How Reading and Writing Fuel Each Other

EDITOR’S NOTE
Early reading intervention is crucial to ensure all students develop strong foundational literacy skills for academic and lifelong success. This Spotlight will help you investigate the benefits of tutoring on early reading skills; identify how to build students’ reading stamina; gain insights into knowledge-building curricula; review the benefits of read-alouds for students; evaluate the challenges and opportunities to reading comprehension; and more.
How Short ‘Bursts’ of Tutoring Can Boost Early Reading Skills

By Sarah D. Sparks

Bite-sized tutoring sessions—only 5 to 10 minutes daily—may help nip reading struggles in the bud in the earliest grades.

Students who participated in Chapter One—a nonprofit tutoring program that serves elementary children in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom—in their first two grades had higher oral reading fluency and better performance on district reading tests than untutored students, according to a study released Jan. 16 by the National Student Support Accelerator, which studies ways to scale up effective models for high-intensity tutoring.

High-intensity tutoring—with trained tutors meeting individually or in very small groups for at least 30 minutes, several times a week—is considered the most effective tutoring model, but often it’s also the most expensive. This study suggests that districts may be able to get more bang for their buck by using short, tightly focused individual tutoring in the earliest grades.

Kindergartners and 1st graders in the Chapter One program have individual sessions with part-time tutors trained in highly scripted, 5- to 10-minute lessons on phonics, oral reading, and other early literacy topics. These “tutoring bursts” happen during regular class lessons three to five times a week, and students also complete tablet-based activities on their own to reinforce the lessons.

“If you’re thinking about teaching phonics—like a new sound—you can actually complete that in five minutes,” said Carly Robinson, a senior researcher at Stanford University and the Accelerator’s research director. “Thinking about the attention span of a 5-year-old, it actually might be more effective to layer bite-sized chunks several times for a few minutes, as opposed to try to reiterate [a new concept] in a 30-minute session.”

Accelerator researchers randomly assigned more than 800 kindergartners in Broward County, Fla., to receive the tutoring or attend class as usual in 2021-22. By the end of the school year, kindergartners who received the tutoring in addition to regular classroom instruction performed on average about 11 percentile points higher on the district reading test than students who only received regular class instruction.

The students who then went on to continue the tutoring program in 1st grade were 16 percent less likely to be identified as at-risk readers by the winter of that school year. While 76 percent of the untutored students in the study read at least on grade level (called stage four or above) by the end of 1st grade, 96 percent of tutored students read at that level by comparison. The benefits were the same for both English learners and native-English speakers.

Cost effectiveness

The tutors all have college degrees, and many have education experience, but they are paid part-time. The program costs $350 to $450 per student annually, Robinson said.

“That’s on the much lower end of costs for high-dosage tutoring both because they have part-time tutors and through these short bursts of instruction, [tutors] actually can serve more students than they might be able to if it was, consistently, like 20-minute tutoring sessions scheduled every day or three times a week.”

While the tutoring program and the current study stops after 1st grade, researchers plan to follow the students through 3rd grade to find out whether the tutoring benefits are sustained over time.

“I think that some tutoring that is proving to be effective for early learners is also relevant for older 2nd and 3rd graders since the pandemic,” Robinson said. “We’ve been hearing [from educators] that in the past few years, interventions that they might normally direct at K-1 grades are needed at the 2nd and 3rd grade levels, too.”

“Some tutoring that is proving to be effective for early learners is also relevant for older 2nd and 3rd graders since the pandemic.”

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How to Build Students’ Reading Stamina

By Stephen Sawchuk

Visited recently by one of his former students, Minnesota teacher Eric Kalenze was reminded of the push it took to get that student to read at length.

While teaching a 9th grade class, Kalenze had given a class a 25-page reading assignment, and the student’s mother was concerned about whether her son would be able complete it within the demands of his individualized education program.

“His mom called and said, ‘This isn’t going to work,’” Kalenze recalled. “And I said, ‘Would you like him to be able to read 25 pages in a sitting at some point in his life?’ She said yes, of course.”

That student ended up being one of Kalenze’s best readers—hence his jubilant visit back to the classroom. But, teacher and student reminisced, it took some hard work to build his reading muscles to the place where he was routinely able to make it through nightly reading assignments.

It’s an anecdote that gets at one of the truisms of reading comprehension: Just as a skilled hitter spends time at the batting cages and a skilled pianist must tickle the ivories, a skilled reader needs to read.

The work of reading comprehension is the work of a lifetime, dependent on exposing students to lots of content and vocabulary and to giving them the tools to make sense of complex sentences and language structure. It also means growing students’ stamina—their ability to read at length. But this aspect of comprehension has not been studied nearly as much as others—even though the sheer amount of text students are expected to read can vary widely from classroom to classroom, beginning in the early grades.

“You have a 30-minute reading lesson. Are kids going to read 30 minutes or two? Is anyone going to monitor or inquire about that reading? And you also need to be doing something with the reading—interacting with the teacher about it, interacting with the other kids about it,” noted Timothy Shanahan, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

“Across a week or couple of weeks of lessons, reading should make up a significant part of the class, and students should be held accountable—it should be clear they really are doing the reading,” he said.

New challenges to stamina—and new resources

The push to get kids to read more is hardly new. Since the advent of sustained silent reading and Drop Everything and Read, or DEAR, programs in the 1960s and 1970s, schools have tried various strategies to increase students’ reading stamina.

The challenges persist today. And by most educators’ accounts, they have been exacerbated by the rise of social media and smartphones. With their beeps, badges, and buzzes, smartphones are engineered to maintain users’ attention—and to pull students’ focus away from focusing on print. A recent survey of educators by the EdWeek Research Center found that more than half said that, in grades 3-8, students’ reading stamina had declined precipitously since 2019.

“Stamina is another word for attention,” said Doug Lemov, who trains teachers and whose book Reading Reconsidered aims to bring evidence-based reading practices into classrooms. “Reading is an exercise in attention, and attention is increasingly fragmented.”

If sustaining students’ attention to persist through text is a long-standing challenge, there are also new opportunities. A plethora of new materials, often called “knowledge-building curriculum,” feature coherent content themes and text sets that can facilitate class discussion and give a framework for teachers to supply the academic vocabulary, background knowledge, and oral-language practice students need to make sense of texts.

Still, while these curricula do tend to present longer and more complex texts for discussion, they don’t intrinsically build in the routines that help students persist through them.

“Each grade level’s selections tend to be longer. That’s not nothing, but to me, it isn’t very instructive. It doesn’t give much help” to either student or teacher, Shanahan said.

And although research has tied aspects of text, including its syntax, vocabulary, and length to how difficult it is to read, that’s not quite the same thing as being able to focus on it for sustained periods of time, the educators note.

“It’s not just complexity. I can look at a complex text all day long, but if I only read three pages at a shot, it’s not building my stamina,” said Kalenze, who teaches middle and high school at the FIT Academy Charter School in Apple Valley, Minn., and also leads
curriculum, instruction, and evidence-based programs there.

No one curriculum can do everything to help build those routines, the educators said. Instead, teachers should include stamina-building exercises as part of the daily reading their students do. And it’s best to start early. Here are some of their ideas.

Make time for reading and talking about shared texts at school

Lemov is a fan of the new knowledge-building curricula, but said they have to be used a certain way to build stamina. Students should be reading together in class for sustained periods of time, working through complex syntax together, then discussing the texts’ meaning, craft, and nuances, he said.

He often deploys a “reading cycle” to make this happen: a combination of teacher read-aloud, student read-aloud, and student silent reading—all on the same shared piece of text. Teachers might, for instance, read the first two paragraphs to model what expressive prosody—the stress and intonations in a language—sounds like; students then take turns reading aloud, practicing their fluent reading; then, students read the next portion of the text silently on their own.

“It’s a sustained section of text, and we are practicing sustaining attention on it, with no break, for 20 minutes. Then we do a minute of writing and reflection and then we discuss it,” Lemov said. “Should there be reading at home? Yeah, probably, but we should also read consistently in class, because that’s when I can wire their habits for sustained attention.”

This model notably differs from the choice-reading programs like DEAR so popular in schools a generation ago. For one, the reading-aloud piece means teachers ensure that students can decode the text on their own, and arrange supports as needed.

For another, working on a shared text opens opportunities for discussion, debate, and ultimately, community. Those opportunities are foreclosed when everyone is reading their own book.

“The communal aspect of this work is one of the unacknowledged things about why shared books are powerful. When it’s funny and we’re laughing together, you feel connected to the people in the room—also when it’s stunning and memorable, or difficult,” said Lemov. “I believe in book choice in independent reading, but when it gets kind of valorized, it can be an isolated experience that weirdly replicates the smartphone.”

Increase the demands on students gradually

Old-school reading textbooks had plenty of flaws, but some features of them did help by gradually increasing the reading demand over time, Shanahan notes. They’d put one sentence on a page, then over time two sentences, then more, and so on through the course of a year. That same theory of action can still work today, especially as students are transitioning from decoding into reading.

For younger readers, teachers can gradually increase the number of sentences they’re expected to handle; for older students, stamina can be grown via page counts. Either way, the main goal should be increasing the number of words read in a sitting.

Teachers can also set “stretch goals” every so often, using either a longer text or a shorter, more difficult one to build stamina, and they can also help kids internalize routines when they’re struggling, Shanahan said.

“What happens if at one paragraph they do well and at two they have trouble? That’s when you start working on what they might do when they get to that second paragraph,” he said.

They could, for instance, write the briefest summary of the first paragraph to have that in mind before beginning on the second.

Consider using whole texts rather than excerpts

Some of the newer knowledge-building curricula prioritize whole texts, like complete poems, novels, plays, and articles. That stands in contrast to traditional reading programs, including what’s known as basal readers—typically big tomes mostly comprised of excerpts.

The EdWeek Research Center, in a nationally representative sample of educators conducted last fall, found that fewer than 1 in 5—just 17 percent—said they relied primarily on
whole texts to teach reading. Most favored all excerpts or a mix of whole texts and excerpts.

Though there isn’t much empirical study on the topic either way, the experts Education Week interviewed favored whole texts. By their nature, whole texts tend to be richer and also gradually make more demands on the reader, who must juggle what’s going on, chapter by chapter, against the work’s larger layers, allusions, and significance. (Longer narrative nonfiction works much the same way.)

“You get to watch characters develop and do more knowledge-building through the things authors don’t explain,” said Kalenze, the Minnesota teacher. “With excerpts, I don’t think you get cumulative gain in quite the same way. There’s just no substitute for watching how a novelist works or how their arc builds. When understanding a work of art, you kind of have to follow everything the author is doing. With a snapshot, I don’t see how that works.”

Teaching a novel or a text of some length also makes it easier for teachers to gradually increase the reading load to stretch kids’ reading stamina—from 10 to 20 to 30 pages over a unit—than trying to juggle a lot of shorter texts of varying levels of complexity.

Accountability matters

There are a few ways teachers can check that kids are successfully building their stamina. One is a simple formative assessment.

When reading a shared text together, teachers can stop and gauge understanding after a set period of time. If students are struggling to grasp the meaning by the end of the read, that may be a signal that a teacher needs to dial back slightly—or offer more supports on the text’s vocabulary, morphological or language features, and other elements.

“If you have a six-paged article about something in the Civil War, for instance, have them read the six pages and then instead of doing some activity right away, quiz them—find out how well they did. Did they have a better understanding about what happened earlier in the article? Did the second half get harder? Maybe they weren’t reading as carefully or maybe they didn’t know how to use that information and the second part just got harder,” Shanahan said.

Another tool useful in secondary school, when teachers expect students to do more reading at home, is the good old-fashioned pop quiz with a few basic questions about plot, characters, or key details. Kalenze uses these not only as a way to prompt kids to do their reading but also because they can prime the pump for understanding if a text is especially challenging.

“It becomes a platform to talk about what’s going on in the chapter, and if it wasn’t clear to you, it will enable our comprehension discussion,” he said. “Without a daily accountability, it really adds up over time. When you start to attach this accountability, you hit a rhythm and you start to notice that all the kids have read. It forces you to do your homework, sit down for an hour, and read.”

Additional Resource
View this article’s charts
How One District Moved to a ‘Knowledge-Building’ Curriculum: 3 Key Takeaways

By Sarah Schwartz

At the beginning of the 2023-24 school year, educators in the Portage schools outside of Kalamazoo, Mich., decided to overhaul how they taught reading comprehension.

Instead of focusing on teaching skills and strategies—such as finding the main idea of a passage, or comparing and contrasting characters—they would structure units around topics in science, social studies, and world cultures. The idea would be to systematically build students’ knowledge of the world, ideally making it easier for them to make connections to new texts and write about what they knew.

This “knowledge-building” approach to English/language arts instruction is gaining ground in the field, buoyed by research that shows a connection between students’ general background knowledge and their reading comprehension ability.

Three educators from Portage joined Education Week on Feb. 15 to discuss the district’s move to the new curriculum, as well as the challenges and successes they have experienced so far. The new program has required a big shift in how teachers structure their days, said Erin Crouch, a 2nd grade teacher.

“In [the old curriculum], you really had—Monday’s vocabulary, Tuesday’s phonics, Wednesday’s comprehension. We didn’t have that [in the new curriculum],” she said. “It was more like, these are our guiding questions, this is our target task at the end of this lesson. We want our students to be able to respond to this prompt, so how are we going to get there?”

Read on for three takeaways from the conversion.

Teachers don’t need to be experts in every topic

There’s more prep work involved in a knowledge-rich curriculum, Crouch said, because she wanted to develop some background ahead of time in the topics she would be discussing with students. The 2nd grade units in the program that Portage uses run the gamut from immigration to animal habitats to the human body.

“We have to be prepared for what questions are going to arise,” Crouch said.

Still, district leaders have impressed upon teachers that they don’t need to be experts, an all-knowing sage on the stage, said Courtney Huff, the district’s literacy coach. “We have to be the facilitators of learning,” she said.

It’s OK—better, even—if teachers don’t present all of the information out of the gate, Huff added. The goal is for students to use their reading and discussion skills to glean that knowledge themselves, she said.

Crouch summarized the approach: “We have to prepared, but we have to learn along with our students, which is pretty awesome.”

Districts have to answer the question—which knowledge?

Different knowledge-building curricula are built around different topics. Some focus more on ancient civilizations, for example, while others might center on social and political issues of today.

When school districts choose a program, they’re signaling which topics they think are most important for students to learn. It’s not a decision that comes without controversy. Some knowledge-building curricula have been criticized as Eurocentric and overly representative of the Western canon.

What subjects are represented, and how, were factors that Portage leaders examined closely in the programs they considered.

“We knew going into this that we wanted to represent all students. That was our driving force,” said Mackenzie Sheahan, the director of curriculum and professional development.

Sheahan and her colleagues also looked for a curriculum that would expose students to the world outside of Portage. The program they picked includes fiction and nonfiction about people and events in other countries.

Having a culturally diverse curriculum has prompted conversations with students about how perspective and voice shape literature, said Crouch. She remembered one book about Julio C. Tello, a Peruvian archaeologist.

“Before the kids even read it, we [read] the note from the author and the illustrator about how it was really important for them to show the story through their lens, because they
were both Peruvian,” she said. The class talked about why it might be important for people to have the opportunity to share stories from their own cultures.

“It wasn’t just about what he did, but how that story was being told,” Crouch said.

**Knowledge-building isn’t the only component of strong reading comprehension instruction**

Reading comprehension is a complex skill, requiring background knowledge, but also the ability to visualize, store, and interpret what is read. In Portage, teachers work to incorporate practice with comprehension strategies into the material.

The district is building a bank of supplemental materials that teachers can use for this purpose—for example, a Venn diagram worksheet that can be used to compare and contrast two different texts about the same person.

Crouch aims to interweave skill practice into the stories she reads with her students. One of the standards for 2nd graders is understanding text features, such as glossaries or captions. In the past, she has taught those skills in isolation, and students have had a hard time identifying them in practice. But now, Crouch regularly points them out in the texts that students are reading.

“Being able to identify [captions] in the reading and stop and talk, and have students explain how that caption helped them understand the photograph or the illustration, we’re embedding that into the lesson itself,” she said.
How Reading and Writing Fuel Each Other

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Reading Aloud to Students Shouldn’t Get Lost in Shift To ‘Science of Reading,’ Teachers Say

By Elizabeth Heubeck

W
we’ve heard a lot about the science of reading this year. The term appeared 600-plus times in Education Week’s 2023 coverage alone.

Clearly, readers are interested in this topic, which refers to literacy instruction aimed at phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. But within this scripted method of how to make children proficient readers, there’s one critical element that’s been largely overlooked: the joy of reading.

“Decoding is absolutely the foundation of reading proficiency, but it is by no means where we end our efforts. Nor should it be the only effort,” said Maryanne Wolf, director of the Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners, and Social Justice at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

As efforts toward developing strong readers go, reading aloud to children is one that teachers’ anecdotes and research inform us is worthwhile. Before emerging readers are able to automatically link the jumble of letters they see in front of them to the riveting stories these symbols create—whether magical, frightening, whimsical, eye-opening or otherwise entertaining or informative—someone must do it for them. And teachers are the most reliable source to take up the task.

Here’s a glance at why reading out loud to students matters, the barriers teachers face in executing the read aloud, and the benefits of making it happen.

The benefits of being read to from a very young age

The single act of reading aloud to children can provide multiple benefits; perhaps most significantly, it can develop a lifelong interest in pleasure reading, according to multiple literacy experts and studies on the subject. It also comes with the ancillary benefits of increasing children’s vocabulary and background knowledge. One recent study found that parents reading to their children as young as 1 to 2.5 years of age strongly predicted later vocabulary, reading comprehension, and reading motivation.

In another study, researchers tracked the impact on children whose parents read to them a minimum of five books daily from a very young age; these children entered kindergarten with exposure to around 1.4 million more words than children who were never read to. Variations in this daily reading practice, referred to as the “million word gap,” may explain later differences in children’s vocabulary and reading development, suggested the study’s authors.

Despite the multiple proven benefits of being read to early and often, teachers can’t assume that this is happening at home. In a nationally representative sample of nearly 10,000 4-year-old children, 25 percent were never read to, and another estimated 25 percent were read to only once or twice weekly, according to data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort. Those rates were in spite of widespread campaigns to increase awareness of the importance of reading to children. For instance, the American Academy of Pediatrics has formally recommended the practice begin in early childhood, noting that it “builds language,
literacy, and social-emotional skills that last a lifetime.”

**Teachers value reading aloud, but don’t always do it**

Children generally come to school eager to learn and, regardless of their reading exposure at home, teachers can make up a lot of lost ground by prioritizing reading aloud to children on a routine basis. Further, most elementary classroom teachers see the value in it. In a 2019 study examining attitudes of 1st- through 4th-grade teachers about read-alouds, 100 percent deemed it important; 45 percent agreed that it was very important; and more than half considered it indispensable. Whether it’s happening widely is unclear.

There’s no reliable way to measure how frequently teachers actually read aloud to students during the school day. But data on time spent in class allowing students to read on their own could suggest that teacher read-alouds aren’t prioritized either. For instance, 82 percent of teachers surveyed recently by the International Literacy Association agreed that students should read independently for at least 20 minutes a day, but only 33 percent said their schedule permitted them to block off that amount of time during class.

When teachers do find the time to read to their students, they report positive results. Longtime elementary teacher Deloris Fowl-er’s efforts to instill in her students the joy of reading were captured in a 2020 article in *The Atlantic*. She observed that her 3rd grade students were far more engaged when she read chapter books to them than content from the basal readers that came with required literacy curriculum; she reported that they begged her to keep reading when the allotted reading time was over.

Teachers who read to students beyond elementary school report similar findings. In an opinion piece for Education Week, 8th grade teacher Christina Torres described her “read-along” strategy, in which she would read from a book and her students would follow along in their own copy, as hugely beneficial. She said it increased student enjoyment and engagement in addition to building community within the class.

Torres, a teacher at Honolulu’s Punahou School, described the reaction of her English students when she would read books aloud to them. “Should we stop for today?” Torres would ask, after reading aloud for a period, to which they would collectively respond: “Noooo!”
Reading Comprehension Challenges And Opportunities, in Charts

By Stephen Sawchuk

Reading comprehension is a complex endeavor. It’s heavily dependent on learning new content and the vocabulary that underpins key concepts in that content. It’s correlated with students’ ability to read fluently. As students grow older and are expected to learn more through lengthier reading, they need to build the stamina to persist through harder and longer texts.

To gain more insight into the challenges and opportunities in schools, the EdWeek Research Center in late 2023 surveyed a nationally representative group of principals, teachers, and district leaders on practices related to grade 3-8 students’ reading comprehension. The results reflect those of nearly 300 respondents nationwide.

Here are some of the key insights from the exclusive data.

Aspects of reading comprehension

When surveyed, more than half of respondents pinpointed several challenges to reading comprehension. Problems with students’ vocabulary topped the list.

Reading comprehension requires teachers to integrate the vocabulary—often domain-specific words and concepts related to the content—into their teaching of the text. (Teaching about geology, for example, might require them to embed words and concepts like magma, cataclysm, eruption, and plate tectonics.)

Over two-thirds of educators said that students who struggle with reading comprehension could not decode enough of the words in the text. Decoding is typically taught in grades K-2, as students learn to recognize sound parts and how letters represent sounds in print. However some students continue to struggle with decoding in later grades, sometimes because they haven’t received enough explicit instruction on this foundational skill.

Decoding alone is not sufficient to become a strong reader, though. Strong readers have a wide body of background knowledge that they bring to bear on texts, developed by exposure to lots of content. Nearly two-thirds of educators, 63 percent, said students often lacked the background knowledge necessary to understand texts.

That’s why, even when they are learning to decode, students should be exposed to rich content through teacher read-alouds and other methods.

Respondents also highlighted stamina and sentence structure as aspects that made reading comprehension challenging. (Printed texts tend to contain more challenging syntax than oral language.)

To get a sense of how educators approached reading comprehension, the EdWeek Research Center also asked to what degree they emphasized content, skills, and writing.

Educators largely agreed that all three elements of reading instruction were critical, roughly in the same amounts. But their very top priorities showed some differences. Nearly 4 in 10 said that teaching comprehension strategies was a top priority; that share was higher than it was for the other two choices.

While students do need to learn strategies such as inferencing, many cognitive scientists and reading researchers say such instruction should take place in the context of greater attention to content, rather than taught in isolation. That’s because of the large body of research showing the high correlation between background knowledge and the ability to understand texts.

Meanwhile, writing can be integrated as a core part of reading work, by asking students to analyze and go deeper into the content they read.

When (and if) your students in grades 3-8 struggle with reading comprehension, what component(s) of the process do they struggle with? Select all that apply.

- They don’t know enough vocabulary in the text [71%]
- They can’t decode enough of the words in the text [68%]
- They don’t have enough background knowledge about the topic of the text [63%]
- The text structure is too complex for them to understand [57%]
- They don’t have enough stamina to read through the whole text [56%]
- My students don’t struggle with reading comprehension [6%]
- Other [5%]

SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center
In your view, how important are the following elements of reading instruction for students in grades 3-8?

- A top priority
- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Somewhat unimportant
- Very unimportant
- Of no importance at all

Materials

What should students read? To get at this age-old question, we asked educators to describe the types of texts they choose. Especially in grades 3-8, one issue is whether to select materials that prioritize complete novels, poems, news articles, and other sources, often grouped thematically. Another popular choice is traditional “basal readers,” large tomes that tend to include a bevy of texts, often excerpted.

Curriculum quality review groups have come down on different sides of this question. The Knowledge Matters campaign, for example, has exclusively endorsed curriculum that focuses on whole-text sets. Another quality-control group, EdReports, has also given good ratings to some basal reader series.

While there is little empirical evidence to suggest that using whole texts is better than excerpts at supporting students’ reading, whole texts allow students to experience complete works, and may be a better choice to prepare students for texts of increasing complexity and length as they advance through their schooling.

Testing reading

States’ year-end reading tests purport to measure general reading comprehension abilities.

However, only 6 percent of respondents said they completely agree that the year-end state reading tests students take are accurate gauges of their reading comprehension; another 36 percent said they partly agreed. A majority of educators disagreed that they’re sound measures.

In open-ended responses, many of them noted that students who do not have the background knowledge to make sense of the reading passages on these exams tend to score poorly.

Cognitive scientists have raised questions about the exams, too, noting that students’ performance on them reflects how much they know about the content at hand, not merely reading ability.

Reading for pleasure

Sixty percent of educators said they placed at least a fair amount of emphasis on reading for pleasure in grades 3-8. A large body of evidence connects students’ interest and motivation to their academic achievement, and encouraging pleasure reading supports the goal
of reading comprehension with the desire to instill a love of reading.

Pleasure reading shouldn’t be confused with the reading students do in classrooms as part of their reading lessons, or with the “lev-eled” or “choice” books that are used in some English/language arts curricula.

Most educators also felt that many students don’t read much for pleasure at home or during free time. More than 8 and 10 educators said that 50 percent or fewer of their students did so.

**Stamina**

To be better readers, students need to read a lot—and they also need to persist through more challenging kinds of texts. This especially matters as the reading volume amps up beginning in the lower secondary level.

Educators said that they felt their students’ reading stamina had fallen since 2019. Although the survey didn’t query why, likely culprits include the pandemic, and the saturation of smartphones and other tech devices competing for students’ attention.

That’s why many educators say sustained attention to reading, and the discussion of increasingly complex text, needs to happen while students are at school.
The Science of Reading Meets Writing

Methods, tools, and strategies for teaching writing are also critical for reading—and vice versa

by Maureen Auman, author of *Step Up to Writing*

Reading and writing have a lot in common, rely upon each other, and work together to build the literacy skills students need for a successful life. In very simplistic terms, reading, for example, provides new vocabulary. Writing uses these new words to replace old standbys. As a lifelong literacy educator, I believe reading and writing skills are the most important of those we want students to master.

The science of reading challenges writing teachers to join the two and teach both as one.

**Reading and writing go hand in hand.**
**Reading impacts writing.**
**Writing impacts reading.**

Before educators can successfully teach reading, they must understand the critical nature of writing when it comes to teaching reading.

When writing is taught in conjunction with reading, even young students learn to express their ideas. These students become fluent readers as they search for more information about topics they choose. They share their new vocabulary, read, and write words, phrases, sentences, and full paragraphs.

Once teachers have gained that essential understanding that writing and reading instruction go hand in hand, there are many strategies they can use to help students of all levels improve their reading and writing skills together.

Building writing instruction into each reading and literacy lesson—in fact, into every lesson, regardless of topic—helps build the strongest readers and writers, preparing them for the next steps in their academic journeys and, most importantly, for successful lives.

Strategies for Writing Instruction

The following four strategies have proven successful time and again, and each is easy to incorporate into a reading lesson.

1. **Marking the text** is a reading skill that is handy for many reading tasks. Marking important terms—words and/or phrases—helps readers concentrate. Sometimes, marking the text can be a group activity. Marking old magazines, handouts, or news items is good practice for students, but try sticky notes when reading school textbooks and items from the library.

2. **Writing a summary** is a great way to demonstrate how much students learned or remember. Summarizing in writing makes a summary permanent, which makes summaries useful for class discussions and test prep.

   Instruct students to try the TED verbs to help them write a topic sentence for a summary. After they have a topic sentence, remind them to add the facts.

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Reptiles by Lois Ballard explains why many kinds of snakes are helpful.

DESCRIBES
This magazine article describes the story of Jordan Romero, a California boy who dreamed of climbing the Seven Summits—the tallest mountains on each continent.

3 Reconsidering cursive and mastering printing may seem old-fashioned. However, I have had many high school students tell me they do not like their writing. What they mean is they do not like their cursive, their spelling, their printing—but they like their ideas, they like what they read, they like conversation, and, yes, they like teacher presentations. They are thankful for help and feel proud when they succeed. They like to read and want to write about what they read.

3 Notes: Don’t grade cursive. Just encourage and model.

Junior High Teacher
→ Tall letters touch the top of the line.
→ Letters below the line go straight down.

Third Grade Teacher
→ Use elementary paper—vertical style with lines and dashes all year long. Enforce margins.
→ Send beautiful cursive writers off to upper elementary and middle school.

4 Creating study guides for textbooks will save time. Have students use notebook paper folded lengthwise for two-column notes. As they read, they can list new vocabulary (broken into syllables) in the first column and synonyms in the second column. Have them use more folded paper to break down and write new information. They can then use these folded pages as study guides.

The research and messages coming from the science of reading have encouraged many of us to think again about what our students need to succeed in school each day as readers and writers.

I remember back a few decades when I was new to public school education. I was the rookie on our team. But I knew we needed to integrate writing into our reading instruction. I was interested in the testing schools and districts gave to assess reading and writing skills. In my own classroom, I tried many ways to motivate middle school students to read and write. I used explicit instruction. I created models for note taking, essay writing, research, and

4 more. My students did well on exams and people noticed. I shared my strategies and methods, and teachers throughout our building added more reading and writing to their weekly plans. Even those teaching electives found ways to promote these skills. The result of all that classroom experience was Step Up to Writing®, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. To say I believe in and know the power of writing in learning to read is an understatement!

This is where we are now. We need all teachers in all subjects to learn about the science of reading. If everyone adds a bit of writing, a bit of reading, and a bit of reading and writing—imagine how much we can accomplish!

To learn more about the new edition of Step Up to Writing and how writing is an integral part of reading instruction, visit voyagersopris.com/SUTW.
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How Reading and Writing Fuel Each Other

Classroom Reading Groups: What Works and What Doesn’t

By Sarah Schwartz

Every year, early elementary teachers welcome students with a wide range of reading abilities into their classrooms. Some kindergarteners may be reading whole books, for example, while others don’t know their letters.

For decades, a popular way to address this broad scope of student need has been leveled reading groups. Teachers group students at similar achievement levels to provide guided instruction in books deemed just right for their abilities, spending time with each group of students in their class every day.

But mounting evidence suggests that this practice doesn’t improve struggling students' reading skills. Research has shown that the tools powering popular leveling systems don’t always accurately capture students’ abilities—and that dividing up high- and low-performing students can actually widen achievement gaps.

These findings leave teachers and school leaders with a few big questions: Should they get rid of grouping altogether? If not, how do they group students if not by level? And how should they go about restructuring literacy blocks that have been designed around leveled group time for so long?

“Understanding the research base on this is a tricky endeavor,” said Kristin Conradi Smith, an associate professor of reading education at the College of William & Mary’s School of Education.

Leveled reading groups aren’t an effective practice. But that doesn’t mean that all grouping has to go, she said.

Researchers who study reading groups say that ability grouping can be effective under certain conditions—if the practice focuses on specific skills that students need work on rather than general reading levels, and if the groups are flexible enough so that students can move once they have mastered those skills.

They also point to the benefits of other types of small group instruction, like mixed-ability grouping and partner work.

Grouping students can be “extremely powerful,” said Matt Burns, a professor of special education at the University of Missouri’s College of Education & Human Development. “It’s especially effective for [lower-performing] kids; we see more growth.”

Critiques of leveled reading groups

Leveled reading groups are a component of some of the most popular early literacy curricula. In a 2020 EdWeek Research Center survey, 61 percent of K-2 teachers said that they use leveled texts in small group work.

To determine their reading “level,” teachers give students an assessment, usually listening to them read and recording the number and type of errors that they make. This level is designed to measure overall reading comprehension ability, rather than component skills like decoding or fluency.

In small groups, students read texts that match their level, while the teacher supports them with strategies students can use when they get stuck. (These strategies often are rooted in cueing—encouraging students to turn to other sources of information instead of the letters on the page, such as pictures and context, to guess at the words on the page.)

The goal with leveled reading groups is to meet students where they are, giving them enough challenge to grow their abilities, but not so much that the lesson becomes too difficult.

But research from Burns and his colleagues has shown that the leveling system doesn’t actually achieve that goal.

“The measurement system is highly erroneous, about 54 percent accuracy,” said Burns, referencing a study that found data from leveling assessments correctly predicted students’ reading ability only a little more than half of the time.

“If the test says they’re at a particular level, we don’t really know if that’s true or not,” he said.

There’s a second problem, too, he said. The leveling system overestimates struggling readers, meaning it matches them with books they have trouble reading.

In part, that’s because “kids who are supposed to be at the same level actually have very different skill profiles,” Burns said.

Levels only offer a determination of general comprehension ability, which can mask differences in students’ underlying challenges. For example, two students could both be at the same low reading level, but one might have trouble with decoding, while the other struggles with vocabulary, requiring different kinds of support.

Educators and researchers alike have also long criticized leveling as a kind of tracking
that makes it difficult for lower-performing students to ever catch up.

Studies have shown that students who start school in the lowest reading group are unlikely to catch up to students who start in the highest reading group. These students in lower groups also make slower progress than their peers, leading to wider skill gaps.

**An evidence-backed option: skill-based groups**

Still, there is a type of differentiation that can help struggling students make progress, researchers say: skill-based grouping.

Instead of assigning students a general comprehension level, skill-based grouping seeks to pinpoint, and address, the specific challenges that students have.

Imagine a teacher has five students who need support around segmenting and blending sounds, but the other students in the class have already mastered that skill, said Sharon Vaughn, a professor in the department of special education at the University of Texas at Austin’s College of Education.

“We don’t need to reteach that lesson to the whole class,” Vaughn said. “We can deliberately put our instruction on the point of need for students.”

Research shows that this kind of targeted, skill-based grouping can be effective. A 2017 study found that students who were in personalized reading groups from 1st to 3rd grade outperformed their peers who were in traditional reading groups, gaining the equivalent of about two months of extra progress each year.

A meta-analysis of small-group reading interventions, published in 2018, found that these interventions were more effective when they were targeted to a specific skill than when they were general comprehension programs that addressed multiple skills.

Putting together skill-based groups requires different assessments than those teachers would use for leveled reading, Burns said.

Teachers should use tests that can identify specific skill deficits—such as decoding inventories or fluency screeners, he said.

But informal observations can also play a role here, said Stephanie Al Otaiba, a professor of teaching and learning at Southern Methodist University’s Simmons School of Education & Human Development. Teachers can incorporate information they’ve collected about students’ understanding of academic language, for example.

These targeted small groups allow teachers to provide extra modeling and give students immediate feedback on the skills they struggle with the most, Burns said.

When students start mastering skills, then it’s time to retool group composition, said Burns, suggesting that teachers could reshape groups every other week based on assessment data.

These assessments can be short, he said—for example, having students read 10 words that feature sound patterns that were just taught.

**When mixed-ability groups can be useful**

Some instructional goals are best met in skill-based groups, researchers said.

Students should only practice specific, discrete skills—such as the /oi/ sound, for example—if they haven’t mastered those skills yet. If they have, “that additional practice might not be as beneficial,” said Vaughn.

But other activities might be better executed in mixed-ability groups, Vaughn said. Take, for instance, small group discussions after listening to a read-aloud together as a whole class. Having students of varying abilities can be beneficial in this context, she said, because they bring different perspectives to the table.

“A range of knowledge about a word enhances everyone’s understanding of that word,” said Vaughn. “A range of knowledge of language use enhances everyone’s knowledge about language use.”

Discussing text in heterogeneous groups can also ensure that all students get access to grade-level material, said Tiffany Young, an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at Doane University in Crete, Neb.

Young taught elementary reading for a decade before she entered academia. She used leveled reading groups as part of her practice with students at the time.

“The more I taught, the more I realized, they can’t move to higher levels if they’re not being taught at that level,” Young said. “Students can’t learn something they’re not exposed to.”

Experimental studies suggest that weaker readers can benefit from reading complex texts, in part because it helps them further develop subject-matter knowledge—knowledge that can then, in turn, support their comprehension of future texts. Pairing weaker and stronger readers to read together as partners, specifically, is supported by studies, too.

In her classroom-based research, Young has proposed several design principles for implementing non-leveled, mixed-ability groups in early reading classrooms. Schools need to shift away from differentiating texts for students by level, she said.

“Instead, we need to think this way: How do we differentiate our teaching so that we bridge the gap for each student between what they know and what they need to know and do in order to access the text that is at their grade level, or above?” she said.

Vaughn raised a final benefit to mixed-ability groups: opportunities for kids to form connections with more of their peers.

“These fixed-ability groups also fix, in a way, friendship groups,” she said.

**Addressing logistical challenges**

Small-group time can be valuable, but it’s also “expensive,” Conradi Smith and her colleagues write in a recent article that gives practical tips for teachers on maximizing small-group reading instruction.

“Not in terms of money,” they write, “but in terms of management and planning.”

For skill-based small groups to work well, teachers need to spend time analyzing assessment data and organizing other activities for the rest of the class to do during a group rotation. There are ways to tackle these challenges, though.

In most early elementary classrooms, Conradi Smith said, the group work portion of a
literacy block can take anywhere from one to two hours, with the teachers spending about 20 minutes with every group. She would recommend less time—up to an hour total, with the teacher spending about 15 minutes with each group. Burns suggests something similar, with 10 to 15 minutes per group.

These are just recommendations, Conradi Smith said, as the research base on grouping provides “surprisingly little detail or guidelines.”

Figuring out timing is a delicate operation, she said. Teachers want to allot enough time to each group to provide individualized feedback. But when the teacher is with one small group, the rest of the students in the class are on their own. Small group time shouldn’t be so long that students are working independently for the majority of the literacy period, Conradi Smith said.

Some schools are getting creative with scheduling, planning for small group time to occur when another adult can also be in the room—a reading specialist, or an English learner teacher, for example, she said. Districts could also use trained volunteers, she added.

In elementary schools near Virginia’s William & Mary, where Conradi Smith works, college students drop in to help during small group time. “Whether they’re college students or other volunteers, I think we’re going to need to look beyond just the reading specialist to think through, how can we have some other adults in the classroom who can support?” Conradi Smith said.

If there aren’t other adults available, students should be given assignments to work on by themselves or with peers that come with clear directions and some modeling, she said.

Finally, these activities should align with what teachers are providing in whole group instruction. “Whatever students are doing, it needs to be activities that allow them to apply the knowledge and skills that they have learned,” said Young.

If students are independently reading, for example, they should be encouraged to apply their decoding skills—rather than relying on the pictures in the book to infer the story’s meaning, she said.

Planning and executing small group time while considering all of these factors is difficult, Conradi Smith said. But she thinks that schools could lose an important opportunity if they toss out all types of grouping in a rush to get rid of leveled reading.

“I think we always want to be sure that we’re meeting the needs of our students,” she said. “It could become a problem if we’re not able to help some of our students catch up.”
OPINION
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Students Need to Make Sense of What They Read. Here Are Ways to Support Them

Verbal Reasoning and Making Inferences

By Larry Ferlazzo

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When it comes to understanding text, some students find themselves between a rock and a hard place. They may be able to decode the words, but they’re still in over their heads, struggling to answer comprehension questions. This is the next installment of a series dedicated to supporting adolescent readers. In this post, our focus is on verbal reasoning, which is the ability to understand what you see, hear, and make sense of the heaps of implied messages, figurative language, and multiple-meaning words in the English language.

Like any cognitive skill, verbal reasoning can be improved through instruction. It’s vital that teachers in all content areas plan opportunities for students to ponder language, then explain and justify their thinking. Activities that prompt students to verbalize their thoughts foster speakers and listeners with chances to revise their thinking while gaining knowledge because of the act of processing out loud.

Teachers who provide experiences where students must negotiate and construct meaning together may get a kick out of how much fun word play and detecting meaning with tweens and teens can be. Below are five strategies that we’ve found to work well with our students.

1. Infer by Reading an Image. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so asking students to describe an interesting image can provoke meaningful discussion and different perspectives. Much like the close reading of a text, students can close read an image and respond to questions posed by the teacher and peers. Instruct students to pretend they are looking at the image with a magnifying glass and write down all the details they notice. Time.com offers a free “photo of the day” that students find interesting. A graphic organizer can assist students to make inferences and draw conclusions based on details found in an image.

2. Infer by Reading Amazon Reviews. Another way for students to practice reading between the lines is to read real reviews from Amazon. Choose a product that students are into, such as the latest video game, eyelash extensions, or another current fad. The trick is to provide students with three written reviews of one product but not the accompanying stars. Ask students to infer the quality of the product based on the clues in the writing. A graphic organizer can assist students to make note of the clues in the textual information, inferences that stem from the clues, and their rationale for recommending or not recommending the product. Here is a link to the latest Madden NFL video game as a start.

3. Infer by Watching a Wordless Film. As a whole class, in groups, or in partners, students watch a short film, pausing at designated stopping points to infer what the character(s) is thinking at that moment. Through discussion, students can collaborate to determine the character’s inner dialogue based on what is happening in the clip. The short film Soar, at 4:50 in length, is a great place for students to get the hang of making inferences.

4. Class Discussion: Paraphrasing. Prompting students to paraphrase a statement encourages them to listen carefully and not just repeat what was heard. For example, if we
ask students to repeat what their partner says, we miss an opportunity for students to practice the skill of paraphrasing. Repeating that parrots the speaker requires little thought and can bore students, discouraging their participation. Instead, teach students the purpose and skill of paraphrasing and develop language frames with them. Post these frames so students can refer to them throughout the year.

5. Class Discussion: Reasoning. As students become skilled at paraphrasing, teachers can also prompt for evidence that supports their ideas. Asking “why?” or “how do you know that?” encourages students to provide reasons and evidence for their thinking, which decreases guesswork while simultaneously teaching peers. As students engage in these types of discussions regularly, they also practice making inferences in the company of their teacher and peers. The classroom should be a safe place for students to dig into thoughts and inferences, both exploring and explaining them.

Conclusion: Developing students’ verbal reasoning skills is mission critical—they’re essential for success in school and in life. While wide, independent reading will certainly expose students to a range of figurative language and multiple-meaning words, it’s important that we provide students with guided practice activities in which they make inferences based on the clues they identify. In other words, they step up their games, their verbal reasoning games.

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.

Additional Resource
View this article’s charts
OPINION
Published August 10, 2023

A Focus on Phonics or Comprehension? What Reading Research Should Look Like in Practice

To develop good readers, teach students to coordinate multiple skills to make meaning

By Elena Forzani & Andrea Bien

As schools around the nation scramble to respond to the alarm bells set off by falling scores on “the nation’s report card,” we—two university professors who teach reading courses and who are former elementary teachers—are watching. We get it. We, too, want to see better results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. We, too, worry about schools not effectively teaching what many believe is the building block of reading instruction, phonics. That needs to be corrected. But phonics, which has made its way to the center of the “science of reading” movement, is neither the whole problem nor the whole solution. That’s because phonics only focuses on sounding out words. It does not support readers to understand or analyze those words.

In that race to replace existing instruction with phonics-centered approaches, we are concerned about what lies on the other side of what could be a well-intentioned but misguided over-correction, like the kind the United Kingdom is seeing now. There, beginning in 2012, phonics instruction was isolated and not well integrated into meaning-based instruction. As a result, the U.K. started seeing lower test scores.

If we focus on phonics instruction that is removed from actual reading, students will continue to fail assessments like NAEP. More importantly, they are unlikely to become successful, self-motivated readers. Focusing on phonics as a solution for better reading-comprehension scores is a flawed strategy, as insufficient phonics knowledge is unlikely to be the only reason children struggle to comprehend. How do we know that?

First, phonics knowledge does not always translate into skillfully comprehending text. Some students can decode words quickly and smoothly but still not deeply understand what they are reading.

Second, reading is complex, and research suggests that there likely are many, sometimes interrelated, reasons why kids struggle to comprehend. For example, one study found that, of a set of 3rd graders who failed a state reading-comprehension test, only 8.1 percent struggled to decode accurately. Another 28.5 percent could decode accurately but read slowly. And the majority of students, 63.3 percent, could decode and read effortlessly but didn’t comprehend well. Other studies have drawn similar conclusions.

Third, when teaching focuses solely on phonics, children often don’t have sustained opportunities to engage in high-level reasoning with advanced texts. But, this is exactly what reading-comprehension questions, like those found on NAEP, demand.

Kids need phonics and comprehension instruction. The Simple View of Reading, an older and incomplete framework of reading that many schools have taken up recently, suggests that basic comprehension occurs automatically if students develop decoding skills and listening comprehension (the latter using what they already know to understand a text). However, this theory excludes deep comprehension, such as analysis, synthesis, and critique. This is a troubling exclusion, as children are not likely to develop these deeper comprehension skills without explicit instruction combined with practice using self-regulated word-solving, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies during reading. Deep comprehension requires engaging students in discussion and reasoning with text, which supports them to ask questions, to draw on prior knowledge and develop new knowledge, to make predictions and inferences, to synthesize, and to critique. Such reading skills are essential for participating in our 21st-century information society, where people need to be able to synthesize information across multiple, complex, and often digital and multimodal texts while also evaluating credibility.

Children do need phonics instruction. But, it should happen in the context of real reading. When learning to ride a bike, we don’t learn to pedal just to pedal. We learn to pedal to move a bike forward, for fun, or to get somewhere. Similarly, students need to learn skills for authentic, motivating purposes, including learning about themselves and others, acquiring new knowledge, analyzing the world, and cultivating joy. One way to accomplish this is by integrating reading with science and social studies instruction to support students’ development of vocabulary, linguistics, and other forms of knowledge that contribute, in important ways, to reading comprehension.
So, instead of investing solely in methods that just aren’t working, let’s use this opportunity to support authentic, skilled reading that focuses on making meaning with text in ways that are relevant to students. Instead of relying on The Simple View of reading, which promotes basic comprehension, let’s instead draw on a more comprehensive view, such as the Active View of Reading, which supports deep comprehension. The Active View extends The Simple View by drawing on more recent research to account for the multiple factors, in addition to decoding and language comprehension, that current research shows are important for effective reading, including fluency, motivation, executive-function skills, and strategy use. Importantly, instruction needs to support all these factors in coordination.

What does this look like in practice?

Schools should ensure that reading instruction reflects what we know from research by including at least five key components in a context that is engaging and motivating to the students in front of us. First, teachers need to provide explicit and systematic modeling and practice of phonics-related skills, including blending sounds together to sound out words. Second, students need practice applying those skills, with and without teacher support, by reading decodables (books with phonics patterns students already have learned) to support phonics-in-context and fluency. Third, students need to develop multiple forms of knowledge to unlock meaning that is often assumed and not always explicitly stated in texts. Fourth, students need explicit instruction in comprehension skills and strategies. Finally, students need time to employ self-regulation to coordinate these skills as they read, write, discuss, and reason with various texts.

Rather than stoking the fires of yet another round of “reading wars” and swinging the pendulum too far in either direction, let’s work together to support our children to become good readers by engaging them in instruction that focuses on phonics in context with the goal of deep comprehension. If we can come together to do this, we can produce a nation of skilled readers. And, yes, probably better NAEP reading scores, too.

Elena Forzani is an assistant professor of literacy education at Boston University who has been involved in developing and reviewing the 2026 reading NAEP. Andrea Bien is a clinical assistant professor of elementary education at Boston University.

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