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Best Practices in Instructional Strategies for Reading in General Education

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OVERVIEW

A candid look at student achievement in the 21st century points to an educational system that continues battling to ensure that all children experience academic success. School psychologists who have been in education for any period of time certainly have witnessed countless programs, curricula, and initiatives ebb and flow. Most ubiquitous and notable among these efforts are those aimed at undertaking the literacy crisis in the United States. According to the Nation's Report Card, which summarizes the academic achievement of a nationally representative sample of elementary and secondary students, approximately 25% of all students read below a basic level. These percentages are greater for poor (37%), Black (42%), and Latino (37%) students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Nevertheless, the ability to read critically and write well is the foundation for lifelong success both in and out of school. Phyllis C. Hunter, a nationally renowned reading consultant who specializes in helping teachers recognize and correctly implement scientifically based reading programs (Reading Rockets; <http://bcove.me/wqnsdtkv>), describes reading as the new civil right. Hunter is unwavering in the conviction that a school's first and most important mission is to teach children to read and read well.

Of all the potential solutions that exist to address this country's education problems, none is more tangible than efforts aimed at improving teachers' capacity to deliver excellent instruction, especially in reading. We know that improvements in instruction invariably lead to improvements in learning outcomes (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). Fortunately, a vast literature on

effective instructional pedagogy, particularly in the area of reading, has identified both general and specific instructional strategies (and interventions) most likely to promote academic achievement for all students. Leaders in the top performing school systems understand that "the quality of the outcomes of any school system is essentially the sum of the quality of the instruction that its teachers deliver" (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 26). We know what works. Indeed, much of the variation in children's reading achievement rests squarely on a teacher's instructional effectiveness in the classroom (Strickland, Snow, Griffin, Burns, & McNamara, 2002).

In the area of reading, using effective instructional strategies can in effect bring most struggling readers to average reading levels (e.g., Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, & Mehta, 1998). Even for students who are English language learners (ELL), quality of instruction is more important than language of instruction (Cheung & Slavin, 2012) for improving educational outcomes. An excellent teacher is a curriculum and instruction virtuoso. She has the remarkable ability to use daily student data to inform what materials she will select and the methods she will employ to instruct each and every pupil in her charge. It is indisputable: "It all comes down to the teacher" (Strickland et al., 2002, p. 4) and the instructional strategies available in his or her teaching arsenal.

This chapter describes instructional principles and strategies, both broad and specific, that have been identified in various literatures (e.g., education, special education, educational psychology, and school psychology) as being the most effective at helping all children learn to read and read better. The chapter addresses the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)

Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services (NASP 2010a) domain of Interventions and Instructional Support to Develop Academic Skills and is intended to address the area of reading instruction and intervention. It is anticipated that the information presented in this chapter will allow school psychologists to recognize when excellent instructional practices in reading are occurring and when these practices need improvement so school psychologists can work collaboratively with teachers in continuing to improve teachers' instructional practices and thus student academic outcomes.

The three core components of excellent classroom pedagogy comprise effective strategies in (a) instruction, (b) classroom management, and (c) classroom curriculum design (Marzano, 2007). In this chapter, the focus is on the first component, the use of effective instructional strategies and principles as applied to improving students' reading. While there is no shortage of literature on effective instructional strategies, the goal of this chapter is to present with broad brushstrokes some of the most salient features of effective instructional practices and principles, emphasizing those that promote reading mastery at the elementary and secondary levels.

BASIC CONSIDERATIONS

If it all comes down to the teacher with regard to classroom instruction and intervention, where does this leave the school psychologist? Among their many professional roles, school psychologists are charged with promoting effective learning environments that prevent academic problems as well as working with teachers and other educators to cultivate these supportive learning environments (NASP, 2010b). Although instruction and curriculum are regarded as domains of the classroom teacher, if school psychologists are going to advocate effectively for students within the educational system, then they must have knowledge about pedagogy, including awareness of evidence-based curricula (the what) and effective instructional methods (the how) and what these look like when implemented (or not implemented) in the classroom.

It is essential that school psychologists become proficient at recognizing the features of excellent classroom instruction and work skillfully and collaboratively with teachers when that instruction falls short. This work can be a delicate undertaking, but no professional is better prepared to carry on this pursuit than the school psychologist. A school psychologist's training in consultation and collaboration (and, in some

cases, pedagogy) allows the school psychologist to work closely with educators to advocate on behalf of students by making sure appropriate interventions and instructional supports are in place.

By and large, school psychologists can champion for students by capitalizing on their unique positions within a school system as both outsiders and insiders. As outsiders, school psychologists are in a unique role to objectively appraise the educational culture in which they work. Because they are not teachers, school psychologists are outsiders to the classroom, and therefore can be impartial when evaluating classroom ecologies and teaching effectiveness and unbiased when observing and assessing individual students. These assessment tasks are especially important when evaluating students who have been referred for special education consideration.

Alternatively, as insiders to the school system in which they work, school psychologists generally are highly regarded by staff for their skills and knowledge about best practices in education and psychology. Consequently, school psychologists have credibility with teachers and administrators and are frequently sought out for their expertise, wide skill set, and ethical acumen. School psychologists thus are in the best position to confer closely with teachers, administrators, and other related services personnel in support of excellent instructional practices that provide every student an opportunity to succeed academically. Examples of this type of work include developing and offering tailored professional development sessions, facilitating discussion around a book study, creating intervention briefs that summarize the literature and interpret it for teachers' practical use, investigating and reporting on the evidence base of certain programs or curricula, and consulting individually with teachers about areas in which they would like more support or professional development.

What Good Reading Instruction Looks Like

Most students—roughly 50–60%—learn to read regardless of the method of instruction employed by their teachers (Olson, 2004). However, for struggling readers, explicit, systematic, and intense instruction in the five essential components of early reading (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) is the key to help them break the reading code in English. If struggling students are identified early through a systematic multitiered system of service delivery and taught using instruction that is based on