

# Researcher rolling out remedy for reading crisis

March 10 2016

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Reading isn't all rainbows for many children across the country.

In fact, it's down right difficult for 70 percent of Arizona's fourth-graders who are testing below proficient in reading, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Trina Spencer, research director at the Institute for Human Development at Northern Arizona University, is on a mission to help remedy a national reading crisis through the design and roll-out of an academic language intervention curriculum called [Story Champs](#). The program is being sought after by educators across the nation.

"It's more than a new curriculum and a new assessment tool," Spencer said. "It's a system of academic language development that required the development and validation of quick, easy to use assessment and intervention tools."

Over the past ten years, Spencer and research partner Doug Petersen, a University of Wyoming researcher and professor, turned countless research findings into real practice for preschool and school-age children. Their goal is to improve reading comprehension of all children, but especially those who are culturally and linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged, by focusing on oral language development.



"Young children cannot write what they cannot say," Spencer said. "We assume kids understand what is said to them and that couldn't be farther from the truth. We are no longer the white, middle class America we were when we set up the structure for teaching reading years ago. We're a diverse population with diverse language skills yet, until Story Champs, oral language had not been integrated into the way we teach kids to read and write."

Spencer shared that many children do not have sufficient language skills to comprehend what they read, yet the primary grades still focus on decoding words. A shift to inferencing, vocabulary, storytelling and domain knowledge has been sorely lacking.

One eight-week Story Champs intervention with second graders at Wyoming Indian Elementary School—where the focus was on oral language and not writing instruction—resulted in a three-grade-level jump in writing performance. After the intervention, students were producing writing that was more complex than that of the fifth graders in the same school who were receiving only writing instruction.

"As an educator who used Story Champs with at risk students and language-impaired preschoolers in Michigan, I was surprised to learn when I took a position in Phoenix that Story Champs was relatively unknown in the state," said Colin Macpherson, a speech language pathologist. "We have clear evidence that strong oral language skills are the basis for reading comprehension. We must focus on developing oral [language skills](#) in preschool, and Story Champs is the best curriculum on the market."

Over the years, Spencer and Petersen have helped educators identify 10 percent of the student population with comprehension challenges who

would have otherwise slipped through the cracks. The free assessment tools developed for teachers to easily identify intervention needs can be found at [languagedynamicsgroup.com](http://languagedynamicsgroup.com).

Much to the delight of the research team, calls and emails praising Story Champs are pouring in from national Department of Education leaders who have implemented or are anxious to implement the program state-wide.

"We couldn't be more thrilled with the response we're getting," Spencer said. "Educators in Wyoming, Utah, Alaska, Colorado, Michigan and Virginia are using the program and are seeing first-hand how oral language intervention massively improves writing and comprehension skills."

Provided by Northern Arizona University

Citation: Researcher rolling out remedy for reading crisis (2016, March 10) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-03-remedy-crisis.html>

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