Chapter 28
Improving Students' Academic Learning by Helping Them Access Text

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ABSTRACT

Conventional methods of addressing the needs of students with print disabilities include text-to-speech services. One major drawback of text-to-speech technologies is that computerized speech simply articulates the same words in a text whereas human voice can convey emotions such as excitement, sadness, fear, or joy. Audiobooks have human narration, but are designed for entertainment and not for teaching word identification, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension to students. This chapter focuses on the 3-year pilot of CRISKids; all CRIS recordings feature human narration. The pilot demonstrated that students who feel competent in their reading and class work tend to be more engaged in classroom routines, spend more time on task and demonstrate greater comprehension of written materials. When more demonstrate these behaviors and skills, teachers are better able to provide meaningful instruction, since less time is spent on issues of classroom management and redirection. Thus, CRISKids impacts not only the students with print disabilities, but all of the students in the classroom.

DEFINITION OF A PRINT DISABILITY

The definition of a print disability is a condition that prevents individuals from gaining information from printed materials, at anticipated levels, and requires the use of alternative access methods or specialized formats such as Braille, large print, audio, or digital text to access that information. This definition includes individuals with a visual, physical, perceptual, developmental, cognitive, or learning disability (Kerscher, 2002). The Higher Education Opportunity Act defines "print disabled" as "a student with

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a disability who experiences barriers to accessing instructional material in non-specialized formats, including an individual described in Title 17 of the Copyright Act" (H.R. 4137: Higher Education Opportunity Act," 110th Congress, 2007-2009). The definition includes physical limitations that could be the result of a spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury, a neurological condition, etc. (e.g., students who cannot physically hold or manipulate a book).

The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA (Section CFR 300.172) added the requirement that states and local education agencies must ensure that "accessible instructional materials" are provided to students with print disabilities in a timely manner. The Chafee Amendment (Public Law 104-197) allows authorized entities to reproduce recordings of previously published nondramatic literary works in specialized formats for those who are blind or have print-disabilities without the need to pay royalties (i.e., the recordings are not an infringement on copyright). Using the most *conservative* estimate of the number of K-12 students in the U.S. with print disabilities based on the "copyright exemption" and the number who qualify for accessible instructional materials, last year there were 2,004,000 students (this estimate was based on figures provided by Connecticut's Bureau of Special Education). *The number is most likely far higher because students present multiple disabilities.* For example, last year in Connecticut 4,941 students with learning disabilities also qualified as having a print disability so there is an overlap in who may need certain accommodations. Annually, the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) polls each state for data on the number of legally blind children (through age 21) enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in the U.S. eligible to receive free reading materials in Braille, large print, or audio format. This is used to develop a "quota" of federal funds to be spent in each state for materials in each alternative format. Based on the APH polls and the above data, the range of students with print disabilities is from 2,004,000 to 3,500,000.

In schools, a "reading disability" is generally conceptualized in three ways: word-based/dyslexia, specific comprehension, and mixed (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2009). In word-based or dyslexic-type disability, students can understand age-appropriate text when it is read aloud but continue to have severe difficulties with decoding even after evidence-based instruction/intervention. Other characteristics of this type of disability include but are not limited to difficulty with spelling, writing (dysgraphia), orientation, organization, mathematical operations, and learning a foreign language; yet, despite these difficulties, individuals who experience word-specific disability may also have highly developed memory skills, creative abilities, originality, intuition, and good "people skills." (IDEA, 2014). Students identified with specific comprehension disability can read accurately and fluently but still have difficulty constructing meaning from text. These students are unable to use text to develop their own abilities, improve content area knowledge, solve problems, or apply new learning. They are also less likely to read for pleasure. The last group of students with reading disabilities has both difficulty with word recognition and comprehension.

CRISKIDS™ FOR SCHOOLS, A SCHOOL-BASED INITIATIVE OF CRIS RADIO

As Bill Haberman stuffed envelopes for the Connecticut Radio Information System, Inc. (CRIS), a 36-year-old nonprofit that provides audio recordings for people who are blind or cannot read print materials due to a disability, he made a suggestion that would set the organization on a new path. Haberman, a retired special education teacher, is one of the 300 CRIS volunteers, most of whom provide the voice talent for the audio recordings of articles featured in more than 70 newspapers and magazines.