Differentiating Reading Instruction Within the Core

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About this Talk

Join **Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.**, and **Stephanie Al Otaiba, Ph.D.** of Florida State University and also the Florida Center of Reading Research (FCRR) as they answer your questions about delivering high quality core instruction and differentiating instruction for struggling learners. Drs. Connor and Al Otaiba will also offer tips and suggestions for using materials and lesson procedures from the core program to provide reteaching, or additional teaching, to students according to their needs.

Transcript

Q *Kim Dunn*

We are working on our School Improvement Plan and we would like some suggestions of how we could differentiate instruction within our core reading time?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*

Good for you! The most effective RTI is a school-wide effort. As we work with teachers to differentiate core literacy instruction, we include the following:

1. Progress monitoring of key skills that is used to guide both the content and duration of children's instruction;
2. We think about literacy across multiple dimensions -- the extent to which teachers work directly with students (teacher/child managed) and the extent to which children are working independently or with peers (child-managed). We also think about whether instruction is generally code (phonics, phonological awareness) or meaning (vocabulary, comprehension, fluency) focused and target instruction based on children's assessed learning goals;
3. We vary both the amount of time and the content of the activities to meet students' learning goals. The teachers in our study have used many different methods to achieve these goals. The FCRR website has activities and videos related to this topic. *The Handbook of RTI* is also a great resource by Jimerson, Burns, and VanDerHeyden (2007).

Q *Ferdinand McGrill*

In a busy classroom with many students who have many different needs (and are in and out constantly), do you recommend having multiple teachers implement differentiation within reading instruction? How could one teacher do that on his/her own?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*

That is a great question and one that will probably involve school level decisions. Taylor, Pearson and colleagues (2000) talk about how effective schools used different strategies to make sure each

A student received differentiated instruction. For example, one method is to have children change classrooms during the literacy block in order to create more homogenous ranges of skills during this time.

They also described how literacy block times were rotated so that Classroom A had their literacy block from 9-10:30 and the special ed teacher, SLP, literacy coach, reading specialist, and other experts went to that class and worked with children. Then Classroom B would have their literacy block from 10:00 to 11:30 (a slight overlap) and the professionals would provide interventions with the children in that classroom. In some of the classrooms where we work, two teachers share a classroom with a larger class size. They then work together as a team to provide differentiated instruction.

Finally, we have seen teachers differentiate instruction on their own using stations or centers where children work independently or with peers on evidence-based literacy activities while the teacher works with a smaller group of students. For example, Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) is a great way to have children work on meaningful literacy activities. Another website that helps schools think about how to use resources within an RTI framework is Project IRIS.

Q *Brad Hale*
Given there are so many different causes of reading disability, when can cognitive assessment be useful in understanding the nature of the learning problem and for differentiating instruction?

A *Stephanie Al Otaiba, Ph.D.*
This is an important question, especially as we move away from using the IQ-Achievement discrepancy approach for identifying learning disabilities. Researchers have varying opinions about the use of cognitive assessments. On the one hand, cognitive testing may not provide much help in selecting particular intervention programs. Children with mild intellectual disabilities generally respond well to explicit reading instruction and interventions that follows the guidance of the National Reading Panel(2000).

On the other hand, cognitive testing may play a role in identifying very young children who have developmental delays in order for them to receive services. Further, it may be appropriate in some situations to use cognitive testing for students who do not respond when they have received very intensive and well implemented reading instruction.

Q *Martha Benes*
How can teachers best support struggling readers who yearn to be independent, yet have great difficulty reading and understanding core content text?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*

This is a really important question because we want to have high expectations for all students. Our research shows that these independent activities can really help support students' reading development and motivation. The timing seems to be important however. For example, providing smaller amounts of child-managed activities at the beginning of the year when children are establishing new skills and learning classroom routines is associated with greater reading gains. However, as skills improve, gradually increasing the amount of time children work independently and with their peers leads to stronger gains.

Another method that has been widely research is Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies or PALS. PALS is a type of class-wide peer tutoring that doubles or triples student practice time and engagement. The partner reading aspect of PALS has been used with young children, high school students, and with narrative and content area text. It also has been effective with English Language Learners. It is important to consider how to partner children. Some teachers divide their class in half and match the top student with the bottom student in that top half in order that children practice on an independent reading level.

Another resource that may be helpful is Mastropieri, M.A. Scruggs, T. Mohler, L., Beranek, M. Spencer, V. Boon, RT & Talbott, E (2001). Can middle school students with serious reading difficulties help each other learn anything? Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 16, 18-27.

Q *Janet Casebier*

Who is required to differentiate core instruction? Is it classroom teachers or highly trained teachers and what is the difference?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*

We have really struggled with the idea of roles. You can read what the IRA Commission on RTI wrote about differentiated core instruction. There is not one mandated RTI model. However, differentiating core instruction has been a consistent recommendation (see the IES Practice Guide on RTI). Differentiated core is generally considered Tier 1 and so would be implemented by the classroom teacher who would also be highly trained.

In our research, we have worked with many classroom teachers and all of them are able to differentiate instruction using assessment-guided instruction in small groups using stations or centers (there is a guided video related to this at The Florida Center for Reading Research website). We have found that the more teachers who individualize or differentiate core instruction, the greater the students' literacy gains [Connor, C. M., Piasta, S. B., Fishman, B., Glasney, S., Schatschneider, C., Crowe, E., et al. (2009). Individualizing student instruction precisely: Effects of child by instruction interactions on first graders? literacy development. Child Development, 80(1), 77-100.]

Q *Leeland Bowers*
Is the goal of differentiating core reading instruction to allow for ALL children to stay in the classroom (ELL's, students with disabilities, etc.) or will it still be required to pull some children out even when this is done perfectly?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*
The goal of differentiating Tier 1 instruction, especially in the early grades, is to keep all of the students in the classroom during the dedicated literacy block. Tier 2 or other special services are probably best provided in addition to the literacy block. This would include students who are ELL. The IES Practice Guide on RTI reading and the IRA guiding principlesoffer more information on this.

It is possible that for older children (after grade three), separate services during the literacy block might be appropriate if they are so far behind that they are unlikely to gain anything from instruction.

Q *Jessica Boyles*
Can you recommend specific reading programs or materials to use with core reading instruction?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*
When we work with our teachers (kindergarten through 3rd grade), we actually help them differentiate the many activities provided in their core literacy curriculum. In fact, core reading can be provided in a small group format rather than whole class, lock step. Many of these curriculums also provide challenges and extra support activities in addition to the regular activities.

The Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR) has a great website that provides free downloadable center or station activities for kindergarten through 5th grade. There is also video on how to differentiate centers as well as great tips for classroom management and organization. Also, many Tier 2-type interventions work very well in the classroom. The Florida Center for Reading Research has reviews and descriptions of many such programs. With older students, additional resources and reviews of intervention programs can be found at the Center on Instruction website and the Best Evidence Encyclopedia website.

Q *Jill Martino*
I'm a parent of a student who is doing very well in school but was interested when I saw this talk was about differentiation. They have talked a lot about that at my son's school. I am having trouble understanding why he should be in a class with students who are reading at such lower levels than he is. How can the teacher possibly be teaching both groups of children - the achievers and the

Q strugglers? Isn't my son missing out on growing further in his reading skills?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*
As parents and teachers we share your concern. In fact, there is research that we may be undeserving children who are highly able, especially if they attend a high poverty school. Teaching "one size fits all" doesn't serve the most or least able students well. That is why differentiating core literacy instruction is so important. As a parent, this is what you might expect to see in an effectively differentiated classroom:

1. Assessment that is used to guide instruction so that your son is presented with challenging and meaningful activities;
2. Opportunities for your son to work independently and with peers. Our research shows, for example, that children with high vocabulary skills make greater reading gains when provided about 30-40 minutes per day to read and write [Connor, C. M., Morrison, F. J., Fishman, B. J., Schatschneider, C., & Underwood, P. (2007). THE EARLY YEARS: Algorithm-guided individualized reading instruction. Science, 315(5811), 464-465.].
3. Repeated assessment to make sure your son is actually progressing as expected.

There is a [Parent Guide on the RTI Action Network](#) that may also provide information on this topic.

Q *Molly Evans*
Can you help with ideas for differentiation within Jr. high English classes?

A *Stephanie Al Otaiba, Ph.D.*
This is a great question. By the time students are in junior high, English teachers face a challenge of the growing range of reading abilities. Further, motivation is such an important component. Carol and I have personally focused our efforts to date with relatively younger children. However, we have some resources to share with you. We also want to refer you to a prior talk with the experts Drs. Barbara Ehren and Kathleen Whitmire. In general, the research will support individualizing by providing children who still have not mastered phonics with strong skill instruction and explicit comprehension instruction for all students.

The following paper summarizes current information on effective reading programs: Slavin, R.E., Cheung, A., Groff, C., and Lake, C. (2008). Effective reading programs for middle and high schools: A best evidence synthesis. Reading Research Quarterly, 43, 3, 290-322. It is found at the [Best Evidence Web site.](#)

The following resources are available in our additional resources section:

- [IES practice guide related to Improving Adolescent Literacy](#)
- [Center on Instruction](#) (includes syntheses on instruction, intervention, and also assessments)

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- Two documents that parallel the National Reading Panel summary but are related to reading and writing for older students are: ReadingNext and Writing Next

Q *Nancy Young*

What tips and lesson procedures should be offered to the many parents wanting to help their child with curriculum reinforcement at home (other than additional worksheets and rote learning?)

A *Stephanie Al Otaiba, Ph.D.*

Another super question! Parents can be an important support, particularly in terms of shared book reading to build language. One well-researched technique is Dialogic Book Reading- in which parents are shown how to have a dialogue about the book and to extend children's language. For older children, supporting motivation by having a family reading time may also be helpful.

We have also incorporated parents as volunteer tutors in some of our studies and found two benefits- parents helped children in the classroom to improve reading outcomes and parents also "took home" the strategies they learned while implementing a fairly scripted beginning reading intervention.

Q *Glenda Hott*

What are the components of a solid core reading program?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*

This is a question that is well worth asking since there are only so many hours in a school day and we want to be sure that time is spent effectively. The answer depends on the grade. For example, in kindergarten and first grade, the National Panel Reading Report(2000), shows that teaching students phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and we would add writing, are critical components of an effective reading program. As children's skills develop, the emphasis shifts to explicit comprehension instruction and building fluency.

That is, the decoding becomes automatic and the comprehension becomes strategic [Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.), Handbook of early literacy research (pp. 97-110). New York: Guilford Press.] and varies across genres. For example, expository text becomes more common and students usually require explicit instruction to "read to learn." For those of you working with older students, Reading Next and Writing Next are excellent resources. For preschoolers, the National Early Reading Panel Report is very helpful.

Q *Nina Gonzales*

Q How many times per week is a child to have Reading inverventions? Is there a specific time frame for inverventions and progress monitoring?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*
This is a good question and our best answer is, "it depends." It depends on the difficulties the child is facing, the reasons, and his or her grade. What we have found is that as children fall farther and farther behind, the only way they can catch up is to increase both the intensity and the duration of small group instruction. Thus for a child that is just struggling a bit, 30 minutes per day might be enough.

However, for children who have fallen about a grade level behind, as much as 40-60 minutes might be needed. If a child is a fluent decoder, but struggles to make sense of what he or she is reading, then more time in comprehension instruction and opportunities to read and write independently are usually more effective. Again, by differentiating instruction during the core literacy block, less time is needed in pull-out kinds of activities. I suggest you read the IES RTI Practice Guide.

Q *Brenda Willis*
How can a teacher differentiate instruction during whole group instruction?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*
Interesting idea! Whole class instruction is very important and we have evidence (in preschool) that it contributes to children's vocabulary growth [Connor, C. M., Morrison, F. J., & Slominski, L. (2006). Preschool instruction and children's literacy skill growth. Journal of Educational Psychology, 98(4), 665-689.]. A teacher that really knows his or her students' assessed skill levels is able to provide appropriate scaffolding, for example, during questions and answers about a book the class is reading together. However, in our kindergarten through third grade studies, we have always suggested that part of the time during the core literacy block incorporate the use of small group centers or stations and some seat work. This is so that the teacher has time to work with small groups of students (struggling, typical, and able).

Q *Margie Gillis*
How can the school administrator be sure that the teachers are maintaining fidelity to the Core Reading Program?

A *Carol M. Connor, Ph.D.*
First of all, you are to be commended for understanding that the school administrator is an instructional leader and can really make a difference in how well children are learning. Fidelity is an important issue but I would suggest that rather than think about fidelity to a specific core reading program (that may not be differentiated), I would think about fidelity to effective

A instruction. One way to help assure fidelity to effective instruction is through frequent (monthly is plenty) progress monitoring on the skills that are important. If all the students are gaining skills at expected rates, the teacher would be considered to have achieved fidelity to effective instruction.

Another way to examine fidelity to effective instruction is to visit classrooms and observe whether or not teachers are using small groups, that content is matched to students' assessed skills, and whether all of the children seem to be engaged in meaningful learning activities.

Fidelity to the core using a lock-step, all classrooms on the same page on the same day approach tends to under serve children at both ends of the skill continuum -- the struggling and the able.

Q *Reed*
What strategies and research-based materials are recommended for use with students at the high school level who may have experienced years of failure?

A *Stephanie Al Otaiba, Ph.D.*
There is a developing research base on interventions for high school students. It is so important to help these students so that they do not drop out. A large randomized experiment was just conducted comparing several interventions for students struggling in high school [Lang, L., Torgesen, J., Vogel, W. Chanter, C. Lefsky, E. & Petscher, Y. (2009) Exploring the relative effectiveness of reading interventions for high school students. Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 2: 149-175]. This study showed that students in the intensive interventions outperformed controls by about one third of a standard deviation.

We also refer you to the research synthesis on the [Best Evidence website](#) and to articles related to interventions and assessments on the [Center on Instruction website.](#)

Q *Nancy Giddens*
Do you suggest incorporating the writing process into the reading program or presenting it separately? Does having a writing station during reading block support the reading program?

A *Stephanie Al Otaiba, Ph.D.*
It is wonderful that you are thinking about integrating writing within reading. There are several strategies that help students think about and get motivated for reading that come from writing. Having a writing station where you can offer students a variety of activities for guided and independent practice is a good option. Strategies like using graphic organizers and self-monitoring or self-regulated strategy development (Johnson, Graham & Harris 1997- cited in the [Writing Next document](#) in additional resources) will help students see this linkage. The Writing Next document also provides some good guidance about these strategies for older students.

That concludes our RTI Talk for today. Thanks to everyone for the thoughtful questions and thanks to our experts, Drs. Carol Connor? and Stephanie Al Otaiba, for their time today.**Related Reading from RTINetwork.org:**

- [Classroom Reading Instruction That Supports Struggling Readers](#) by Carolyn A. Denton, Ph.D.
- [Classroom Reading Instruction That Supports Struggling Readers: Key Components for Effective Teaching](#) by Carolyn A. Denton, Ph.D.

Additional Resources:

- [Best Evidence Encyclopedia](#)
- [Center on Instruction](#)
- [Evaluation of Early Reading First](#)
- [The Florida Center for Reading Research](#)
- [IES Practice Guides](#)
- [IES Practice Guide for RTI](#)
- [IES Guide to Reviewing Research for Practioners](#)
- [The Institute of Educational Science](#)
- [IRA Commission on RTI: Working Draft of Guiding Principles](#)?
- [The International Reading Association](#)
- [National Center on Response to Intervention](#)
- [National Early Literacy Panel](#)
- [Peer Assisted Learning Strategies](#)
- [Project Iris](#)
- [Student Progress Monitoring Tools](#)
- [Reading Next](#)
- [Writing Next](#)