The Educator's Science of Reading Toolbox

By the National Center on Improving Literacy in Partnership with The Reading League Journal

INTENSIFYING READING INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT MAKING DESIRED PROGRESS

Our goal for all students is that they become proficient readers. When students aren't making adequate progress with core or supplemental reading supports, we need to intensify their instruction until they are on track for reading success. Intensifying instruction for students with reading difficulties is challenging. There are many evidence-based strategies that can be implemented to intensify instruction, but it is often not clear right away which strategies will work best for each student. Because of this, intensification involves frequent adjustments to instruction based on data, until it is clear that students are on track to meet their reading goals. This Educator's Toolbox provides a framework for increasing the intensity of reading instruction and intervention for students who are not making desired progress toward their goals.

Why Intensify Instruction?

Most students will be able to learn to read as long as they receive high-quality, evidence-based, core and supplemental reading instruction that focuses on the key building blocks of reading known as the "5 Big Ideas," including phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. For a few students, core and supplemental instruction is often not enough, and their reading skill development does not keep pace with that of their peers. The reading gap increases over time as the focus of instruction gradually shifts from "learning to read" in early elementary school, to "reading to learn" in upper elementary school and beyond—when reading becomes essential for mastering content in science, math, social studies, and other subjects. Students who have not received the instructional support necessary to facilitate reading proficiency by third grade have a challenging path to becoming skilled readers. This is why it's important to provide these students with intensive, individualized intervention when warranted based on data to help them become successful readers. Because intensification is by definition an intensive and

resource-laden process, it should be reserved for those students who have not made enough growth while receiving high-quality, evidence-based instruction, OR for students who are so far behind what is expected for their grade level that supplemental reading instruction won't be enough to meet their needs. The main goal of intensification is to accelerate learning, so that students with difficulty learning to read can narrow or eliminate the reading gap with their peers and reach grade level expectations.

What Does Intensification of Reading Instruction Look Like?

Research shows us that careful data-based adjustments to ***what*** we teach and ***how*** we teach can improve learning for students with reading difficulties. We can use a 4-part intensification framework (*see the* ***NCIL Intensification Framework*** *Infographic*) to help us systematically intensify key aspects of instruction based on each student's individual learning needs, whether the student has dyslexia or other reading difficulties. This framework shows how to strategically integrate the what (***reading content and cognitive processing***) and the how (***instructional design and instructional delivery***).

Adjusting What to Teach

To adjust what we teach, we can intensify instruction in critical reading areas that research demonstrates are important for all readers, taking into consideration each student's specific reading difficulties. We can also increase student engagement during instruction in these critical areas of reading by using cognitive processing strategies that attend to underlying learning impairments.

Reading Content

Decades of reading research call for the use of systematic and explicit instruction to teach the skills encompassed in the 5 Big Ideas in order to benefit all students but especially students with or at risk for reading difficulties (Gersten et al., 2008; Coyne et al., 2007; Vaughn et al., 2000).
The slow and labored process that many students experience when they first start learning to read can persist for some students. For these students, their ongoing difficulty reading words accurately and automatically hinders their ability to focus on generating meaning from text. To help students who have difficulties reading words accurately and effortlessly:

- Spend extra time during supplemental or intensive reading instruction focusing on phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, and fluency of foundational skills or oral reading.
- Use assessments that are designed to pinpoint areas of reading instruction that should be intensified. These assessments are typically called diagnostic assessments and assess the skills students are expected to master.
- Provide abundant opportunities to practice and process new skills with immediate feedback to engage students in content deliberately.

It's important for students to know that their new word reading skills will directly help them with learning new information and finding meaning in what they read. Vocabulary and comprehension instruction cannot be overlooked. Each can be provided to students with word reading difficulties

during core instruction. If they do not yet have the reading skills to independently read texts, other approaches can be used to support vocabulary and comprehension development. For example, all students can participate in teacher read alouds. Read-aloud texts can be well above students' independent reading levels. Active read alouds include a lot of questions about vocabulary, predictions, and prior knowledge. This interactive experience between teacher and students helps students strengthen critical oral language and listening comprehension skills that support reading comprehension.

Cognitive Processing

Students with difficulty learning to read may also struggle with cognitive processing skills related to executive functioning and self-regulation. There are two kinds of embedded teaching strategies to support kids with cognitive processing challenges: supports teachers use during instruction, and supports students learn to activate on their own.

Teachers can use specific supports, or scaffolds, during instruction to help students successfully accomplish tasks by attending to students' needs related to memory, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. For example, teachers can use different formats to maintain student engagement during instruction. That is, teachers can present similar information to students through multiple modalities—oral, visual, written, or tactile—in ways that are related to the skills students must demonstrate in proficient reading. Teachers can also communicate with students frequently about their progress to help them set, monitor, and achieve reading goals and support self-efficacy in reading.

Teachers can promote strategies that students will be able to use independently to facilitate cognitive processing. For example, students can be taught strategies for organizing information, such as learning how to take notes effectively. Or students can learn multi-step routines for important skills, such as learning the steps involved in decoding a multisyllabic word. By teaching cognitive strategies within the context of reading instruction, and not as a separate intervention, students are better able to adapt these strategies more widely while reading independently at home and learning in other subject areas.

The ultimate goal of attending to cognitive processing strategies to intensify instruction is for students to deeply learn strategies that they can use on their own, inside and outside of the classroom. This process takes time and explicit teaching, but the learning dividends can be great.

Adjusting How to Teach

To adjust how we teach, we can intensify the design and delivery of reading instruction to better support students at their levels of need.

Instructional Design

To adjust the design of the instruction, be sure to align it with the five evidence-based instructional principles that are key to effective teaching:

1. ***Explicit instruction*** typically follows a series of steps, and the actions of the teacher are clear, specific, direct, and related to the learning objective.
2. ***Instructional scaffolding*** involves adding appropriate learning supports that align with student needs. These supports may include prompts, hints, or clues to help guide students toward accurate responses that are removed as students master new skills.

3. ***Strategic integration*** is the process of making clear connections among different learned strategies and linking earlier skills to more complex skills.
4. ***Primed background knowledge*** involves reviewing important pre-skills before introducing students to new concepts to anchor new learning to previously learned material.
5. ***Student practice and review*** provides students with multiple opportunities to practice new and previously learned skills during lessons.

These five evidence-based instructional principles are important for effective teaching in general, but they are essential for intensifying instruction for students with reading difficulties who may have co-occurring working memory or attention challenges. When considering how best to intensify instruction, consider how each of these instructional principles are used in your practice, and make changes as needed.

Instructional Delivery

Modifying instructional delivery increases both the amount of time students spend learning reading skills and the pace of learning within a fixed amount of time by increasing student engagement. Teachers can increase the amount of time a student receives intensive intervention each day, increase the number of sessions the student receives each week, or extend the intervention for additional weeks. They can also increase students' learning rates by changing group sizes. For example, some research shows that small groups of no more than four students are ideal for providing intensive intervention in elementary school (Baker et al., 2010; Gersten et al., 2008; Wanzek et al., 2010).

Teachers can also create homogenous groupings for intervention. These are instructional groupings of students with similar instructional needs. Homogenous, small groupings increase opportunities for interaction between you and your students, opportunities for practice and feedback, tailoring of instruction to specific student needs, and ease of monitoring on-task behavior and engagement. When students with similar needs are grouped together, it is easier to maintain appropriate instructional pacing which helps the students stay engaged and focused.

Your school and your students are unique. How you adjust instructional delivery depends on what you know about your students' instructional needs, how intense those needs are, and the resources available at your school.

Using Assessment to Support Decisions About What and How to Teach

It's important to collect data throughout the intensification process to make decisions about the best ways to support a student. We can think of the intensification process as a cycle where data are constantly used to help inform instructional adjustments.

When intensifying instruction, different types of data help us to make different decisions. *First*, data ***before*** intensifying instruction tells us whether intensifying instruction for a student is necessary. Remember, intensification should only be occurring with those students who aren't responding to effective core and supplemental instruction. Data from screening and progress monitoring measures tell us whether students are on track to reach goals, whether our current interventions are working, and whether more intensity is needed. Implementation fidelity data tells us if we are implementing our interventions as intended to make sure that lack of growth is not due

to a lack of high-quality instruction. If data show that even with high-quality instruction a student continues to read far below grade level and is not developing reading skills at a quick enough pace, we will likely need to intensify instruction for that student.

Second, data ***during*** the intensification process tell us whether intensification strategies have been successful or whether we need to further intensify instruction to help our students meet their reading goals. For example, after intensifying a student's instruction, biweekly progress monitoring data assessing skills aligned with the focus of intervention may show that skills are still not improving quickly enough to help students meet end-of-year reading goals. This is a sign that we need to further intensify instruction.

Third, data collected ***throughout*** the intensification process help us make thoughtful decisions about how best to intensify instruction even more when students aren't making sufficient reading growth. We continue to use screening, progress monitoring, and implementation fidelity data to help us make these decisions, but we might also use:

- program mastery data which tells us how well students are learning the skills being taught during instruction
- in-depth assessments that provide detailed information about students' skill gaps in a particular area, such as phonics
- parent and teacher interviews and observations to help us learn whether there are other factors, such as student behavior, that may be impacting the students' abilities to access instruction

If program mastery data show us that a student is having a lot of trouble mastering the skills that we are teaching each week, think about intensification strategies that will give them additional practice so they can master these skills.

There are several ways that data inform strategic decisions about what will help our students progress throughout the intensification process. However, ***it's important to remember that each minute a child spends on assessment is a minute away from instruction. We must be wise and efficient about what we collect, and only collect the data that will help us make instructional decisions.***

Research on best practices in intensification is continuously emerging. Instructional intensification is an ongoing process of implementing the best research evidence available to support student learning, using data to evaluate what works, and making adjustments informed by data.

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NCIL Intensification Framework

Strategic Integration

Reading Content

- Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension

Cognitive Processing

- Memory
- Self-regulation
- Self-efficacy

What?

Intensification

Instructional Design

- Explicit and systematic instruction
- Instructional scaffolding
- Pre-teaching prerequisites
- Example selection and sequencing
- Judicious review and mastery

How?

Instructional Delivery

- Time
- Duration
- Grouping
- Pacing

Dynamic and Responsive Data-Based Individualization

Assessment

- Daily or weekly mastery data
- Every other week or monthly progress monitoring data

Instructional Density

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