



Research You Can Use

Do your literacy practices reflect the latest research?

By Colleen E. Whittingham, Emily Brown Hoffman, and William H. Teale



In order to be an instructional leader for literacy, you need to keep up with relevant new research. We combed the reading and writing research journals from 2016 and 2017 to identify studies that have special relevance to literacy instruction. The seven studies below can help you conceptualize staff development and refine classroom observations to provide teachers with useful instructional feedback.

1. Reading and Writing Instruction: More Effective Together or Apart?

Effectiveness of Literacy Programs Balancing Reading and Writing Instruction: A Meta-Analysis

An international team of colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of research to determine whether teaching reading and writing together—balanced literacy instruction—has empirical evidence indicating its effectiveness. They examined 47 experimental intervention studies with students from pre-K to grade 12. Results showed that balanced literacy programs improve multiple dimensions of students' reading skill (comprehension, decoding, vocabulary) and writing skill (quality, mechanics, output). The researchers conclude that “the two skills can be learned together profitably.”

Graham, S., Liu, et al. (2017). *Reading Research Quarterly, Advanced Online Publication*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.194>.

2. Does Vocabulary Instruction Enhance Reading Comprehension?

A Systematic Review of the Research on Vocabulary Instruction That Impacts Text Comprehension

This research covers pre-K to grade 12 and can synthesize our understanding of how vocabulary interventions affect reading comprehension. The findings indicate that teaching word meanings supported comprehension of text containing the same target words. Perhaps most important for teachers, the authors found that instruction emphasizing active processing was more effective than definition- or dictionary-based methods of vocabulary instruction. However, they also found limited evidence that direct teaching of word meanings can improve overall reading comprehension, and no empirical evidence that strategy instruction (e.g., using context, word parts) impacts generalized comprehension. They suggest studies

that actively teach students to monitor their understanding of vocabulary are promising avenues of future research.

Wright, T.S., & Cervetti, G.N. (2017). *Reading Research Quarterly, 52*(2), 203–226.

3. How Can Educators Bridge the Achievement Gap?

Breaking the Cycle: Cumulative Disadvantage in Literacy

This award-winning dissertation investigated the literacy achievement gap and factors that can interrupt such trajectories for students who experience cumulative disadvantage. Using a large-scale, national data set that followed struggling readers from kindergarten through middle school, she found that 54 percent of these students performed on par with peers by grade 8. This finding dismantles a longstanding belief that children who struggle early will continue to do so. Northrop examined many child-based factors, combined with teacher interviews, to determine that recovery is based on child, home, and school factors, and when the three are coordinated and aligned, children experience the most success.

Northrop, L. (2017). *Reading Research Quarterly, Advanced online publication*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.195>.

4. What's the Best Way to Develop Students' Writing Skills?

Taking the Long View on Writing Development

In this article, a group of nine highly respected writing researchers—who study writing across all age levels, preschool through college—report the results of the first phase of a comprehensive synthesis of the past three decades of studies of writing instruction. They provide eight principles that should serve to guide writing instruction:

1. Writing can develop across the lifespan as part of changing contexts.
2. Writing development is complex because writing is complex.
3. Writing develop is variable; there is no single path and no single endpoint.
4. Writers develop in relation to the changing social needs, opportunities, resources, and technologies of their time and place.
5. The development of writing depends on the development, redirection, and specialized

To understand how writing develops across the lifespan, educators need to recognize the different ways language resources can be used to present meaning in written text.

—*Taking the Long View on Writing Development*, Bazerman, C., et al.

reconfiguring of general functions, processes, and tools.

6. Writing and other forms of development have reciprocal and mutually supporting relationships.
7. To understand how writing develops across the lifespan, educators need to recognize the different ways language resources can be used to present meaning in written text.
8. Curriculum plays a significant formative role in writing development.

Bazerman, C., et al. (2017). *Research in the Teaching of English*, 51(3), 351–360.

5. Does Digital Reading Count?

What Are Preadolescent Readers Doing Online? An Examination of Upper Elementary Students' Reading, Writing, and Communication in Digital Spaces

Prevailing perceptions—and the media—portray today's children as “digital natives” who confidently manipulate an assortment of digital technologies. Such perceptions can negatively influence how elementary schools integrate digital tools into classroom literacy instruction. The authors report findings about the online activities, perceptions, preferences, and skills of fourth- and fifth-graders. A sampling:

- Students believe it is more difficult to use the internet than read a book, and that a book is usually more beneficial to their learning.
- Students engage in digital tasks more frequently in school than outside of school, but school tasks often “involve consumption of information rather than engagement in creative media production.”

Hutchison, A.C., Woodward, L., & Colwell, J. (2016). *Reading Research Quarterly*, 51(4), 435–454.

6. What's the Most Efficient Way to Teach Reading to ELLs?

A Window Into Bilingual Reading: The Bilingual Reading Practices of Fourth-Grade, Mexican American Children Who Are Emergent Bilinguals

Educational practices related to the literacy instruction of children who acquire a different language at school than the one used at home are increasingly relevant. The authors' research provides insight into how students interact with texts in both their first and second languages. A main finding: Students use various reading strategies across languages to make meaning from text. This finding supports the idea that it can be effective to use instructional strategies focused on bilingual reading development, as opposed to separate reading development in each language. García, G.E., & Godina, H. (2017). *Journal of Literacy Research*, 49(2), 273–301.

7. How Can Principals Facilitate High-Quality Instruction?

Metasynthesis of In-Service Professional Development Research: Features Associated With Positive Educator and Student Outcomes

The authors examined 15 research reviews of professional development studies that examined improving teacher content knowledge and practice and, in turn, student achievement. Results showed that professional development was effective when it included factors such as trainer demonstration; active, authentic teacher learning experiences; opportunities for teachers' reflection; and extended follow-up supports to reinforce teacher learning and practice. This is important for planning teacher PD in any school. Dunst, C.J., Bruder, M.B., & Hamby, D.W. (2015). *Educational Research and Reviews*, 10(12), 1731–1744. 

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