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# ***Evaluation of the SLANT System<sup>®</sup> for Structured Language Training: A Multisensory Language Program for Delayed Readers***

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Early intervention reading programs are proliferating since the advent of the Response To Intervention (RTI) structures emerging in schools in the United States. Federal guidance about effective practices is available through a number of reports and websites. Among these, the National Reading Panel and the Institute of Education Sciences have established components of best practices in early intervention reading instruction (Gersten et al., 2009). Overall, these expert-developed guidelines recommend the use of a curriculum that addresses phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. More specifically in the RTI process, students who score

below benchmark on a universal screener should be provided with systematic instruction on up to three foundational reading skills in a small group setting, which is commonly considered tier two in the RTI structure (Gersten et al., 2009).

The effectiveness of supplemental reading instruction for students who struggle to acquire reading proficiencies is well-established (O'Connor, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Torgensen, 2000; Vellutino et al., 1996). Wanzek and Vaughn (2007) synthesized reading research involving various early intervention programs that offered more than 100 sessions and found a moderate to large effect especially with students in kindergarten and 1st grade. The question about which approach is most effective in early reading intervention is under scrutiny by researchers and policymakers with inconclusive evidence overall. Multisensory language instruction is one of several possible intervention choices.

The origins of multisensory language approaches are commonly attributed to curriculum written by Anna Gillingham and Bessie Stillman (1960) based on Samuel Orton's (1937) theory of children whose reading problems were due to their perceived twisted symbols. Although many studies of a general class of the multisensory language approach have been reported, there is a general lack of certainty about the efficacy of the approach. Ritchey and Goeke (2006) reviewed 12 studies involving the effectiveness of the Orton-Gillingham (O-G) multisensory language method and reported mixed findings. The Institute for Education Sciences (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010) corroborated this finding by determining that there is insufficient evidence to support the efficacy of unbranded Orton-Gillingham multisensory approaches to reading instruction due to a lack of studies that meet evidence standards.

Individual studies involving elementary schools offer more positive results over several decades of investigations. Lichter, Roberge, Meyer, and Karnes (1979), using a matched-pair design, found that the reading achievement of 1st graders who were given three hours of O-G instruction

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daily was significantly higher than similar students exposed to standard 1st-grade curriculum for reading instruction. Foorman et al. (1997) compared scores of 2nd- and 3rd-grade students with reading disabilities using three approaches and found that the O-G method outperformed analytic phonics and sight-word instruction. Similarly, the use of multisensory language instruction with 1st graders was shown to be effective when compared to other approaches (Joshi, Dahlgren, & Boulware-Gooden, 2002), with the greatest gains demonstrated in Hispanic females (Scheffel, Shaw, & Shaw, 2008).

This paper examines reading achievement outcomes after instruction using the *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> for Structured Language Training, which is a systematic approach to multisensory language instruction. This evaluation analyzed pre- and posttest data collected by several groups of teachers enrolled in a one-year intensive training program that resulted in *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> certification.

### ***SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> Overview**

The *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> is a multisensory structured language (MSL) program incorporating research-based reading components in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. As an MSL program, instruction is systematic, sequential, and explicit. Instruction begins by emphasizing phonemic awareness and letter/sound relationships, and it builds to include instruction in vocabulary and comprehension strategies.

The development of the *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> was based on the results of reports from the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) and the National Research Council (Snow et al., 1998) as well as the O-G approach to reading remediation. The *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> adheres to industry standards for MSL programs as determined by the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council (IMSLEC).

The *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> teaching procedures involve explicit instruction in new letter sound

correspondences or language structure concepts (i.e., syllable rules), which incorporates a model-lead-test approach. Each highly structured, 50-minute daily lesson plan includes practice with the new concept in isolation as well as contextual activities:

### ***Isolation Activities***

- Writing new sound unit and simultaneously saying its sound
- Reading a list of words with the new unit combined with only previously learned sounds
- Spelling a list of words with the new unit combined with only previously learned sounds
- Looking at previously taught grapheme flash cards and giving the correct sound(s)
- Listening to previously taught phonemes and writing the correct graphemes
- Blending of previously learned phonemes into single syllable nonsense words

### ***Contextual Activities***

- Reading decodable sentences emphasizing the new sound unit
- Reading decodable passages emphasizing the new sound unit
- Spelling sentence dictations emphasizing the new sound unit combined with previously learned sounds

The daily lesson also includes phonemic awareness activities as well as vocabulary and comprehension discussions.

The *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> training includes a process for certification in the use of the program. This process includes 45 hours of coursework emphasizing phonology, morphology, and language structure (syllable and spelling rules, etc.). This coursework is presented in a 20-hour four-day Introductory Course followed by a school-year-long implementation program. During the implementation program, teachers are involved in 25 additional hours of coursework in eight three-hour monthly seminars. Additional components

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of certification involve pre-/post-assessments, five visits by a *SLANT* Coach during the teacher's *SLANT* reading time to ensure fidelity of implementation, and a certification exam at the end of the implementation program. Certification is valid for three years and requires 30 hours of specific coursework to be renewed.

## Research Question

The aim of this investigation was to determine if the scores related to sight word and decoding skills indicated support for the *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> program generally. The second question was to determine if any trends were evident in regard to types of learners in the sample.

## Chicago Area Implementation

This study analyzed the reading scores reported by teachers as a part of their training year. Four separate years (2004-2005, 2005-2006, 2006-2007, and 2007-2008) of reported scores were aggregated for this analysis. The *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> program was implemented in approximately 20 suburban schools surrounding Chicago. In seven of these schools, the program was selected by instructional leaders through the establishment of a formal training contract which included all early intervention reading and special education teachers in the school. In the remaining schools, reading or special education teachers sought out the training individually. A requirement in the *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> training is the collection and analysis of several measures of reading progress. Of these, data were aggregated and analyzed to identify patterns and trends.

## Participants

### Teachers

In all, 131 teachers collected pre- and posttest data corresponding to eight months of *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> instruction. Ninety-two percent of the teachers were special educators or reading

specialists (121/131), and the remaining 10 teachers (8%) were general educators. By the end of the training year, 100% of the teachers involved in this program evaluation met the certification criteria for the *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup>.

### Students

All of the 251 students in the sample were receiving support for reading via the following services: special education services through IEP reading goals, Title 1 reading support, or Reading Specialist services. Most of the students were in the early grades. The grade levels with the highest number of students in the sample were 2nd grade ( $n = 27$ ), 3rd grade ( $n = 39$ ), and 4th grade ( $n = 30$ ). The older students sampled in grades 5 through 9 totaled 45 in all. The older students were all identified as students with disabilities. The number of students in kindergarten ( $n = 1$ ) and 1st grade ( $n = 10$ ) represented the smallest group of students in this sample.

Of the 215 students in the sample, 148 students (69%) were identified with a disability. The largest disability group ( $n = 106$ ) in the sample was students with a Learning Disability (LD). Other disability groups represented were Communication Disorders ( $n = 12$ ), Cognitive Disability ( $n = 9$ ), Attention Deficit Disorders and Other Health Impairments ( $n = 7$ ), Emotional Disabilities ( $n = 5$ ), Autism ( $n = 3$ ), Physical Disability ( $n = 3$ ), Hearing Impairment ( $n = 2$ ), and Visual Impairment ( $n = 1$ ). There were four students who had been identified as English Language Learners (ELLs). The remaining 63 students (31%) were reported with no disability or ELL designation.

### Settings

The 20 schools involved in this evaluation represented a wide variety of urban and suburban settings with a large range of ethnicities and socioeconomic groups of students. Using data available through the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), student demographic descriptors of these schools

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ranged from 3 to 47% African American, 15 to 59% White; and 2 to 95% Hispanic. Between 24 to 85% of the student population in these schools was low income. Teachers in these schools (as reported by ISBE) were up to 6% African American, 71 to 95% White, and up to 28% Hispanic. Years of experience ranged from 8 to 13 years; and between 32 to 57% of teachers had Bachelor's degrees and between 43 to 68% had Master's degrees.

In seven of the schools (representing 64% of the student data), the program was selected by instructional leaders through the establishment of a formal training contract which included all early intervention reading and special education teachers in the school. In the remaining 13 schools, reading or special education teachers sought out the training individually. Five of these schools (representing approximately 28% of the student data) were public schools with demographics very similar to those above. The remaining eight schools (representing 8% of the student data) were private parochial or special education schools, and no specific demographic data were available.

Overall, the ratio of teachers to students ranged from 1:1 to 1:10 with an average ratio of 1:2. Most students were given instruction in small group settings with less than four students in the group. Students were provided the *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> intervention as pullout instruction (for those students receiving Special Education resource services or Reading Specialist services); or, for those students in Special Education instructional programs, intervention was provided during their typical literacy time.

## Reading Assessment

Teachers assessed each of their students—pre-testing in September and posttesting in June. All teachers participated in a training session on the administration and scoring of the assessments and had access to their *SLANT* Coach for additional assistance. Although the teachers reported several assessments, only three assessments were used in this investigation. Two subtests from the Test of

Word Reading Efficiency (TOWRE) (Torgensen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1999) was used to assess the students' ability to accurately and fluently pronounce both real (Sight Word Efficiency subtest) and pseudo (Decoding Efficiency subtest) words. Each subtest was timed for 45 seconds. The third assessment, a subtest (Elision) from the Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP) (Wagner, Torgensen, & Rashotte, 1999), was used to assess the students' phonological awareness. On this subtest, the student is asked to repeat a spoken word, then to say it again minus one phoneme (i.e., "Say 'flat.' Now say it again, without the /l/"). These subtests were selected due to their superior reliability and validity in assessing phonological awareness and decoding skills. The selection of these three subtests was intended to investigate the decoding and phonemic awareness specifically.

## Score Reporting

The teachers submitted specific information for each of the students in their reading intervention program during the training year. This information included grade level, pre- and posttest scores on the three subtests, and, when applicable, the disability eligibility category and ESL determination. These data were recorded in an *Excel* spreadsheet by teacher, school, and year. The reading subtest scores were converted to standard and scaled scores using the test manuals.

## Procedural Integrity

All students in the program received a minimum of two 50-minute lessons each week. To obtain *SLANT* System<sup>®</sup> certification, teachers are required to meet with their student or group at least 60 sessions and accrue at least 60 hours of contact time from October through May. Contact hours are documented through the submission of a log sheet. The *SLANT* Coaches verified the accuracy of the log sheet over the course of the training year. Pre- and post-assessments were not counted toward contact hours.

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A *SLANT* Coach visited teachers five times during their *SLANT* instruction between October and May. The *SLANT* Coach used a comprehensive checklist of observed behaviors at each visit. The indicators on the checklist were organized into three categories: (1) Classroom Environment, (2) Teacher Instruction, and (3) Materials. Teachers' performance on each indicator of the checklist was rated as *observed*; *should have seen, but didn't*; or *not applicable*. On the last observation checklist of the training year, teachers were required to have at least 80% proficiency overall in order to qualify for certification.

Teachers participated in eight three-hour instructional seminars between October and May. Topics of the seminars included fluency, vocabulary instruction, comprehension strategy development, working with morphemes and language structure (syllable and spelling rules). Each seminar included an opportunity for questions by the teachers as well as time to share anecdotes of success. Additionally, a comprehensive exam was given at the end of the seminar component. Teachers were required to pass the exam with a minimum 85% accuracy rate in order to qualify for certification. All teachers involved in this evaluation report met the criteria for certification by the end of the training year.

### **Checklist Reliability**

The *SLANT* Coaches who participated in this analysis were trained observers. As a part of the *SLANT* System®, coaches were trained in the use of the observation checklist through the use of videotaped instruction and in actual classroom settings. In addition, coaches met regularly to discuss the indicators and clarify the scoring protocol. To determine the inter-rater reliability of the use of observation checklists for this investigation, all *SLANT* Coaches individually scored a videotaped *SLANT* lesson. The checklist scores were then compared across *SLANT* Coaches. The percentage of agreement was 100%, which was calculated by dividing the number of disagreements by

agreements multiplied by 100. *SLANT* Coaches consistently marked items similarly, and subsequent discussion confirmed each coach identified similar areas of need for the videotaped teacher.

### **Analysis**

The *Excel* spreadsheet was imported into *SPSS* to identify statistically significant differences between groups. Scores were aggregated overall and by disability and grade level. The posttests were compared using the ANCOVA with the pretest as covariate to mitigate the influence of prior reading achievement in the analysis of reading gains. In addition, *t*-tests were used for individual groups and all students ( $n = 215$ ) to examine the significance of changes in reading achievement as measured by the three reading subtests.

### **Results**

The aggregated scores of four years of pre- and posttest results showed that overall students made significant gains on three measures of reading development. First, the TOWRE Sight Word Efficiency standard scores yielded highly significant ( $t [226] = -10.967, p < 0.000$ ) growth. The second assessment variable examined was the TOWRE Phonemic Decoding Efficiency Subtest Standard Score, which also showed highly significant growth ( $t [223] = -12.269, p < 0.000$ ). And finally, the CTOPP Elision Scaled Scores, also demonstrated highly significant growth ( $t [222] = -10.676, p < 0.000$ ).

Looking at differences between students in 4th grade and below compared to students in 5th grade and above showed variation between the younger and older students. Younger students significantly outperformed their older counterparts in all three posttest scores of reading development (Table 1). An ANCOVA of scores by grade level showed differences between grade levels in sight word identification. The TOWRE Sight Word posttest analysis was highly significant overall:  $F (9, 114) = 4.84, p < 0.000$ . The pairwise

comparisons showed several random differences between grade levels without apparent trends. The TOWRE Decoding posttest pairwise comparisons of grade levels demonstrated significant differences between upper and lower grade levels (e.g., K vs. 6th, 7th, and 8th grades). However, a significant difference was seen ( $F [9, 115] = 8.48, p = 0.000$ ) overall, demonstrating that all students progressed with relative uniformity. There were no differences ( $F [9, 105] = 2.57, p < 0.01$ ) between grade levels on the CTOPP.

Overall, students without disabilities significantly outperformed students with disabilities on all three subtests (Table 2). An analysis of the scores by disability was also conducted. Students with learning disabilities ( $n = 106$ ) represented the largest disability category, or 70% of all students with disabilities in the sample. An analysis of the pre-/posttest scores showed that this group of students made significant gains in sight:  $t(105) = -8.189, p < 0.000$ ; decoding:  $t(108) = -11.010, p < 0.000$ ; and elision:  $t(98) = -8.352, p < 0.000$ . Similar gains were seen with other disability groups, while the smaller numbers per group limited the statistical evidence.

### Anecdotal Data

One of the schools in this sample provided additional data about the overall effectiveness of the

*SLANT System*<sup>®</sup> for early intervention in reading. A *SLANT System*<sup>®</sup> coaching model was utilized in this school where a majority of teachers (61%) were exposed to the approach through a 20-hour Introductory Course. The school's literacy coach was fully certified in the approach. The coach meets weekly with teachers to ensure adherence to *SLANT System*<sup>®</sup> procedures. The school reported two indicators to determine the effectiveness of the *SLANT System*<sup>®</sup> approach. The first indicator was the number of students referred for special education assessment due to a suspected learning disability. This number reflected a dramatic decrease in referrals (-14) and eligibility (-10) over a two-year period. The second indicator reported was that after the *SLANT System*<sup>®</sup> intervention year, 100% of kindergarten students performed above benchmark in the AimsWeb Initial Sound Fluency subtest. The percentage of 1st-grade students at or above benchmark on the AimsWeb Phoneme Segmentation Fluency subtest increased from 42 to 96% over a three-month period. During the same period, the percentage of 1st graders who met or exceeded benchmark on the AimsWeb Nonsense Word Fluency subtest increased from 27 to 68%. This school team attributed these improvements to the *SLANT System*<sup>®</sup> intervention.

Other corroborating evidence was reported by a school with all K-2 teachers using the *SLANT System*<sup>®</sup> with fidelity. This school compared the

**Table 1. Subtest Means, Standard Deviations, and ANCOVAs for Younger and Older Students**

Subtest	Younger Students			Older Students			ANCOVA		
	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
TOWRE Decode	171	95.74	13.31	53	78.68	11.24	(1, 221)	19.12	<0.000
TOWRE Sight	173	94.50	15.95	54	77.19	12.27	(1, 224)	34.504	<0.000
CTOPP	178	8.99	3.54	45	7.80	3.49	(1, 220)	2.066	<0.152

**Table 2. Subtest Means, Standard Deviations and ANCOVAs for Students With and Without Disabilities**

Subtest	Students with Disabilities			Students without Disabilities			ANCOVA		
	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
TOWRE Decode	152	87.36	12.16	72	100.9	15.56	(1, 221)	5.35	<0.022
TOWRE Sight	152	88.13	.81	75	94.94	1.19	(1, 224)	20.99	<0.000
CTOPP	143	7.83	3.42	80	10.40	3.20	(1, 220)	2.97	<0.086

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results of the Illinois Student Achievement Test (ISAT), which is administered annually for all Illinois students in 3rd grade and above. When comparing progress over two years (2005-2006 and 2006-2007), the 3rd-grade ISAT reading scores improved 19% compared to district increases of 14% and statewide increases of 3% for the same period. In the following year, which reflected two full years of the *SLANT* System® as the school's primary reading program for K-2 students, 100% of 3rd-grade students met or exceeded reading benchmarks on the ISAT assessment.

## Discussion

The *SLANT* System® training was selected by individual teachers or by individual schools as a reading intervention for students who were presenting reading delays. Teachers collected the reading achievement scores used in this evaluation as a requirement of their training program. In all, four years of data were aggregated and analyzed for differences based on student grade level or disability. These results offer evidence that the *SLANT* System® demonstrated significant growth in the phonemic awareness and decoding abilities of the students involved in the program evaluation and looks to be an effective approach for targeted intervention. The scores derived from trainees showed that all of these students made significant progress on individually administered achievement tests during the intervention year. This was supported by the AimsWeb data and the Illinois statewide assessment provided by the schools using the *SLANT* System® with consistency. Both of these reports indicated that the *SLANT* System® contributed to increases in reading improvement.

Although the younger students sampled outperformed their older age peers in the three measures of reading achievement, this finding may be attributed to other variables like the larger number of younger students. Similarly, the results of the *SLANT* System® were dramatic for LD students, which was the largest disability group in the sample. Overall, these analyses

indicate that students in all grade levels and all disability groups showed significant gains on the three measures of reading achievement.

## Limitations

Several factors limit the credibility of these findings. First, there was no control group that had been exposed to another reading intervention to show comparative results or relative effect size of the findings. The teachers in the study were novices in the use of the *SLANT* System®, which might have influenced the adherence to procedures in offering the intervention and in collecting the reading scores. A subsequent study should involve teachers who have practiced using the *SLANT* System® and administering the reading achievement subtests.

While the systematic observation by the *SLANT* Coaches offered evidence of procedural compliance, potential errors in implementation could have been controlled through additional observations. Similarly, the criteria used to identify disabilities were not consistently defined over the four years. These years saw the early implementation of RTI, which created some inconsistencies in disability eligibility overall. For example, some students who were suspected as having LD were counted in that category, but the students may not have been identified as LD after the reading intervention. These limitations are commonly experienced in program evaluation analysis.

Future research is needed to compare the reading achievement outcomes of students with reading difficulties who are exposed to O-G approaches such as the *SLANT* System® and competing approaches. This program evaluation adds to the favorable evidence that MSL instruction is highly beneficial for students experiencing reading deficiencies. Only through rigorous experimental designs can we demonstrate that O-G approaches meet the level of evidence required to state that it works with confidence, however.

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## Adapted Observational Checklist

Date

School

Observer

Grade level

Number of minutes per lesson

Number of students in group

### Classroom Environment

- Students are seated to enable active engagement by all students.
- Program wall posters and other visuals are displayed as designed.
- Student work is displayed and reflects a pride of work standard.
- Classroom environment is conducive to instruction.
- Materials are accessible/organized.

### Teacher Instruction

- Teacher follows lesson as designed.
- Pace is appropriate.
- Teacher adjusts instruction to accommodate all learners and is aware of student response.
- Teacher provides corrective feedback and positive reinforcement.
- Teacher fosters active student engagement.
- Teacher uses direct instruction as needed.
- Evidence of program materials being used as designed.
- Teacher adheres to content of the program manual/lesson plan.

### Field Notes

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## About the Authors

Kathleen L. Brown is an assistant professor of Special Education at Northeastern Illinois University. Kathleen coordinates and teaches in the Learning Behavior Specialist II advanced credential program for special education teachers. She has over 30 years of experience in special education as a teacher, administrator, and university instructor. She completed her doctorate in Special Education at Purdue University in 2008. In 2008-2009, Kathleen served as Visiting Scholar for the Erasmus Mundus Special Educational Needs Programme in London, Prague, and the Netherlands. Her research interests involve co-teaching, reading instruction, distance learning applications, and international special education programs.

David Yasutake is a professor at Northeastern Illinois University. His 30-year career includes teaching as a general educator and special educator in urban environments. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1993. Since then, he has served as a faculty member and department chair at Northeastern Illinois University. In addition to his work at the university, he has worked on state and federal grants and often consults with the Illinois State Board of Education on matters concerning special education and special education teacher preparation.

Marsha Geller is the author of the *SLANT* System® for Structured Language Training. She has over 30 years of experience working with students with reading difficulties in both private practice and public school settings. Marsha has an extensive background in Orton-Gillingham, bringing that knowledge into the development of the *SLANT* System®. She consults with schools to provide professional development in the areas of reading and early literacy, as well as in the implementation of RTI practices and reading

assessment. Formerly, Marsha was an assistant professor in the Special Education program at National-Louis University in Wheeling, Illinois, where, for over 25 years, she developed and taught classes in the diagnosis and remediation

of reading disabilities. Marsha is a former president of the Illinois Branch of the International Dyslexia Association and a frequent speaker at state and national conferences.

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