

## PreK-Grade 3 Reading and Literacy Practices That Matter

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This snapshot of five recent research studies addresses reading and literacy in the early grades. It does not reflect a comprehensive review of the literature, although two studies have been added since this review was first completed earlier this year. The following criteria were used to identify the studies included in this summary and the ECS Research Studies Database: (1) wide-reaching recommendations and policy implications; (2) implications for state-level policy; (3) interventions that hold potential for replication; and (4) peer-reviewed/juried — although exceptions are made on a case-by-case basis.

### **Study #1: Educational Investment, Family Context, and Children's Math and Reading Growth from Kindergarten Through the Third Grade**

Jacob Cheadle, *Sociology of Education*, Winter 2008.

**Background:** Children of different backgrounds begin formal education at unequal skill levels.

**Purpose:** This study examines whether the deliberate cultivation by parents of cognition and social skills plays a role in children's math and reading achievement, and subsequent growth.

#### **Findings:**

This study uses the author's term "concerted cultivation" to describe a composite measure of parenting that includes:

- Child participation in adult-orchestrated leisure activities (e.g., clubs, sports, art classes, music)
  - Investment in education materials and resources (e.g., books)
  - Parental involvement with the school (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, fundraisers, volunteering).
1. Higher-level parenting skills moderately offset social-class differences in children's math and reading skills during kindergarten and 1st grade (19% and 16% respectively).
  2. While parenting skills matter, differential growth in student learning occurs during the school year, suggesting that school-based processes or other elements (e.g., instruction, expectations) are the principal sources of the growth gap in achievement after school entry.

**Policy recommendations:**

1. Efforts to more fully inform parents — particularly low-income parents — of the value of efforts such as talking with their children, networking and being involved in their activities, could lead to a greater number of families practicing these strategies and building their children’s skills.
2. Broader community support for children’s experiences (e.g., public after-school programs) can supplement parent efforts, but such programs are likely to be larger and of lower quality and cannot be expected to produce the same return as higher levels of parent engagement (e.g., parents spending time in the car with their children, talking with them about their day and contextualizing their experiences).
3. While parental influences contribute significantly to the skills with which young children enter school, once children are in school, schools do matter. Policies that provide support for improving the quality of P-3 instruction could help reduce achievement gaps.

For full study: <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/asoca/soe/2008/00000081/00000001/art00001>

**Study #2: What Works to Improve Student Literacy Achievement? An Examination of Instructional Practices in a Balanced Literacy Approach**

Catherine Bitter, Miguel Socias, Paul Gubbins and Jennifer O'Day, American Institutes for Research, *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 2009.

**Background:** Literacy is the foundation for success in school and, in today’s society, for success in life.

**Purpose:** This study describes literacy instruction in San Diego City elementary schools and determines which specific practices, if any, were associated with increased student achievement.

**Findings:** Three measures of literacy instruction demonstrated a consistently positive and statistically significant relationship to students’ reading comprehension:

1. **Instruction focused on higher-level meaning of text:** The strongest instructional predictor of increased reading comprehension was teachers’ use of higher-level questioning and discussion about the meaning of text. *Teachers “telling” students the answers was negatively related to student outcomes.*
2. **Writing instruction:** Students in classrooms that included greater amounts of writing instruction (discussion about writing and actual composition) improved their reading comprehension more than did students with less writing.
3. Instruction that seeks to foster student responsibility, interactive learning, and sustained, idea-focused, evidence-based discussion has a significant influence on student achievement.
4. Some practices — such as engaging in discussion and conversation with peers in the classroom — that were beneficial for non-native English speakers were less so for fluent and native English speakers, and vice versa. This finding has important implications for designing literacy instruction for the very diverse student populations in most urban districts.

**Policy recommendations:**

1. Policies should encourage or support a balanced literacy approach.
2. Diverse urban settings should explore and implement a balanced approach to literacy.

For full study: <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a908605828~db=all~jumptype=rss>

### **Study #3: Socioeconomic Status, English Proficiency, and Late-Emerging Reading Difficulties**

Michael Kieffer, Teachers College Columbia University, *American Educational Research Journal*, 2010.

**Background:** Increasingly, concerns are being raised about students who learn to read by 3rd grade but fall behind in later grades. “Late-emerging” reading difficulties may be particularly common among at-risk populations.

**Purpose:** This study investigates the prevalence of late-emerging reading difficulties among English language learners (ELLs) and native English speakers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Findings:** Students for whom English is not their first language (ELLs) and those from low-income backgrounds disproportionately demonstrate late-emerging reading difficulties. Of the two risk factors, the level of family income has the strongest influence.

1. ELLs are more likely than native English speakers of the same income level to demonstrate reading difficulties by grade 3. However, native English speakers also are at risk for reading difficulties in the upper elementary grades or middle school.
2. Poor students are at substantially higher risk for developing reading difficulties during each developmental period, but particularly for difficulties that emerge before grade 3.
3. Among students from upper income backgrounds, the risk for difficulties emerging in middle school is slightly higher than the risk for early-emerging difficulties. This suggests that the particular challenges of adolescent literacy apply to all students.

#### **Policy recommendations:**

1. Because family income is a more prominent predictor of late-emerging reading difficulties, it is important to continue to closely monitor all low income students’ reading abilities through high school.
2. Because more affluent students are at greater risk for late-emergent reading difficulties than they are for early reading difficulties, all students should have their reading skills monitored throughout elementary and middle grades.
3. Upper elementary-level through high school-level reading instruction should emphasize vocabulary development and critical thinking skills.

For full study: <http://edr.sagepub.com/content/39/6/484>

### **Study #4: The Relation Between the Type and Amount of Instruction and Growth in Children’s Reading Competencies**

Susan Sonnenschein, Amy Benson and Laura Stapleton, University of Maryland Baltimore County, *American Educational Research Journal*, November 11, 2009.

**Background:** Children with limited literacy experiences may be more sensitive to or in need of specific instruction, such as letters/sounds, than children entering school with a greater foundation of prior literacy experiences.

**Purpose:** To consider the longer term effectiveness of two instructional approaches — phonics and integrated language arts — and to investigate the relation between classroom instructional practices and children’s reading skills from kindergarten through 5th grade.

**Findings:** Children’s entry-level skills, ethnicity and parents’ education level predicted children’s reading scores at the end of kindergarten. To a lesser extent, type and amount of reading instruction predicted children’s reading scores. However, the type of instruction appeared to matter only in kindergarten and 1st grade.

**1. Reading instruction and characteristics of teachers**

- The number of years teachers taught was not related to the amount of time that their classes reportedly engaged in reading activities. The only exception was in 3rd grade, where teachers with three or fewer years of experience reported less reading time than their more experienced peers.
- The number of reading courses taken by teachers was related to the frequency with which kindergarten and 1st-grade teachers reported implementing phonics activities and integrated language arts activities (vocabulary, discussion, explaining what they have read, etc.).
- Neither the number of years of teaching nor the number of reading courses taken was uniquely related to reading scores of children at any time point.

**2. Growth in children's reading skills**

- Only in kindergarten did the type of instruction matter, with phonics instruction predicting higher spring reading scores.
- Children’s reading-related skills at the start of kindergarten predicted their reading scores at the end of kindergarten and beyond.

**3. Schooling factors and children’s reading development**

- Children who entered kindergarten and 1st grade with more advanced phonics skills benefited from an instructional emphasis on the meaning of the text.
- Children most at risk for reading difficulties did not benefit as much from integrated language arts as those with higher skills.
- *At kindergarten level* – Time spent on reading was positively related to the spring reading score; and children in kindergarten benefited from a direct instructional focus on phonics acquisition.
- *At 1st- and 3rd-grade levels* – Time spent reading was more beneficial for those children whose entry scores were slightly above the mean.
- *At 5th-grade level* – Children with lower reading scores showed more benefit from more time spent reading.

**Policy recommendations:**

1. Early reading instruction should include a direct instructional focus on phonics acquisition during kindergarten, especially for children starting school with fairly limited literacy experience.
2. Instruction focused on decoding skills should be provided to weaker readers; greater focus on comprehension should be provided to those children with stronger decoding and vocabulary skills.
3. Although young children may need instruction in both decoding skills and comprehension, the exact balance between the two should vary depending upon the child’s skills.

For full study: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?\\_nfpb=true&\\_ERICExtSearch\\_SearchValue\\_0=EJ887171&ERICExtSearch\\_SearchType\\_0=no&accno=EJ887171](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ887171&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ887171)

### **Study #5: How Effective Are Family Literacy Programs? : Results of a Meta-Analysis**

Roel van Steensel, Nele McElvany, Jeanne Kurvers, Stephanie Herppich, University of Amsterdam, Technische Universitat Dortmund, University of Kiel, Tilburg University, *Review of Educational Research*, Mar 2, 2011.

**Background:** Recent international studies have shown that a considerable number of students systematically lag behind their peers in literacy skills. One way of working to prevent delays in children's literacy development is by extending and improving their literacy experiences through "family literacy programs." This study focuses on a specific category of family literacy programs, those that target children's literacy development directly by providing stimulating parent-child activities to be carried out at home and by training parents to transfer the contents embedded in these activities.

**Purpose:** To examine the effects of family literacy programs on children's literacy development.

**Findings:** Family literacy interventions seem to make a modest contribution to children's literacy skills.

1. Family literacy programs more frequently offer a broad range of activities. This is likely a reflection of the move away from the focus of reading readiness in beginning literacy education — advocating the training of specific pre-literacy skills — to the holistic approach advocated in the past two to three decades.
2. Semiprofessionals are often responsible for training the parents of children at risk of educational or reading delays. In some family literacy programs, however, the use of semiprofessionals for at-risk families seemed to be a deliberate strategy. For example, using mothers from the same communities was seen as a way of approaching parents who are sometimes hard to reach. Such programs did not have a significantly lower effect on children's literacy development than programs using professionals.
3. Differences in the effects of programs focusing primarily on core-related literary skills (i.e., abilities necessary for deciphering the written language code) and comprehension-focused programs are small.
4. Only 12 of the 30 studies examined include some measure of fidelity, and in most cases these measures were superficial (e.g., records or ratings of parental attendance at training sessions). In only one program were systematic observations made of parent-child activities.

#### **Policy recommendations:**

1. The conclusion that the overall effects of the programs are small should give program developers, policymakers and educators pause for thought, as the high expectations they might have of these programs are not necessarily justified. This does not mean, however, that the programs should be abandoned. Even small effects can be meaningful when viewed in light of the context in which they were obtained. Moreover, it remains to be determined how program activities are actually implemented by parents and children and how these activities interact with existing family literacy practices.
2. More thorough research is needed on how programs are actually carried out by families. Only 12 of the 30 studies included some measure of treatment fidelity, and in most cases these measures were quite superficial (records or ratings of frequency, duration and completion of parent-child activities; records or ratings of parental attendance at training sessions). In only one case were systematic observations made of parent-child activities.

For full study: <http://rer.sagepub.com/content/81/1/69.abstract>

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