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Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding evidence-based information about literacy instructional practices for students in grades K-3. Ask A REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the ten regional educational laboratories (REL) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. It provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations on research based education questions.

The information below represents the most rigorous research available. Researchers consider the type of methodology and give priority to research reports that employ well described and thorough methods. The resources were also selected based on the date of the publication with a preference for research from the last ten years. Additional criteria for inclusion include the source and funder of the resource.

**Question:** *What research is available to guide schools in selecting and implementing effective literacy instructional practices for students in grades K-3?*

### **Search Process**

**Key words and search strings used in the search:** *primary grades AND effective literacy instruction; elementary AND reading instruction*

### **Search databases and websites:**

1. ERIC: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/>
2. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/action/showAdvancedSearch>
3. Google Scholar: [www.google.com/scholar](http://www.google.com/scholar)
4. Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Resources: <http://ies.ed.gov>
5. What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>

### **Sample Citations Retrieved:**

Duke, N. K., & Block, M. K. (2012). Improving reading in the primary grades. *Future of Children*, 22, 55-72.

**Abstract/Summary:** Almost fifteen years have passed since the publication of the National Research Council's seminal report "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children," which provided research-based recommendations on what could be done to better position students in pre-kindergarten through third grade for success in grade four and above. This article by Nell Duke and Meghan Block first examines whether specific key recommendations from the report have been implemented in U.S. classrooms. They find that recommendations regarding increased access to kindergarten and greater attention to and improvement of students' word-reading skills have been widely adopted. Others have not. Vocabulary and comprehension, long neglected in the primary grades, still appear to be neglected. Contrary to the report's recommendations, attention to building conceptual and content knowledge in science and social studies has actually

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decreased in the past fifteen years. In other words, the easier-to-master skills are being attended to, but the broader domains of accomplishment that constitute preparation for comprehension and learning in the later grades--vocabulary knowledge, comprehension strategy use, and conceptual and content knowledge--are being neglected. Near stagnation in fourth-grade students' comprehension achievement is thus unsurprising. The authors then turn to research and reviews of research on improving primary-grade reading published since 1998, when "Preventing Reading Difficulties" was issued. They discuss several instructional approaches identified as effective in improving word-reading skill, vocabulary and conceptual knowledge, comprehension strategies, and reading outside of school; they discuss advances in interventions for struggling readers, and in whole-school literacy reform. Duke and Block then identify three key obstacles that have prevented widespread adoption of these best practices in teaching reading. The first obstacle is a short-term orientation toward instruction and instructional reform that perpetuates a focus on the easier-to-learn reading skills at the expense of vocabulary, conceptual and content knowledge, and reading comprehension strategies. The second is a lack of expertise among many educators in how to effectively teach these harder-to-master reading skills, and the third is the limited time available in the school day and year to meet unprecedented expectations for children's learning. Policy makers, the education community, and parents must attend to these three challenges if they wish to see meaningful improvements in the reading skills of American children.

Gersten, R., Compton, D., Connor, C.M., Dimino, J., Santoro, L., Linan-Thompson, S., and Tilly, W.D. (2008). *Assisting students struggling with reading: Response to Intervention and multi-tier intervention for reading in the primary grades. A practice guide.* (NCEE 2009-4045). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides/>.

**Abstract/Summary:** This guide offers five specific recommendations to help educators identify struggling readers and implement evidence-based strategies to promote their reading achievement. Teachers and reading specialists can utilize these strategies to implement RtI and multi-tier intervention methods and frameworks at the classroom or school level. Recommendations cover how to screen students for reading problems, design a multi-tier intervention program, adjust instruction to help struggling readers, and monitor student progress.

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Juel, C., & Minden-Cupp, C. (2000). Learning to read words: Linguistic units and instructional strategies. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35, 458-492. doi: 10.1598/RRQ.35.4.2

**Abstract/Summary:** Analyzes word recognition instruction in four first- grade classrooms. Finds that: differential instruction may be helpful in first grade; children who enter first grade with low literacy benefit from early and heavy exposure to phonics; and a structured phonics curriculum that includes both onsets and rimes and sounding and blending phonemes within rimes is effective.

Maynard, K. L., Pullen, P. C., & Coyne, M. D. (2010). Teaching vocabulary to first-grade students through repeated shared storybook reading: A comparison of rich and basic instruction to incidental exposure. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 49, 209-242. doi: 10.1080/19388070902943245

**Abstract/Summary:** The purpose of this study was to evaluate effectiveness of rich and basic instruction to incidental exposure of target words with first-grade students within the context of repeated shared storybook reading. Participants were 224 first-grade students, randomly assigned to a condition by classroom, from three elementary schools that serve large numbers of students at-risk for experiencing reading difficulties. All three conditions received large group instruction of the storybook intervention in three 20-30 minute sessions over the course of one week. Results indicated that rich instruction was superior to both basic and incidental exposure across all taught measures. These results were maintained at delayed post-test three weeks following the conclusion of the intervention. Implications are discussed in relation to a three-step approach to vocabulary instruction.

McCutchen, D., Abbott, R. D., Green, L. B., Beretvas, N. S., Cox, S., Potter, N. S., Quirogo, T., & Gray, A. L. (2002). Beginning literacy: Links among teacher knowledge, teacher practice, and student learning. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 35, 69-86. Doi: 10.1177/002221940203500106

**Abstract/Summary:** A study investigated the effects of a 2-week summer institute that taught kindergarten and first-grade teachers (n=44) about learning disabilities and effective instruction, stressing the importance of explicit instruction in phonological and orthographic awareness. First-graders taught by trained teachers outperformed controls on phonological awareness and on all reading measures.

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Shanahan, T., Callison, K., Carriere, C., Duke, N. K., Pearson, P. D., Schatschneider, C., & Torgesen, J. (2010). *Improving reading comprehension in kindergarten through 3rd grade: A practice guide* (NCEE 2010-4038). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from [whatworks.ed.gov/publications/practiceguides](http://whatworks.ed.gov/publications/practiceguides).

**Abstract/Summary:** Students who read with understanding at an early age gain access to a broader range of texts, knowledge, and educational opportunities, making early reading comprehension instruction particularly critical. This guide recommends five specific steps that teachers, reading coaches, and principals can take to successfully improve reading comprehension for young readers.

Taylor, B. M., Pearson, D. P., Clark, K., & Walpole, S. (2000). Effective schools and accomplished teachers: Lessons about primary-grade reading instruction in low-income schools. *Elementary School Journal*, 101, 121-165. doi: 10.1086/499662

**Abstract/Summary:** We investigated school and classroom factors related to primary-grade reading achievement in schools with moderate to high numbers of students on subsidized lunch. 14 schools across the United States and 2 teachers in each of grades K-3 participated. 2 low and 2 average readers per class were tested individually in the fall and spring on measures of reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. The teachers were observed 5 times by trained observers between December and April during an hour of reading instruction, completed a written survey, completed a weekly log of reading/language arts activities in February and again in April, and were interviewed in May. Each school was identified as most, moderately, or least effective based on several measures of reading achievement in the primary grades. A combination of school and teacher factors, many of which were intertwined, was found to be important in the most effective schools. Statistically significant school factors included strong links to parents, systematic assessment of pupil progress, and strong building communication and collaboration. A collaborative model for the delivery of reading instruction, including early reading interventions, was a hallmark of the most effective schools. Statistically significant teacher factors included time spent in small-group instruction, time spent in independent reading, high levels of student on-task behavior, and strong home communication. More of the most accomplished teachers and teachers in the most effective schools supplemented explicit phonics instruction with coaching in which they taught students strategies for applying phonics to their everyday reading. Additionally, more of the most accomplished teachers and teachers in the most effective schools employed higher-level questions in discussions of text, and the most accomplished teachers were more likely to ask students to write in response to reading. In all of the most effective schools, reading was clearly a priority at both the school and classroom levels.

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Weiser, B., & Mathes, P. (2011). Using encoding instruction to improve the reading and spelling performances of elementary students at risk for literacy difficulties: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research, 81*, 170-200. doi: 10.3102/0034654310396719

**Abstract/Summary:** Although connectionist models provide a framework explaining how the decoding and encoding abilities work reciprocally to enhance reading and spelling ability, encoding instruction in today's schools is not a priority. Although a limited amount of high-quality experimental or control studies to date (N = 11) give empirical support to using direct, explicit encoding instruction to increase the reading and spelling abilities of those students at risk for literacy failure, the benefits of integrating this instruction into current reading curriculums warrant further consideration. Students receiving encoding instruction and guided practice that included using (a) manipulatives (e.g., letter tiles, plastic letters) to learn phoneme-grapheme relationships and words and (b) writing phoneme-grapheme relationships and words made from these correspondences significantly outperformed contrast groups not receiving encoding instruction. Robust Cohen's d effect sizes, favoring the treatment groups, were found in areas of phonemic awareness, spelling, decoding, fluency, comprehension, and writing. Educational implications of these findings suggest that there is support for using encoding instruction to increase the literacy performances of at-risk primary grade students and that encoding instruction can be successful in improving the reading and spelling performances of older students with learning disabilities. Importantly, there is also evidence to support the transfer effects of early encoding instruction on later reading, writing, and spelling performances.

Wharton-McDonald, R., Pressley, M., & Hampston, J. M. (1998). Literacy instruction in nine first-grade classrooms: Teacher characteristics and student achievement. *The Elementary School Journal, 99*, 101-128. doi: 10.1086/461918

**Abstract/Summary:** Classroom observations & in-depth interviews were used to study first-grade teachers (N = 9) classified as outstanding or typical in their ability to help students develop literacy skills. Based on observational measures of student reading & writing achievement & student engagement, three groups of teachers emerged from the original nine. Eight practices & beliefs distinguished the instruction of the teachers whose students demonstrated the highest levels on these measures: (1) coherent & thorough integration of skills with high-quality reading & writing experiences, (2) a high density of instruction (integration of multiple goals in a single lesson), (3) extensive use of scaffolding, (4) encouragement of student self-regulation, (5) a thorough integration of reading & writing activities, (6) high expectations for all students, (7) masterful classroom management, & (8) an awareness of their practices & the goals underlying them. Teaching practices observed in seven of the nine classrooms are also discussed. These data highlight the complexity of primary literacy instruction & support the conclusion that effective primary-level literacy instruction is a balanced integration of high-quality reading & writing

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experiences & explicit instruction of basic literacy skills.

**Organizations:**

- International Reading Association: <http://www.reading.org>
- Reading is Fundamental: <http://www.rif.org>
- The Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk: <http://www.meadowscenter.org>
- The IRIS Center: <http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu>
- Florida Center for Reading Research: <http://www.fcrr.org>
- Center on Instruction: <http://www.centeroninstruction.org/>
- Reading Rockets: <http://www.pbs.org/launchingreaders/>

**Federally Funded Resources:**

- Institute of Education Sciences (IES), public search engine available at: <http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/>
- What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>
- National Center on Response to Intervention: <http://www.rti4success.org>

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