

Leslie Cuti
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Position Paper

Is software, used as an intervention, as effective as teacher taught interventions?

There is a big push right now to use certain software programs to help remediate children who may be lagging behind in specific subject areas. However, it seems that these programs certainly are not as good as the one-on-one teacher driven interventions.

Which makes more sense to a young child, teacher or computer?

The big push in education in our area is to sit young children (K-2nd graders) at a computer a minimum of four times per week and have them work on an intervention driven software program. The students are to work alone with little or no assistance. This makes little sense. There are several reasons why this should not be the desired form of intervention. One reason is that the computer-generated voice does not sound the same as a human voice. Children hear the computer produce letter names and sounds through a set of headphones. The computer may actually produce the sounds correctly, but the children have background noise to filter out while trying to listen to the sounds. Another problem is that the students are unable to see the person produce the sound. For very young children it is crucial for them to see how then sound is produced in the mouth. Another negative aspect to the computer-generated intervention is that the students become bored or distracted easily. Students working on the computer do not have a human to motivate them to continue through the lessons and to do their best. Also, if the child is not successful and would like to ask for assistance or ask a question who are they supposed to ask, the computer? This makes no sense. At the very least a human should

sit with the child and assist as he/she goes through the lessons. One final negative aspect of this intervention program is that the classroom teacher is required to have each student use the program a minimum of four times per week. Logistically this is a nightmare. Most classroom teachers only have one computer with internet access. Therefore, one student at a time can use the program. Each episode that the students must complete takes a minimum of 20 minutes if the student is accurate and remains on task. Because some children become distracted and take longer it may take some children 30-40 minutes to complete one episode. Teachers continually complain that it is impossible to have all children visit the one computer 4 times per week. Students are missing out on other crucial lessons when they are attempting to visit the program so often and for such a length of time. It seems that the children's and the teachers' time would be better spent if the interventions occurred in the classroom in small controlled groups that were lead by the teacher

This computer-based program is not actually a bad program. There are great benefits for some children. The children that benefit most from this program are not the ones who need to receive intervention. They are the average and above average students. Children who are self-motivated do well using this program. Children who listen to and follow directions have success on this program. This program does have value in the sense that if it is the only alternative to children receiving some intervention assistance it is better than nothing. In other words: If the classroom teacher cannot service the students in a small group setting it is better to put them on the computer than to do nothing at all. So which is better, teacher or computer?

In conclusion, the computer-based intervention is not bad as a whole. The greatest problem is the use of the program. If the program were used to forward the learning of the self-motivated, average student it would be very beneficial. Or if the program were used with the weaker students, who need extra motivation, with an adult partner assisting as needed. However, in the way that it is used currently it is not serving the students in the best way possible.