

## **What Does Excellent Reading Instruction Look Like in Elementary Classrooms?**

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Educators have learned a great deal from research about what it takes to help all children in the elementary grades succeed in reading to their fullest potential. Teachers must focus and reflect equally on the **content** and the **pedagogy** of their reading instruction, and they must continuously make good instructional choices to meet individual students' needs based on these reflections in conjunction with ongoing pupil assessment data.

The content of excellent reading instruction includes dimensions of effective instruction supported by reading research that are related to the abilities students must develop to become competent readers. These dimensions include instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Most students, especially in kindergarten and first grade, benefit from systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge (Adams, 1990; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). A variety of approaches to systematic phonics instruction are effective (Christensen & Bowey, 2005; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000; Mathes et al., 2005; NRP, 2000; Stahl, 2001), including letter-by-letter decoding and decoding by onset and rime. Oral reading procedures to develop decoding fluency, in which students receive guidance or support, have a significant impact on students' reading (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; National Reading Panel, 2000).

A variety of instructional approaches to vocabulary instruction are beneficial, including direct instruction in specific words, pre-reading instruction in words, learning

to use strategies to determine word meanings, and learning of words in rich contexts and incidentally through wide reading (Bauman & Kame'enui, 2004; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; Graves, 2007; National Reading Panel, 2000). Words studied should generally be those the learner will find useful in many contexts (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

Instruction in comprehension strategies that students use as they read improves reading comprehension abilities (Foorman et al., 2006; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, and Baker, 2001; Guthrie, Wigfield, & VonSecker, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000). Explicit lessons in the following strategies are most effective: summarizing; comprehension monitoring, use of graphic and semantic organizers, use of story structure, question answering, and question generation (National Reading Panel, 2000). Also, using multiple strategies in naturalistic contexts is important (Guthrie et al., 2004; Klingner, Vaughn, Arguelles, Hughes, & Leftwich, 2004; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pressley, 2006). Teaching students how to engage in high level talk and writing about text is another important aspect of comprehension instruction repeatedly found to be related to reading gains (Guthrie et al., 2004; Knapp, 1995; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999; Taylor et al, 2003; VandenBranden, 2000).

Research supports a balanced approach to reading instruction that involves direct teaching of reading skills and strategies as well as providing students with opportunities to apply skills and strategies to engaging texts through reading, writing, and discussing (National Reading Panel, 2000). Effective teachers make good choices in the use of instructional materials based on students' abilities, as determined by assessment data, and teaching purposes, which will vary at times for different students (Pressley et al., 2007).

The pedagogy of excellent teaching of reading includes all of the actions a teacher takes to teach the reading content described above. Teachers need to plan for and coordinate many different components of their lessons and students' learning activities during a one to two hour daily reading block. Usually, other classroom or resource teachers collaborate instructionally during parts of this block as well (Valli & Croniger, 2007). Each day, teachers need to consider the purposes and timing of their lessons; to provide students with challenging, motivating activities as they are working with the teacher, on their own, or with other students (Pressley et al., 2003); to provide culturally responsive instruction (Au, 2006); and to have a good balance between whole group and small group instruction (Chorzempa & Graham, 2006). Teachers need to foster students' active involvement in learning activities (Guthrie et al., 2000). They also need to provide balance between a) direct teaching (e.g. leading of students' learning, questioning, and other activities during large and small group lessons) and b) providing support in the form of judicious coaching and effective feedback as students are engaged in literacy learning activities (Connor et al., 2004; Pressley et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2003).

Effective teachers continually assess their students' engagement, understanding, and behavior throughout the day (Pressley et al., 2003). Also, teachers in effective schools systematically collect and share student assessment data to help them make instructional decisions to improve student performance (Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, & Russ, 2004; Taylor et al., 2000.)

Classrooms of effective teachers in the elementary grades have very positive classroom atmospheres (Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, & Vincent, 2003; Pressley et al.,

2003). Well-managed classrooms are the hallmark of effective teachers (Dolezal et al., 2003; Pressley, 2001; Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2002). Teachers in effective classrooms provide encouragement and praise as well as positive feedback (Pressley, 2007). Effective teachers have high expectations for their students, communicate to students that effort leads to success, encourage independence and responsibility, and foster cooperative learning experiences (Bohn et al., 2004; Dolezal et al., 2003; Guthrie et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Pressley et al., 2003).

There are also important elements of **school-wide reading programs** that impact classroom reading instruction . Teachers in effective schools work together to develop of a cohesive, school-wide program (Consortium for Responsible School Change, 2005; Taylor et al., 2005). Essential aspects include: a) collaboration among classroom teachers and resource teachers (e.g., Title 1, English language learner, special education teachers) in whatever delivery model is chosen to provide cohesive, exemplary reading instruction (Taylor et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 2002); b) amount of time for reading instruction across different grades and blocks of time during the school day (Taylor et al., 2000); c) a school-wide assessment plan in which student data is collected and used regularly to inform instruction (Pressley et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 2002), and d) the interventions that are in place to meet the needs of students who are experiencing reading difficulties, who have special education needs, and who are English language learners (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Mathes et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2000). Also, working effectively with parents as partners is another important component of an effective school-wide reading program (Edwards, 2004; Taylor et al., 2002) and effective teachers (Dolezal et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2000).

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