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**Title:** Do students in developmental reading literacy programs process text differently than traditionally admitted students?

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**Strand of Work:** Basic Studies

**Purpose and Questions Investigated:** Studies report an alarming increase in the number of students entering college that need remedial assistance in the academic literacy skills that are needed to be successful in college-level courses. Many of these students may be required to take a reading literacy course prior to being formally enrolled in a college or university. Developmental education refers to a broad range of programs that support under prepared college students, including reading literacy course.

The goal of this study was to explore how students enrolled in a developmental educational program for reading literacy process texts differently from peers who are enrolled in college via traditional admissions criteria. Addressing this goal is important because students are typically admitted to these programs based on performance on standardized tests. While these test are diagnostic of reading problems, they do not give any information about what students do when they read. Gaining an understanding of what developmental students do similarly or differently from their peers should give insights into aspects of reading for which they need additional support.

**Research Context or Methodology.** This study conducted at Northern Illinois University (NIU), which has a developmental reading program. Twenty-two students admitted to the developmental reading program and 22 students traditionally enrolled in the university participated in the study, which occurred in a laboratory setting. Students enrolled in the developmental program at NIU are recruited from schools in the Chicago Public School system and rural schools in the Northern Illinois Region, and are therefore representative of many of the high school students involved in Project READI. The Reading Strategies Assessment Tool (RSAT) was used to assess comprehension level and comprehension processes (Developed with the support of a previous IES grant, R305G04005). RSAT provides these assessments by embedding questions in text. *Direct questions* provide an assessment of comprehension level. *Indirect questions* (based on a think aloud prompt) provide assessment of comprehension processes of bridging inference (connecting discourse constituents), elaborative inferences (i.e., based on world knowledge), and paraphrasing the text. Developmental students and non-developmental peers were matched on comprehension based on scores for direct questions.

**General statement of findings.** Analyses of the comprehension processes indicated that bridging and paraphrase scores were comparable in both populations. However, developmental students had lower elaboration scores than their peers.

**Implications.** These results indicate that developmental students may possess important skills needed for basic comprehension, but may struggle with issues pertaining to having sufficient background knowledge to support elaboration. While it is encouraging that these developmental students possess some basic literacy skills, knowledge deficits will likely negatively impact their ability to comprehend and use the challenging texts that they will be asked to read in their credit bearing courses. It may not be feasible to rectify issues regarding knowledge deficits in a developmental literacy course. However, these students need to learn the dispositions and skills necessary to persist with challenging, ambiguous texts so that they can acquire that knowledge through repeated exposure to texts. The interventions designed in project READI are intended to promote these skills and dispositions.

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