
Research in Brief: Effective Reading Programs for All Students in the Elementary Grades



Reading is an important skill that children must develop, and it is linked to future academic success. Schools invest a substantial amount of time and energy in teaching children to read and in remedial programs for students who struggle with reading. Much basic research exists on how children learn to read, but there is less research on specific programs used by schools and teachers. There are many classroom programs and approaches designed to help young students learn to read or to improve their reading skills.

What types of reading programs are most effective for elementary students from kindergarten to grade 5?

A recent systematic review examined studies of elementary reading programs and compared them to one another. In this study, the authors' focus was on initial programs for all students, as opposed to remedial programs for struggling readers. The reviewers examined the following types of programs:

Curriculum

- Core reading textbooks and curricula, i.e. Reading Street, Open Court Reading

Instructional process programs

- Professional development – educating teachers on effective strategies for teaching reading
- Includes cooperative learning programs for teachers i.e. PALS, CIRC and phonics/phonological awareness programs

Curriculum and instructional process programs

- Programs that provide specific phonetic curricula and professional development for teachers on instructional strategies i.e. Success for All, Direct Instruction

Instructional technology

- Programs that use technology to enhance reading achievement, including computer-assisted supplementary instruction, i.e. Reading Reels, Writing to Read

Why does this matter?

- ⇒ *Reading is an important skill that is linked to future academic success.*
- ⇒ *Some reading programs are focused only on those students who are struggling. This review examines reading programs for all students in the classroom.*
- ⇒ *Programs that focus on daily teaching practices have substantially greater research support than programs that focus on curriculum or technology alone.*



Effective Reading Programs for all Students in the Elementary Grades

Researchers found that instructional process programs designed to change daily teaching practices had substantially greater research support than programs that focused on curriculum or technology alone.

What is a systematic review?

The purpose of a systematic review is to sum up the best available research on a specific question. This is done by bringing together the results of several studies. Studies included in a review are screened for quality, so that the findings of a large number of studies can be combined.

What did the researchers do?

Slavin and colleagues (2009) conducted a literature search using JSTOR, ERIC, EBSCO, PsycINFO, and Dissertation Abstracts databases to find relevant studies.

The following criteria qualified a study for inclusion in the review:

- Programs were for students in grades K-5
- Programs were at least 12 weeks duration
- Studies used random assignment
- Studies compared programs to control groups

63 studies of beginning reading programs (kindergarten to grade 1) and 79 studies of upper elementary reading programs (Grade 2 to Grade 5) were included in the review.



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What did the researchers learn?

The researchers found that specific programs that were successful in developing beginning reading skills were not necessarily successful for upper elementary grades, and vice versa. However, for students in all grades, effective programs were most often based on a cooperative learning approach where students assist one another in small groups. Instructional technology and curriculum programs were found to be minimally effective.

For beginning readers, successful programs were those that provided teachers with professional development and follow-up based on specific teaching methods. Effective programs were most often based on cooperative learning, such as Success for All, Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS), and Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition program (CIRC) – these programs involve students working together in small groups. All effective programs had a strong focus on teaching phonics and phonemic awareness. For upper elementary students, cooperative learning programs such as CIRC were found to be effective, as were peer-tutoring programs. Programs that focused on metacognitive strategy instruction, such as Reciprocal Thinking and Thinking Maps, were also found to be promising. These programs emphasized skills such as prediction, summarization and self-evaluation.

This brief summary was prepared from:

Slavin, R. E., Lake, C., Chambers, B., Cheung, A., & Davis, S. (2009). Effective reading programs for the elementary grades: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research, 79*(4), 1391-1466.

Please see the original document for full details. In the case of any disagreement between this summary and the original document, the original document should be seen as authoritative.