

# ORAL LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IS ESSENTIAL TO AVOID THE FOURTH GRADE SLUMP

## WHAT DID THEY DO?

As a follow-up research from 1990, Terry et al examined oral language and reading skills in a sample of students aged 6-11. Using the research and findings from Chall et al. (1990) regarding the "fourth-grade slump," where children from low-income backgrounds exhibited a sudden decline in academic achievement despite earlier success, Terry et al. sought to determine if this is still occurring today. This also occurred in typically developing black children growing up in poverty or low socioeconomic status (low-SES) with varying family dynamics. The students who were included in the study came from diverse backgrounds. Some came from single-parent or two-parent families. The group included multilingual individuals as well as those from multigenerational households. There were also students whose parents had attended college and others whose parents had not graduated from college.

## ARTICLE

Terry, N. P., Gatlin-Nash, B., Webb, M.-Y., Summy, S. R., & Raines, R. (2023). Revisiting the fourth-grade slump among black children. *The Elementary School Journal*, 123(3), 414–436.

## WHAT DID THEY FIND?

The data was consistent with the original study conducted by Chall and showed a downward trend in word reading and reading comprehension between 1st and 4th grade. Despite stereotypes of underachievement among Black children from low-income households, this study revealed that some of these children were excelling in oral language and reading skills. The slump in performance was particularly noticeable during the transition from learning to read to reading to learn. Although this decline was documented and researched, it is noted that it can be prevented, stopped, or even reversed. While disparities in upbringing, economic status, and race were and should be acknowledged, the decline in performance was linked not to a lack of foundational reading skills or oral vocabulary but to less well-developed oral language skills.

## WHAT COULD THIS MEAN FOR TEACHERS?

The findings can enhance educators' understanding of the educational challenges faced by Black children in low-SES contexts. Progress monitoring is crucial for tracking students' growth rates and identifying the specific skills that need to be targeted to diminish the descending trend in reading achievement. Teachers and schools should adopt a comprehensive approach that emphasizes oral language development, employs targeted interventions, and provides instruction that supports advanced word reading and comprehension skills. It is essential to recognize that Black students from low-SES families or living in poverty benefit from the same high-quality instruction as their more affluent peers. Ensuring equitable literacy instruction can help bridge the gap and promote better educational outcomes for all students.

