

A DESCRIPTION OF FIRST-GRADE LITERACY INSTRUCTION ACROSS NORTH CAROLINA

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In this research brief, we leverage data collected in 104 first grade classrooms across the state of North Carolina to better understand the influences on, and components of, first grade literacy instruction. Our research shows that:

- Classroom instruction in first grade is characterized by attention to all components of early literacy, including word study and comprehension. However, writing was seldom a major focus of instruction. This is a missed opportunity as reading and writing rely upon the same knowledge base, and recent metaanalysis indicate significant effects on student growth in both domains when reading and writing are taught simultaneously.
- Meeting students' needs was a primary goal for teachers when planning instruction, particularly when planning small group instruction. However, instruction for students reading below grade level focused more on skills limiting their access to instructional tasks that require higher order thinking.
- More than 40 curricular resources, supported by varying degrees of research evidence, were implemented in these first-grade classrooms, with Teachers Pay Teachers being the most used resource. When districts do not provide teachers with curricular materials, teachers must develop their own literacy curricula.

INTRODUCTION

Early schooling experiences set the stage for learning foundational literacy skills and developing dispositions for using foundational skills to engage in literate practices over a lifetime. The full range of literary experiences is essential, especially for children who depend on school for their early literacy learning. One of the most critical components of a strong educational experience is knowledgeable, capable educators. In fact, a recent review of educational research conducted by READ Charlotte,¹ found that among the five categories of early literacy interventions studied, the most significant gains in children's reading achievement resulted from investments in teachers' professional development.

As the largest single preparer of teachers for the state's public schools, the University of North Carolina (UNC) System recognizes the important role teachers play in the development of proficient readers, especially in early literacy. In response, the UNC System commissioned joint research by the Education Policy Initiative at Carolina (EPIC) at UNC Chapel Hill and the Cato College of Education at UNC Charlotte. Collectively, this work attends to the instructional resources and practices utilized in early elementary classrooms and the effectiveness of early grades literacy teachers. In this research brief we focus on instructional resources and practices by addressing the following: (1) What literacy content do first-grade teachers focus on during their English Language Arts (ELA) instruction?

¹ READ Charlotte is an initiative for parents, educators, and community partners founded in 2014 by the Belk Foundation with the goal of improving local third grade literacy scores.

(2) What curricular materials do first-grade teachers utilize during ELA instruction? and (3) What supports do first-grade teachers have? Our findings reinforce and challenge current policy with the hope that policy

can better support teachers in enacting cohesive, research-based literacy instruction that improves students' literacy development.

BACKGROUND

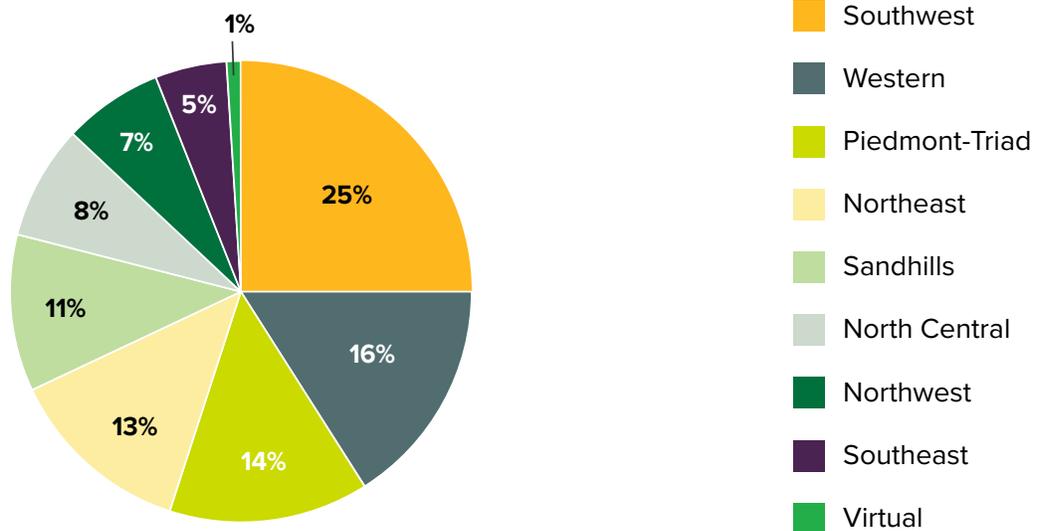
This study focuses on first grade, as students experience tremendous growth in reading ability during this time period. Students typically enter this grade with the skills necessary to read simple, short sentences and leave with the ability to read beginner chapter books. All first-grade teachers in schools receiving Title I funds in North Carolina were eligible to participate in the study. The Department of Public Instruction sent a recruitment email to all Title I directors, who forwarded this email to Title I school principals, who then forwarded the email to their first-grade teachers.

Data were collected from 104 first-grade teachers in schools receiving Title I funds. The sample was overwhelmingly White (85%), with lesser representation of Black (6%), Hispanic (3%), Native American/American Indian (2%), and multiracial

(3%) teachers. Two percent of teachers did not provide race/ethnicity data. All participants self-identified as female.

Teachers represented diversity in geographic location and years of experience. North Carolina's eight education regions were all represented (Figure 1), with the greatest representation from the Southwest region (24%). Teaching experience ranged from two (n=11) to 21+ years (n=18), with the largest representation of teachers having between 10-15 years of experience (n=25). In terms of first grade specific experience, teachers ranged from being in their first year (n=7) to 21+ years of experience (n=3), with the largest concentration of teachers having between 4-6 years of first grade teaching experience (n=30).

FIGURE 1: Participants Representation by NC Region



Note: This figure displays the North Carolina education regions for each of the 104 first-grade teachers in our sample.

The formal education of 26% of teachers included some specialized focus in reading or literacy. Teacher qualifications include an earned literacy-related Master's degree or higher (n=13), a literacy-related minor or endorsement (n=7), certification as a reading

specialist (n=6), a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) or English Language Learner (EL) minor or endorsement (n=4), and dual majors as undergraduates (n=3).

In-person classroom size ranged from 13-28 students, with one participant teaching 44 first graders in an online context. Table 1 demonstrates the academic profiles of the classrooms.

On average, teachers had 5.26 students reading well below grade level, 6.07 students engaging in Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 instruction, and 1.96 students with an IEP in their classrooms.

TABLE 1: Student Characteristics in First-Grade Classrooms

| | Mean (SD) |
|------------------------------------|--------------|
| Class size | 18.13 (3.67) |
| Reading well below benchmark | 5.26 (3.22) |
| Reading below benchmark | 5.64 (3.00) |
| Reading on or above benchmark | 6.88 (3.63) |
| Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 supports | 6.07 (4.07) |
| Have an IEP | 1.96 (1.63) |
| ESL Instruction | 1.11 (1.63) |
| Academically/Intellectually Gifted | 0.29 (0.91) |

Note: For the first-grade teachers in our sample, this table displays average class size and the mean number of students taught with a respective characteristic (e.g., having an IEP). Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Teachers initially completed a Classroom Context Questionnaire (CCQ) to describe their specific teaching context. The CCQ is a 47-item survey completed by participants at the start of the school year to gather information on: (1) the classroom demographic context; (2) teachers' instructional context; (3) instructional material selection and use; (4) descriptors of small group instruction; (5) experience with professional development; and (6) participant demographic information.

Ninety-eight of these teachers then completed the Literacy Log (LL), which took teachers approximately 10 minutes to complete each day. The LL, a survey instrument with approximately 100 items, is used to record the literacy instruction provided to a single student on a single day. Teachers completed the LL for 15 consecutive instructional days in October and an additional 15 consecutive instructional days in February. Daily Log prompts were randomized to

assure teachers recorded 10 logs each for students reading at grade level, below grade level, and above grade level.

With the LL teachers recorded the amount of time a focal student engaged in literacy instruction and identified which elements of literacy instruction were a major focus, minor focus, touched on briefly, or not included in instruction for the given day. Instructional elements included comprehension, text-based writing, non-text-based writing, word study², fluency, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, and research strategies. When comprehension, writing, and/or word study were selected as a major or minor focus of instruction, display logic was used to gather additional information about these three instructional elements. These items attended to the topics of instruction, materials used, and instructional strategies employed.

² Word study or word analysis includes work on the structure of words or the sounds and letters that make up words.

Additionally, all participants were eligible to participate in a 30-minute semi-structured focus group interview to further understand teachers' instructional contexts, how they select instructional materials, how they approach small group instruction, and to describe their ideal literacy instruction scenario. Seventy teachers participated in a focus group interview.

The CCQ responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics for single- and multiple-response items and thematic analysis for open-ended responses. The LL data were analyzed using hierarchical linear models (HLM), and the focus group data was qualitatively coded to identify themes.

What literacy content do first-grade teachers focus on during their English Language Arts (ELA) instruction?

Time Spent on Instruction: The state of North Carolina requires 90-minutes of uninterrupted instruction during the ELA block for K-3 students.

Teachers self-reported the typical number of minutes per day spent on literacy on the CCQ, and the actual minutes spent were averaged based on their LL (Table 2). According to the CCQ, teachers reported the length of the ELA block varied from less than 60 minutes (n=1)³ to more than 120 minutes (n=23), with the majority of classrooms (n=55) spending between 91 and 120 minutes and another 24 classrooms spending between 61-90 minutes each day.

While the most frequently reported number of instructional minutes on the LL was 90 (m=96.67), data also demonstrated a significant variance in instructional time (SD=36.21), and significantly less time spent on instruction than reported by the CCQ (Table 2). In terms of variability, it is worth noting that 128 logs (5%) reported 30 or fewer minutes spent on literacy instruction and another 128 logs (5%) reported more than 150 minutes spent on literacy instruction.

TABLE 2: Instructional Minutes Spent on Literacy Per Day

| | CCQ (Teachers) | | LL (Logs) | |
|---------------|----------------|------|-----------|------|
| | n | % | n | % |
| Less than 60 | 1 | 1.0 | 210 | 9.6 |
| 60-90 | 25 | 24.0 | 1092 | 49.9 |
| 91-120 | 55 | 52.9 | 467 | 21.3 |
| More than 120 | 23 | 22.1 | 421 | 19.2 |

Note: This table presents the average number of minutes spent on literacy instruction each day. Data come from the Classroom Context Questionnaire (CCQ) and Literacy Logs (LL).

Content of Instruction: Comprehension was a major focus of instruction 55% of the time. Word study and spelling (closely related topics focusing on decoding and encoding words) were the major focus of instruction 39% and 28% of the time, respectively. Text-based writing (writing in response to a text) and non-text-based writing (writing narrative, informative, or persuasive texts) each received little instructional time and were the major focus of instruction 13% and 15% of the time, respectively.

Additionally, vocabulary, a key component of comprehension, was a major focus of instruction only 19% of the time.

All teachers used small group instruction to address two or more literacy topics. Nearly all classrooms used small groups to teach comprehension (99%) and phonics or phonological awareness (92%), while fluency (88%) and writing (78%) were attended slightly less frequently in small group instruction.

³ This participant taught in a fully online, or virtual school.

Literacy centers or stations were a staple in classrooms with all but two teachers using them as part of their ELA block. Independent reading, computer/tablet, and word work were the most commonly implemented centers (94%, 93%, and 90%, respectively) with 77% of teachers using a writing center.

Differences by Student Ability and School Grades:

Teachers modify instruction based on the needs of their students through differentiation and small group instruction. As a result, the instruction students engage in at differing stages of literacy development will vary. Stark differences can be found in the instruction provided to students reading below grade level (BGL), at grade level (GL), and above grade level (AGL). Though comprehension instruction is a major focus of instruction 55% of the time, students reading below grade level engaged in comprehension instruction 49% of the time while students reading above grade level did so 64% of the time. Table 3 displays the differences in the proportion of instructional days that each literacy topic was a focus of instruction. As stated above, students reading BGL had significantly less instructional days where comprehension was a major focus of instruction. Students reading BGL and at GL are more likely to engage in word study instruction than students reading AGL, and students who read BGL and at GL are significantly less likely to engage in text-based writing instruction than students reading AGL. This pattern of students reading BGL participating in less complex instruction or instruction requiring less higher-order thinking was evident across the dataset.

Similar patterns are evident when considering North Carolina school performance grades. Table 3 indicates that first grade teachers in schools identified as A schools are statistically more likely to engage in word study instruction, comprehension instruction, and text-based writing instruction.

Differences by Teacher Characteristics: There were few differences found when comparing instruction across North Carolina's education regions. Teachers in the Western region were less likely to teach comprehension than those in the Southwest region, whereas teachers in the North Central region provided significantly less text-based writing instruction. In contrast, teachers in the Northwestern and Northeastern regions were significantly more likely to teach non-text-based writing.

Differences across instructional topics taught based on teachers' years of teaching experience were also analyzed (Table 3). There were no statistical differences between novice teachers (those teaching less than three years) and the reference category, teachers with seven to ten years of experience. Teachers with four to six years of teaching experience were significantly less likely to teach non-text-based writing. Teachers with 10 to 15 years of experience were significantly less likely to teach word study. This finding is potentially explained by the prevalence of the whole language paradigm, which valued exposure to rich language and literature over attention to explicit phonics instruction, during the timeframe of their formal education. Remarkably teachers with 15 to 20 years of experience were the least likely to teach word study, comprehension, and non-text-based writing when compared to all other groups. This finding is potentially explained by the prevalence of the reading readiness paradigm during the timeframe of their formal education, which indicated students were not biologically ready to begin formally reading until at least the middle of their first grade year.

As noted earlier, writing instruction in general received less instructional time than other topics in literacy. Although the differences are not statistically significant, there is some evidence that those who participated in the NC Reading Research to Classroom Practice professional development (previously called Reading Foundations Training) were more likely to teach word study and comprehension but less likely to teach writing (Table 3).

What curricular materials do first-grade teachers utilize during ELA instruction?

Teachers across the state have varying degrees of autonomy when determining the curricular materials used and pacing of ELA instruction. The majority of teachers (69%) determine the content of ELA lessons as a grade level team. Similarly, 68% of teachers follow a pacing guide established by the school or district administration, curriculum team, or literacy coach⁴. Thirty-three percent of teachers have complete autonomy when it comes to content and pacing of their literacy lessons as long as they follow the North Carolina Standard Course of Study.

⁴ Teachers could select multiple answers for this question, as such the percentages will not equal 100.

TABLE 3: Differences in Proportion of Days with a Focus on Gateway Topics by Covariates

| | Word Study | Comp. | Text-Based Writing | Non-Text-Based Writing |
|------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| <i>NC Professional Development</i> | | | | |
| Yes | 0.45 | 0.75 | 0.34 | 0.04 |
| No | <u>0.36</u> | <u>0.70</u> | <u>0.40</u> | <u>0.09</u> |
| <i>Student Ability</i> | | | | |
| BGL | 0.41 | 0.62 | 0.28 | 0.08 |
| GL | 0.44 | 0.68 | 0.35 | 0.11 |
| AGL (omitted) | <u>0.36</u> | <u>0.70</u> | <u>0.40</u> | <u>0.09</u> |
| <i>School Grade</i> | | | | |
| A (omitted) | <u>0.36</u> | <u>0.70</u> | <u>0.40</u> | <u>0.09</u> |
| B | 0.19 | 0.54 | 0.15 | 0.23 |
| C | 0.25 | 0.57 | 0.20 | 0.18 |
| D | 0.22 | 0.48 | 0.24 | 0.14 |
| <i>Years of Experience</i> | | | | |
| Less than 3 | 0.44 | 0.67 | 0.35 | 0.05 |
| 4-6 | 0.25 | 0.64 | 0.50 | 0.04 |
| 7-10 (omitted) | <u>0.36</u> | <u>0.70</u> | <u>0.40</u> | <u>0.09</u> |
| 10-15 | 0.22 | 0.66 | 0.45 | 0.07 |
| 15-20 | 0.22 | 0.54 | 0.33 | 0.03 |

Note: This table displays results from HLM analyses showing the proportion of instructional days that each literacy topic (word study, comprehension, text-based writing, and non-text based writing) was a focus. **Red Font** = significant differences lower than reference category; **Blue Font** = significant differences higher than reference category; underline = estimates for reference category.

Teachers reported using more than 40 different curricular resources to plan and implement literacy instruction. Table 4 lists all of the materials used by teachers and includes comparisons between novice and veteran teachers for the most frequently used resources. Notably, 79% of teachers use Teachers Pay Teachers as a source for curriculum materials, with 92% of novice teachers and 75% of veteran teachers using this resource. Fifty-three percent of teachers create their own literacy materials, while 52% use Letter Land, a phonics curriculum. Pinterest

is another popular resource for teachers, with 50% of teachers using the website. As with Teachers Pay Teachers, Pinterest is more popular amongst novice teachers with 70% of novice teachers using Pinterest as compared to 42% of veteran teachers. Teachers use both Fountas and Pinnell and Jan Richardson, resources to guide teachers' language and actions during small group instruction with leveled readers, almost equally (49% and 46% respectively) to support their guided reading instruction.

TABLE 4: Curricular Materials Used

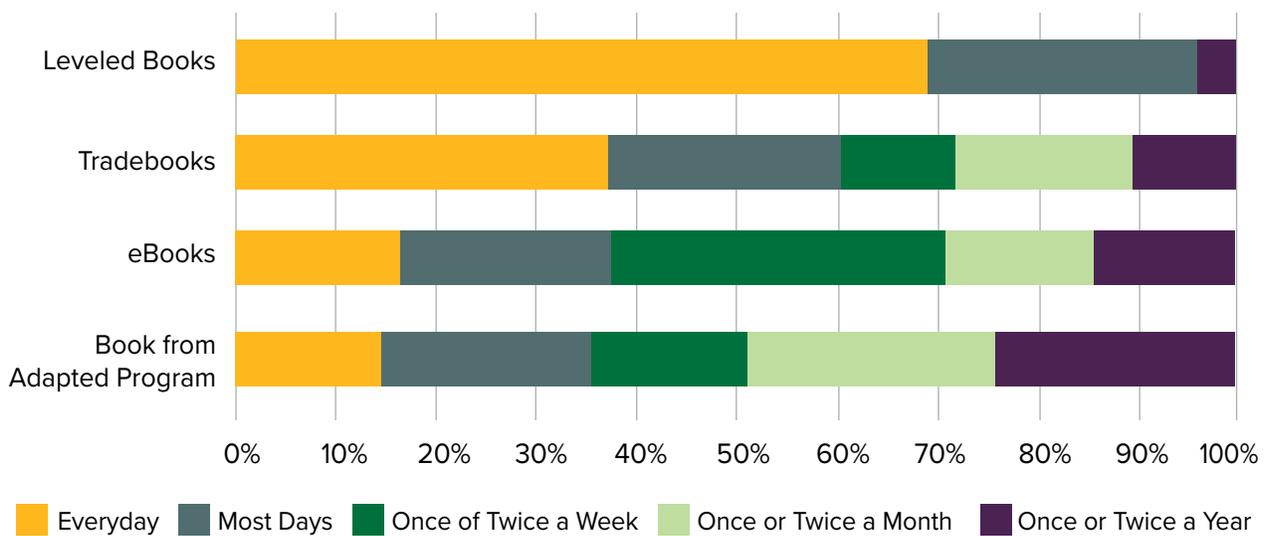
| | Total | | Novice | | Veteran | |
|------------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|-------|---------|-------|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| | 104 | 100.0 | 27 | 100.0 | 77 | 100.0 |
| Teachers Pay Teachers | 83 | 79.8 | 25 | 92.6 | 58 | 75.3 |
| I create my own materials | 56 | 53.8 | 13 | 48.1 | 43 | 55.8 |
| Letter Land | 55 | 52.9 | 17 | 63.0 | 38 | 49.4 |
| Pinterest | 52 | 50.0 | 19 | 70.4 | 33 | 42.9 |
| Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading | 51 | 49.0 | 14 | 51.9 | 37 | 48.1 |
| Jan Richardson Guided Reading | 48 | 46.2 | 10 | 37.0 | 38 | 49.4 |
| Words their Way | 28 | 26.9 | 8 | 29.6 | 20 | 26.0 |
| Foundations | 25 | 24.0 | 5 | 18.5 | 20 | 26.0 |
| Core Knowledge | 19 | 18.3 | 4 | 14.8 | 15 | 19.5 |
| Making Words | 18 | 17.3 | 4 | 14.8 | 14 | 18.2 |
| Lucy Calkins Units of Study | 16 | 15.4 | 4 | 14.8 | 12 | 15.6 |
| Collaborative Classroom | 15 | 14.4 | 2 | 7.4 | 13 | 16.9 |
| Raz Kids / Reading A to Z | 14 | 13.5 | 2 | 7.4 | 12 | 15.6 |
| Reading Street | 9 | 8.7 | 1 | 3.7 | 8 | 10.4 |

Additional curricula listed but used by less than 5% of participants:

| | | |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Horizons Phonics & Spelling | Saxon Phonics | Ready Reading |
| iStation | FirstiePhonics (Tara West) | Senderos |
| Journeys | Accelerated Reader | Sound Partners |
| Harcourt | Early Steps (Darryl Morris) | Wordly Wise |
| iReady | Heggerty Phonemic Awareness | Write for the Beginning |
| Wit and Wisdom | HillRAP | Rooted in Reading (Amy Lemons) |
| Wonders Spelling | Jolly Phonics | Growing Readers (Kathy Collins) |
| Daily 5 | KIPP Wheately | The Reading Strategies Book |
| EL Education | LETRS | What's Next for the Beginning Writer |
| Epic! Books | Leveled Book Kits | Reading Essentials (Reggie Routman) |
| Orton Gillingham | Missing Link Phonics | Reading with Meaning (Debbie Miller) |
| Primary Comprehension (Harvey & Goudvis) | Open Court | |
| ReadyGen | Read Well | |

Note: This table presents all of the curricular resources that teachers reported using in their ELA instruction. For the most commonly named resources we compare usage for novice versus veteran teachers. The bottom panel lists curricular resources that are less commonly used by the first-grade teachers in our sample.

FIGURE 2: Types of Books Used During Literacy Instruction

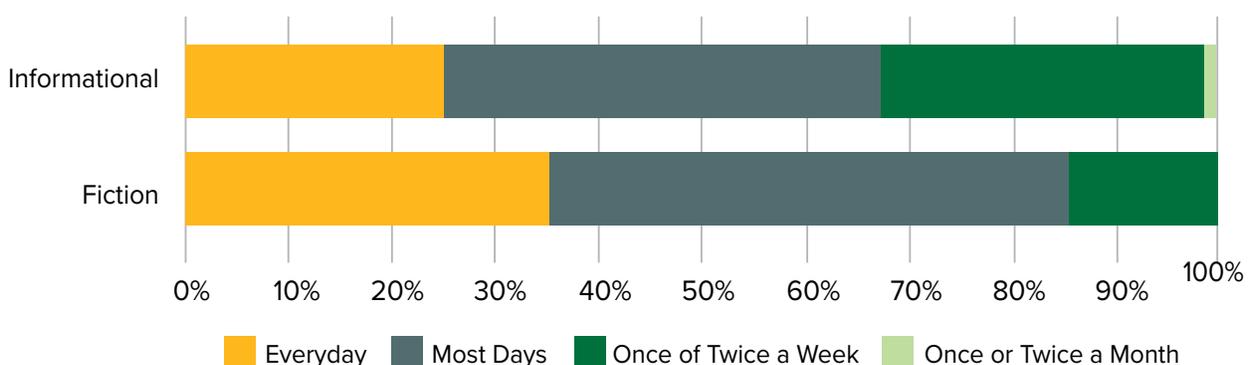


Note: This figure displays the frequency with which first-grade teachers in our sample use the following books in their ELA instruction.

Teachers used a variety of texts during the ELA block, with leveled readers being used by almost all (n=100) teachers every day or most days. In contrast, trade books, or books written as authentic children’s literature, are only used by two-thirds of teachers every day or most days (see Figure 2). Teachers report using eBooks less frequently, with 33% of teachers using them once or twice a week. With regard to genre (Figure 3), 85% of teachers report

using fiction text every day or most days, whereas informational text was used every day or most days by 67% of the teachers. When teachers use fiction texts for instruction, 37% of the texts are picture books whereas 29% of the texts are short stories. When teachers use informational texts, they primarily read books (49%), multimedia clips (14%), or short passages from children’s magazines or basal readers.

FIGURE 3: Genre of Books Used During Literacy Instruction



Note: This figure displays the frequency with which first-grade teachers in our sample use informational and fiction texts in their ELA instruction.

What support do first grade teachers have?

Across the state Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions are provided by a variety of personnel. In most schools, multiple personnel deliver this support. Eighty-nine percent of teachers reported providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions to students. Additionally, interventionists, special education teachers, or Title I teachers provide this support in 60% of respondents' classrooms, Instructional Assistants (IAs) or paraprofessionals provide this service in 39% of classrooms, and a different first grade teacher provides Tier 2 and Tier 3 support in 22% of classrooms. Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention is also provided by literacy coaches in 13% of classrooms and classroom volunteers do so in 11% of classrooms. In 2% of classrooms "other" tutors are used.

Having an IA can be a meaningful way to support teachers and students in the classroom. The presence of an IA in classrooms throughout the state varied greatly. Eleven percent of teachers had an IA in their classroom 100% of the time during ELA instruction. In contrast, 37% receive support from an IA less than 25% of their literacy instructional time. The remaining 52% of teachers have an IA for a portion of their ELA block.

There was no consistent approach to supporting teachers towards their development as literacy professionals. Half of the teachers report the employment of personnel (e.g., literacy coaches) with this express purpose in their school and half reported no such resource. Of the 49% of teachers benefiting from regular literacy support (n=51), the most prevalent frequency of interaction was once or twice a week (59%), but support ranged from interacting daily (10%) or most days (21%) to interactions once or twice a month (10%). In 29% of cases (n=15), this literacy professional also directly evaluated the participating teachers' instruction.

Variation was also observed in the number of hours teachers reported attending professional development (PD) focused on literacy over the prior three academic years. Including professional meetings, workshops, conferences, professional learning communities, lesson studies, or teacher study groups, 28% of teachers reported access to more than 35 hours of PD. Nearly a third of teachers reported between 16-35 hours spent in PD (31%) and another third reported 7-15 hours (30%). However, 9% of participants received fewer than six hours of PD opportunities over the prior three years.

TABLE 5: Percentage of Professional Development Time Spent on Instructional Topics

| | 0-25% | 25-49% | 50-75% | 75-99% | 100% |
|-----------------------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|------|
| Comprehension | 10.6 | 20.2 | 21.2 | 37.5 | 10.6 |
| Writing | 26.9 | 26.0 | 28.8 | 14.4 | 3.8 |
| Word Work | 19.2 | 21.2 | 33.7 | 21.2 | 4.8 |
| Concepts of Print | 42.3 | 19.2 | 19.2 | 14.4 | 4.8 |
| Reading Fluency | 12.5 | 18.3 | 26.9 | 35.6 | 6.7 |
| Vocabulary | 18.3 | 22.1 | 27.9 | 27.9 | 3.8 |
| Grammar | 49.0 | 26.9 | 11.5 | 10.6 | 1.9 |
| Spelling | 40.4 | 25.0 | 20.2 | 12.5 | 1.9 |
| Research Strategies | 26.9 | 24.0 | 24.0 | 19.2 | 5.8 |
| Differentiating Instruction | 10.6 | 13.5 | 26.0 | 31.7 | 18.3 |

Note: This table presents the percentage of professional development time that first-grade teachers in our sample spent on instructional topics in literacy.

Eighty percent of teachers indicated that literacy-related PD had impacted their practice. Table 5 provides further detail on the amount of time teachers spent on PD and the topics that were addressed in these sessions.⁵

In recent years, a statewide, five-day intensive professional development program on foundational literacy skill development has been offered to practicing teachers. Roughly half of the first-grade

teachers (52%) in our sample participated in the NC Reading Research to Classroom Practice (formerly titled, Reading Foundations) professional development. However, when asked which professional development opportunities had been most impactful on their practice, only 22% of the teachers who had attended this PD highlighted it as being particularly impactful.

DISCUSSION

State education leaders in North Carolina are currently discussing revisions to teacher preparation, licensure requirements, and professional development to improve reading outcomes for K-3 students. In order for these revisions to have a maximum impact, it is vital to understand the current instructional context that has resulted in often disappointing reading achievement for many of our students. Our analysis offers several key takeaways that should be considered as revisions are undertaken.

Absence of Writing Instruction

Though comprehension and word study were often a focus of instruction in first grade classrooms, text-based and non-text-based writing were seldomly a major focus of instruction. This is a missed opportunity as reading and writing rely upon the same knowledge base, and recent metaanalysis indicate significant effects on student growth in both domains when reading and writing are taught simultaneously. For example, the phonetic knowledge required to read a word is the same knowledge required to spell that word. Reading and writing are both communicative processes. Understanding the processes writers engage in when writing can improve students' comprehension. Likewise, readers who think about authors and an author's craft can improve their writing. Finally, writing in response to reading is one of the most effective ways to improve reading comprehension. When students write about what they have read or learned, their comprehension increases more so than when reading only, reading and rereading, or reading and discussing. It may be worth noting that

participants with formal additional literacy training were significantly more likely to address writing during small group instruction, but those attending the NC Foundations of Reading PD were less likely to do so. This may, in part, be due to the PD's emphasis on reading related skills, not literacy more broadly.

Instruction Driven by Student Ability

Meeting students' needs was a primary goal for teachers when planning instruction, particularly when planning small group instruction. This is a worthy goal and aspiration of dedicated teachers. However, planning instruction that strictly meets the needs of students seems to result in unintended consequences. Students who were reading below grade level were less likely to participate in comprehension and writing instruction than students reading at and above grade level. Unfortunately, there is often a misconception that students who are performing below grade level should be first taught the "basics" before they are ready for tasks that require more critical or creative thinking. This approach results in students who are continuously denied access to grade level content, perpetuating a trajectory of underachievement. It is worth noting historic trends in the racial and ethnic makeup of students reading well below grade level and recognizing that such patterns in limiting access to higher-order instructional opportunities for students of Color perpetuate larger issues of systemic inequality. Instead, code-specific skills and meaning-centric skills must be taught in tandem, and code-centric skills cannot be used as gatekeepers for access to instruction which requires complex and critical thinking.

⁵ Teachers could select multiple answers for this question, as such the percentages will not equal 100.

Variability in Curricular Materials

The materials a teacher uses have a significant impact on students' literacy achievement. Curricula that is planned, intentional, and explicit has a strong positive effect on student achievement. Teachers' use of more than 40 different curricular resources, with Teachers Pay Teachers and Pinterest as primary resources, is a worrisome trend. Such variability in curricular resources can result in a lack of cohesion in instruction within a classroom and inconsistent quality of instruction across the state. Unfortunately, faced with vast curricula options, teachers may have difficulty distinguishing programs based on research evidence from those benefiting from good

marketing. Though all teachers reported attending professional development, none of them reported attending a session focused on developing a reading curriculum or on the selection of research-based materials to teach literacy. Combined with the variability reported in how the content of instruction is decided, from individual teacher discretion to the adherence to documents developed at the state level, we urge additional attention be paid to providing teachers with professional development not only on the foundational skills necessary for literacy achievement, but on the ways in which to design and implement a coherent and cohesive approach to such instruction.

FOR MORE ON THIS TOPIC

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