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Frequently Asked Questions About Reading Instruction

Developed by the Teaching and Learning Review Team

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Q. 1. What is systematic instruction?

A. Systematic instruction refers to a carefully planned sequence for instruction, similar to a builder's blueprint for a house. A blueprint is carefully thought out and designed before building materials are gathered and construction begins. The plan for systematic instruction is carefully thought out, strategic, and designed before activities and lessons are developed. Systematic instruction is clearly linked within, as well as across the five major areas of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). For systematic instruction, lessons build on previously taught information, from simple to complex, with clear, concise student objectives that are driven by ongoing assessment. Students are provided appropriate practice opportunities which directly reflect instruction.

Q. 2. What is direct instruction?

A. Direct instruction is an instructional approach that utilizes explicit and structured teaching routines. A teacher using direct instruction models, explains, and guides the students through extended practice of a skill or concept until mastery is achieved. The lessons are fast paced, students are academically engaged, and teachers are enthusiastically delivering instruction. Direct instruction is appropriate instruction for all learners, all five components of reading, and in all settings (whole group, small group, and one-on-one).

Q. 3. Aren't scripted lessons for inexperienced or uncreative teachers?

A. The primary purpose of scripted lessons is to provide effective explanations of new concepts, to offer appropriate examples of the skill or concept that is being taught, to provide practice activities that directly reinforce instruction, to provide models for appropriate scaffolding and error correction, and to help with pacing. If they are well written, scripted lessons help focus instruction by providing consistent language and maintaining fidelity to the lesson's objectives. While it is true that scripted lessons may be particularly beneficial to less experienced or less knowledgeable teachers, they may also be used effectively by experienced teachers to help them sharpen and

focus their instructional language and procedures.

Q. 4. Why is it important to have a 90 minute reading block?

A. Implementation of a 90 minute reading block must be combined with good teaching methods with special attention to what a student already knows, timely and specific feedback, and the active participation of the teacher in order to have a significant impact on achievement (Quartarola, 1984). It is important to remember that students vary on the amount of time needed to learn a new skill, the intensity of instruction, and amount of practice opportunities provided within the reading block. All of these aspects of reading instruction are important to student achievement (Gettinger, 1984, 1985, 1989). Therefore "time spent in learning is a more useful index of learning time and a stronger predictor of achievement than simply allocated time" (Gettinger, 1985, p. 4).

Research suggests that before simply adding more time, schools should instead, make better use of (maximize) existing time (Quartarola, 1984; Hossler et al., 1988; (Moore et al., 1990 NECTL, 1994);(Taylor et al., 2000); (Taylor et al., 2003). Because increased engaged time (on task) produces, at best moderate increases in achievement, schools must at the very least find ways to (Aronson et al., 1999):

- 1- Increase the proportion of time students are involved in instructional activities.
- 2- Be sure that adequate allocated time is devoted to instruction in those core academic subjects in which we seek improved student performance.
- 3- Find ways to minimize interruptions during engaged learning times so teachers can create opportunities for academic learning time.

The appropriate amount of time allocated to reading instruction in grades K-3 will vary with the needs of the majority of students. Schools that serve a high proportion of students at risk for reading difficulties (students from poverty, students with restricted language experience, etc.) will likely require a longer block of time devoted to reading instruction than schools that have small numbers of students at risk (Foorman and Torgesen, 2001). If substantial numbers of students in the early elementary grades are not able to meet grade level expectations in basic reading skills and significant numbers cannot meet grade level expectations in reading comprehension by the end of third grade, both the amount and quality of instruction may need to be increased. The 90 minute reading block is widely recommended as a "starting place" for schools that serve a high proportion of poor and minority students. This amount of time can be adjusted depending on students' reading achievement and is a minimum requirement for all elementary schools in Florida.

Q. 5. May students go to another class for intervention during the 90 minute block?

A. In order to implement some programs correctly, students are grouped homogeneously and may need to move to another classroom for their core instruction. Students with an individual educational plan (IEP) that specifies special reading interventions may receive the most appropriate level of instruction either in the regular classroom or by the ESE teacher in the special education classroom.

Q. 6. How do we prioritize what to teach when the Core Reading Program offers so much?

A. During the 90 minute reading block, your priority should be on teaching the objectives of the lesson in the sequence provided with a focus on the five major components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Content and activities that directly teach and provide mastery oriented practice of critical skills should receive the first priority for inclusion in the lesson. Part of the purpose of the professional development provided is to provide the knowledge required to help teachers select the most relevant, or critical instructional activities from within the material offered by the core program, depending on the needs of their students.

Q. 7. What is the best use of an extra adult in the room during the 90 minute block?

A. During the time an extra adult is in the room, organize the reading block for flexible, small groups. Rather than using this time to teach a whole group lesson, the classroom teacher works with a small group of students who are at high risk while the other adult works with a small group of students who need extra support. One

suggestion is to train the extra adult (e.g., paraprofessional, volunteer) to use a detailed reading program that meets the needs of the particular group in which he/she will work.

Q. 8. During the 90 minute reading block, should I follow the sequence of student materials in the Core Reading Program or choose stories as they seem appropriate for our thematic units?

A. In an explicit and systematic reading program, the student materials are aligned with instruction and sequenced to provide application and practice of previously taught skills. Choosing stories based on thematic content is not appropriate as it may reduce the benefits of explicit, sequenced, and aligned student materials.

Q. 9. Is writing permitted and what type of writing activities can be included during the 90 minute block?

A. A writing activity that relates to one of the five components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension) may be included as part of the reading block. A lesson that teaches the writing process should be outside the 90 minute reading block. For example, writing activities that are explicitly designed to provide opportunities for students to use new vocabulary words in novel ways are an appropriate part of reading instruction. Many writing activities can also be used productively to help children strengthen their phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge.

Q. 10. What do you mean by flexible small group instruction?

A. Students are grouped according to shared instructional needs and abilities and regrouped as their instructional needs change. Group size, allocated instructional time, and instructional content varies among groups. Time can be adjusted so that additional instruction is provided for struggling students.

Q. 11. How can I keep teaching my small group when the students in centers complete their activity early and start misbehaving?

A. It is essential to spend time at the beginning of the school year modeling, practicing, and reviewing appropriate classroom procedures in order to establish efficient routines and to encourage positive classroom behaviors during center time. It is also necessary to keep consistent materials, in addition to the assigned activity at the centers. These consistent activities contain materials that have been previously introduced to the students. These materials are aligned with the students' instructional needs and remain available to students throughout the year. Examples of consistent materials that enable students to stay academically engaged until they move to the next center are: magnetic letters, alphabet tiles, alphabet puzzles, rubber stamp letters, dry-erase marker boards, blank mini-books, word games, word sorts, flannel boards, puppets for retelling, CD's and tapes for listening centers. These consistent materials need to be well organized and easily accessible to students.

Kindergarten and First Grade Students Center Activities and a Teacher Resource Guide (how to plan, organize, and manage reading centers) can be found [here](#).

Q. 12. What is a good way to build vocabulary skills?

A. Teachers help young students build vocabulary by choosing understandable, interesting, and potentially useful words to discuss during or after reading books to the children. Vocabulary knowledge will be expanded and deepened when teachers clearly explain the meaning of unfamiliar words and provide discussion and activities that require students to demonstrate their knowledge of the words' meaning within multiple contexts. Teachers build vocabulary skills for older students before, during, and after reading by choosing words that are likely to be useful in understanding the text, exist in a variety of texts, and appear in normal conversations of the mature language user. In order for vocabulary learning to have an impact on reading comprehension, new words must be learned at a level of mastery that includes the ability to fluently access their meaning and to understand possible shades of meaning in different contexts. So, one key to "robust" vocabulary instruction is to engage students in activities with words that help them learn to access their meaning in many different ways. A helpful resource for building teachers' knowledge about vocabulary instruction is *Bringing Words to Life* by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (Beck et al., 2002).

Q. 13. What can I do to help my students read more fluently?

A. Teachers can help their students become more fluent readers by providing a model of fluent reading and then monitoring them during repeated oral reading. Model how to read a passage at the student's independent level then have him/her reread the passage at least three times to improve fluency. Of course, this will need to be done

across many different passages during the year in order to produce a generalized effect on reading fluency, and it is important for reading to be as accurate as possible during this type of reading practice. Effective repeated oral reading strategies include partner reading, choral reading, tape-assisted reading, and timed repeated readings. When the teacher is able to provide immediate feedback during a timed repeated reading, it may be appropriate to have the students read material at their instructional level. As much practice as possible of this type should be scheduled during reading instruction, particularly for students who are struggling with reading fluency. For students who are very poor readers with extremely limited sight vocabularies, it may also be helpful to provide focused practice from lists of high frequency words. Apart from these focused instructional techniques that have been shown to produce gains in reading fluency, it is also important to create as many opportunities throughout the day for students to read meaningful text at the appropriate level of difficulty. A useful reference for further guidance in the area of fluency instruction is *A Focus on Fluency* by **Osborn, Lehr, and Hiebert** http://www.prel.org/products/re_/fluency-1.htm.

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