksheets to provide extra practice with braille mechanics (that is, correct finger placement, tracking lines, moving down a line, letter and word discrimination skills, and the like), contractions, and comprehension. Six types of supplementary worksheets were created; four of them address braille reading mechanics and two of them provided extra practice with reading comprehension.

Teachers at Perkins have been very excited about the successful results students have experienced through the Wilson Reading System and wanted to use the program with more students and share this approach with other teachers of students with visual impairments. Since the amount of time needed to transcribe the print materials into braille and to create the supplemental materials was a huge undertaking, Perkins reached out to APH and the Wilson Language Training Corporation for help. Another training opportunity was provided to teachers of students with visual impairments across the United States through a webinar, which included the traditional Wilson training approach, a certified Wilson trainer, and information about braille adaptations. A research project by Hannan, Wicker, and Erin (2012) and a field study were conducted. APH saw the value of this program and decided to move forward with its commercial publication. Currently, Wilson Student Readers 1–3 are available in braille and large print, and Wilson Student Workbooks 1–3 are available in large print. Soon, all of

the instructional materials will be available in braille and large print, including sound, word, and syllable cards; an assessment tool; a magnetic journal and tiles; adapted Wilson Student Workbooks; and supplemental braille worksheets. Given all of this information, we hope other teachers will consider using this adapted instructional approach to help more students become successful readers.

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