

SCIENCE OF LEARNING: READING

RESEARCH PROFESSIONAL PAPER

STUDY FINDINGS:
EARLY LITERACY IMPLEMENTATION
IN SCHOOL SETTINGS



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INTRODUCTION

Being part of children's process of learning to read and write can be one of the most satisfying aspects of teaching in the early elementary grades. Creating an environment that encourages students to become literate and motivates them to love reading and writing is one of the major responsibilities of teachers in these grades and one of their biggest challenges.

Research has demonstrated that all children, regardless of their backgrounds, can learn to read successfully (Fiester, 2013; Snow et al., 1998) and that professional development about early literacy has the potential to enhance teachers' use of evidence-based instructional practices and ultimately to increase student achievement (Basma & Savage, 2017; Kraft et al., 2018).

At the same time, far too many of the nation's children leave school without the literacy skills needed for advanced education and the workforce (Aud et al., 2013). One warning sign of this harsh reality comes from reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)¹. According to *The Condition of Education for 2020*,² Grade 4 reading scores have not been significantly different across the 2013, 2017, and 2019 NAEP administrations, with the majority of students continuing to perform at or slightly above the Basic level.

In addition – and sadly – NAEP data also continue to document that some students (e.g., Black, Latino, students eligible for free

or reduced-price lunch, English Learners, and students with learning disabilities) are the most likely to be at risk to struggle as readers.

Many factors in children's lives affect their academic performance, but the experiences they have in the early grades plays a huge role in their acquisition of needed skills and their attitudes about school and about themselves as learners. The U.S. Department of Education has funded many rigorous evaluations of instructional programs for teaching reading to young children (Garet et al, 2016). However, many studies often do not deeply examine how teachers actually teach, what they do during their literacy block to instruct, monitor, engage, and motivate their students.

Given the multiple implementation models present within the current pandemic, it is important to examine the best practices and highlight challenges of the various instructional settings: in-classroom, remote, or hybrid models. Evidence-based reading and writing strategies can be applied to any implementation model. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate snapshots of the instructional interactions of K–3 teachers and highlight what happens in an early literacy classroom in an in-school setting. Research and teacher survey results pertaining to the remote and hybrid learning environments can be found in separate papers within the *HMH Science of Learning: Reading* professional paper series.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic causing school buildings to shut down across the county, researchers conducted a two-phased data collection plan with teachers in kindergarten and Grades 1, 2, and 3 during the Spring of 2020. Phase One involved collecting survey data from K–3 teachers (Appendix A). Phase Two involved creating targeted interview protocols to dig deeper into the details that arose from the survey data (Appendix B).

Researchers sent surveys by email to kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and third grade teachers and received 137 responses: kindergarten (36), first grade (29), second grade (41), and third grade (31). Survey questions asked teachers about their typical classroom instructional practices, methods of gathering and using assessment data, strategies to meet the needs of all students in a diverse classroom setting, and some of the greatest challenges teachers face on a daily basis with reading and writing instruction. The survey also collected data

on teachers' reading and writing instruction during COVID-19 school building closures. Results from those questions can be found in the *HMH Research Professional Paper: Survey Results of Remote Early Literacy Instruction During the Pandemic*.

Survey results informed the development of the protocol that were used to interview nine teachers in California and Massachusetts. These teachers painted a picture of their reading and writing instruction by answering interview questions about similar topics: their instructional practices, data use, and approaches to differentiation, their approach to planning, and additional supports that would improve their reading and writing instruction. Researchers interviewed two kindergarten, three first grade, two second grade, and two third grade teachers.

This paper summarizes the participants' survey responses and the information generated from the teacher interviews.

¹ The NAEP reading assessment is given to a national sample of students in Grades 4 and 8 every two years; students in Grade 12 are assessed every four years.

² See: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cnb.pdf

SCHEDULE OF AN EARLY LITERACY CLASSROOM

As might be expected, the data revealed many common practices and some divergence. In addition, all the teachers were quick to point out that there is no such thing as a “typical day” in the life of an early literacy teacher: variations depend on the day of the week, on students’ needs, and sometimes with serendipitous events like an unexpected snowfall or classroom visitor.

Teachers participating in the interviews were asked to describe what an observer would see upon walking into their classroom during reading and writing instruction on any given day. All the teachers shared that they start the morning off with whole-class reading instruction, followed by partner reading, guided

reading, or independent reading work. These activities are then followed by both whole-class and independent writing work. Teachers said that while they do plan their literacy blocks using this general structure as a guideline, it was clear that the number of instructional minutes and the material covered varies by grade. In addition, teachers mentioned that each day’s activities vary depending on the day of the week. The schedules presented in Table 1 show representative literacy blocks for each grade that were derived from survey and interview data. Nuances of these literacy blocks are discussed throughout the remainder of this paper as we delve into the details of teachers’ reading and writing instruction. Representative teacher comments are also included.

Table 1: Kindergarten to Grade 3 Literacy Block Schedules

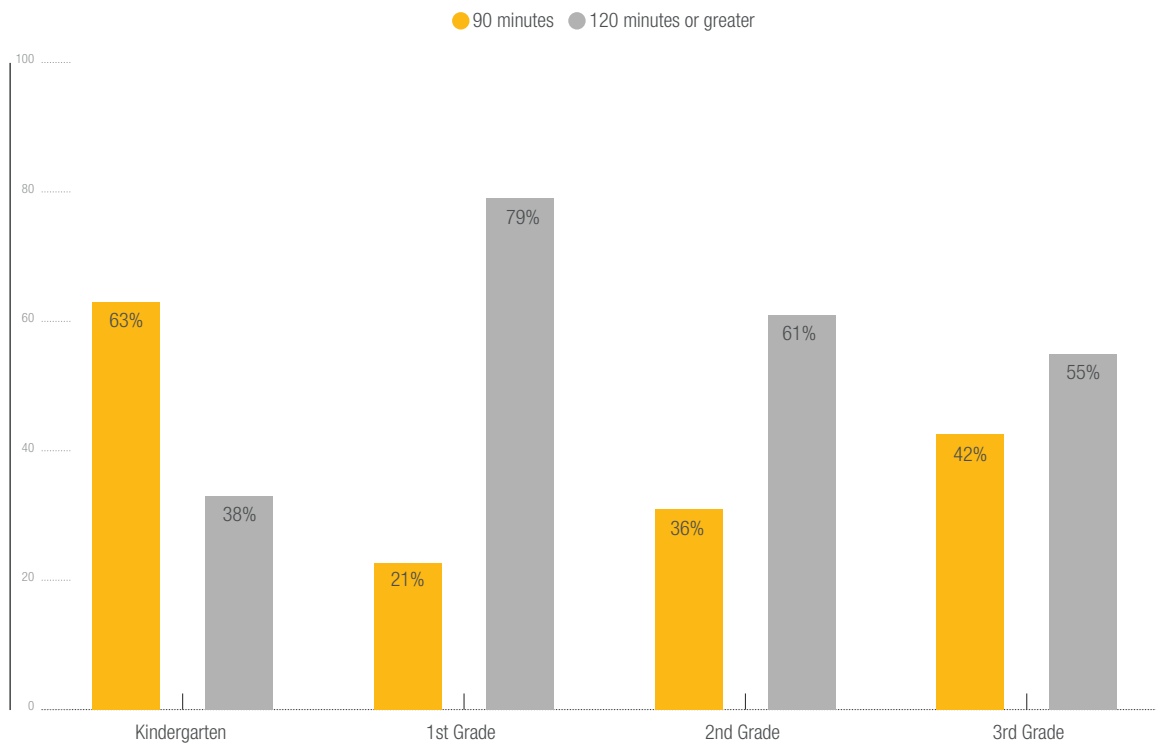
| Kindergarten | First and Second Grades | Third Grade |
|---|--|---|
| 8:15-8:30 Whole-Class Reading Instruction | 8:30-9:00 Whole-Class Reading Instruction | 8:30-8:50 Whole-Group Mini Reading Lesson |
| 8:35-8:55 Whole-Class Read Aloud and Comprehension Work | 9:00-9:25 Whole-Class Read Aloud and Comprehension Work | 8:50-9:30 Literature-based Guided Reading Groups/Independent Student Work |
| 9:00-9:30 Partner Reading, Guided Reading Groups, Small Groups, or Independent Work | 9:30-10:00 Snack Recess | 9:30-10:00 Snack Recess |
| 9:30-10:00 Snack Recess | 10:00-10:30 Whole-Class Guided Writing | 10:00-10:30 Writing |
| 10:05-10:25 Whole-Class Guided Writing | 10:30-11:30 Independent Writing and Teacher Small Groups | |
| 10:30-10:45 Independent Writing | | |

READING INSTRUCTION

TIME ALLOCATION FOR READING INSTRUCTION

The majority of teachers surveyed spend 90 minutes or more of their instructional day teaching reading. First and second grade teachers were more likely than kindergarten and third grade teachers to spend 120 minutes or more of their instructional day teaching reading (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of teachers who allocate 90 and 120+ minutes to reading instruction



The amount of time kindergarten teachers spend is contingent on the number of minutes in their teaching day. Some kindergarten classrooms are half-day rather than full-day, which explains why kindergarten teachers are less likely than first and second grade teachers to spend more than 120 minutes on reading instruction.

Third grade teachers were also less likely than first and second grade teachers to spend more than 120 minutes on reading instruction. Third grade teacher interviewees attribute this to the need to cover the content that will be included on the standardized tests their students will take.

Teachers across all grade levels did share how rare it is to have uninterrupted blocks of time for reading instruction five days a week. While teachers plan for 90 to 120 minutes or more of reading instruction per day, five times a week, one day of the week is often lost to assemblies, fire drills, music, library time, PE, or other “specials.”

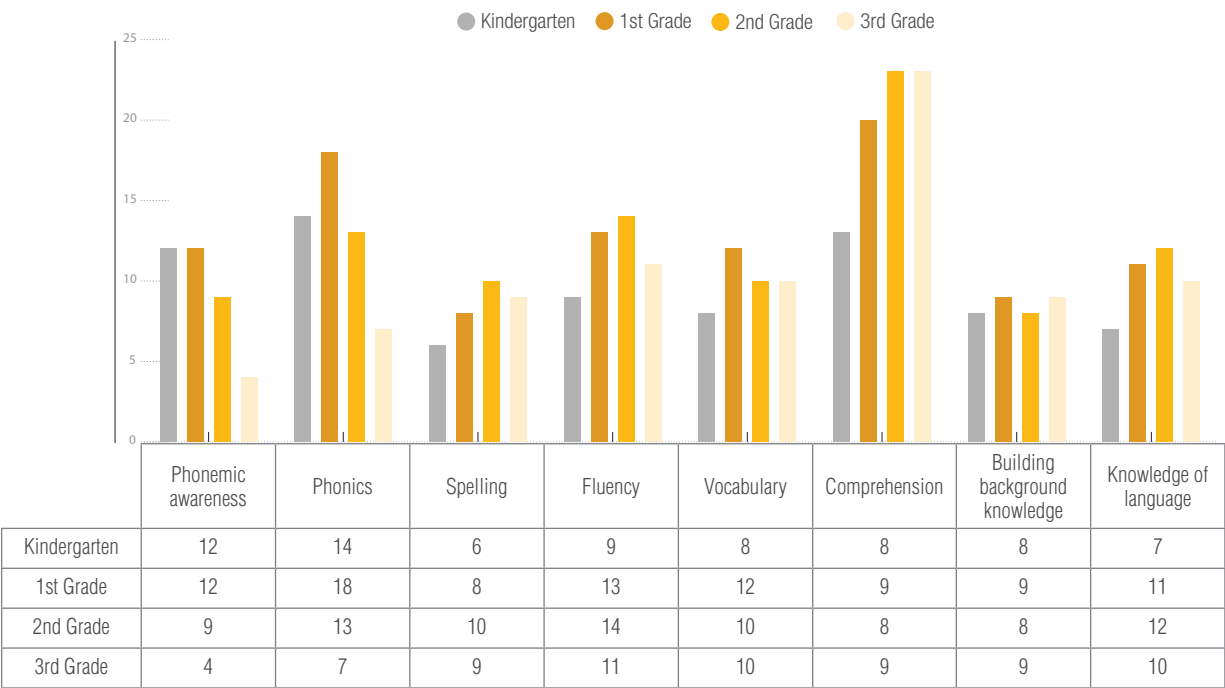
“It’s hard on those days when the kids have science, PE, music, and art. I know they’re super important, but I wish the students had more time to just read and write. I don’t know how the kindergarten teachers do it because that shortened day is so condensed and it’s harder to fit it all in.”

– First grade teacher

TIME ALLOCATION FOR SPECIFIC READING SKILLS

Teachers were asked about the number of minutes they allocated during the reading block to the explicit, systematic instruction of the specific, evidence-based aspects of reading. Of interest were phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, building background knowledge, and the knowledge of language. Figure 2 provides details on how teachers allocate their time.

Figure 2: Number of instructional minutes allocated to reading in specific areas by grade



As can be seen, kindergarten and first grade teachers reported that they spend the greatest number of minutes during their reading blocks instructing phonics, phonemic awareness, and reading comprehension. Phonemic awareness and phonics instruction are considered essential for later reading growth, and comprehension instruction at these grades can range from aspects of “book handling” for beginners to instruction about the differences between stories and informational texts. Kindergarten and first grade teachers allocated the fewest number of instructional minutes to spelling (6 and 8 minutes respectively), although instruction in phonics overlaps considerably with instruction in spelling.

Not surprisingly, second and third grade teachers reported spending the greatest number of instructional minutes on fluency and reading comprehension. One third grade teacher shared during an interview:

“The hope is by third grade most kids will be moving away from phonics-based instruction and more towards comprehension. Students who do need more help with that will get academic support outside the classroom or in a small-guided reading group. But most of my lessons are comprehension based, such as how to make predictions and inferences.”

When responding to questions related to the average daily instructional minutes spent on each of these activities, teachers shared that because there are so many areas to cover that not everything can be covered in one day. As a result, each day looks different. However, teachers tend to follow a specific structure each week to ensure they are covering all their state standards systematically. For example, Table 2 shares one first grade teacher’s general planning guide for the week to add structure and predictability for her students as well as ensuring all these elements are addressed several times a week. This teacher said that she uses Friday as a day to build in review, catch up, and flexibility in the event the reading block was interrupted during the week.

Table 2: Example of a first grade teacher’s weekly planning guide for reading instruction

| Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reading Workshop ■ Sight Words ■ Phonics ■ Comprehension Strategy: Building background knowledge ■ Group Phonics Work ■ Small group/ independent practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reading Workshop ■ Sight Words ■ Phonics ■ Comprehension Strategy: Setting ■ Small group/ independent practice ■ Dictation practice ■ Handwriting practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reading Workshop ■ Sight Words ■ Phonics ■ Comprehension Strategy: Character ■ Group Phonics Work ■ Small group/ independent practice ■ Making Words Activity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reading Workshop ■ Sight Words ■ Phonics ■ Comprehension Strategy: Problem/ Solution ■ Small group/ independent practice ■ Dictation Practice ■ Handwriting practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Friday Free Read ■ Group Phonics Work ■ Comprehension Test |

WHOLE-CLASS AND SMALL-GROUP READING INSTRUCTION

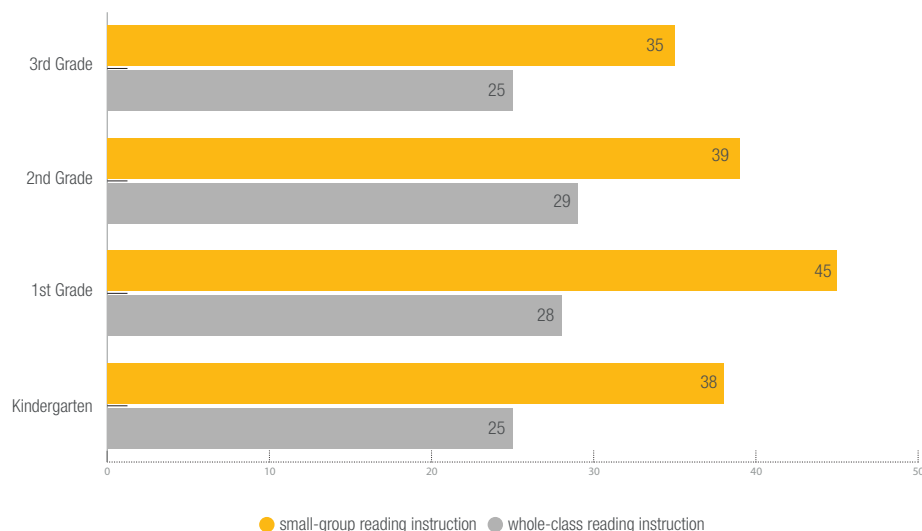
Teachers across grade levels use both whole-class and small-group instruction to maximize the amount of teaching and learning opportunities available to students. One first grade teacher described a sample of her whole class reading mini-lesson on a typical Monday morning:

“We start in a circle and go over all the sight words for the week, all of our phonics skills for the week, and the literacy theme for the week. So if it’s a theme about animals, then all the informational and narrative stories we read that week will be about animals. And they come to the front and point to the word charts and help me read through things. And then I’ll do a read aloud and have the students take notes by drawing what they hear as I read. And then we discuss the story, check for understanding, discuss main character, setting,

problem and solution. And then I’ll send the students to their desks to work independently on a phonics skill using a decodable reader while I work with a small group of students.”

The teachers in this study reported allocating more instructional minutes in their day to small-group reading instruction compared to whole-class reading instruction. Figure 3 illustrates the variation by grade for time spent on whole-class and small-group reading instruction. First grade teachers spend the greatest number of minutes meeting with their students in small reading groups (45 minutes) compared to their kindergarten, second, and third grade colleagues, who spend between 35 and 39 minutes on small group reading instruction. The majority of kindergarten and first grade teachers reported meeting with three groups during a reading block, while meeting with two small groups was common for second and third grade teachers.

Figure 3: Number of instructional minutes allocated to whole-class and small-group reading instruction



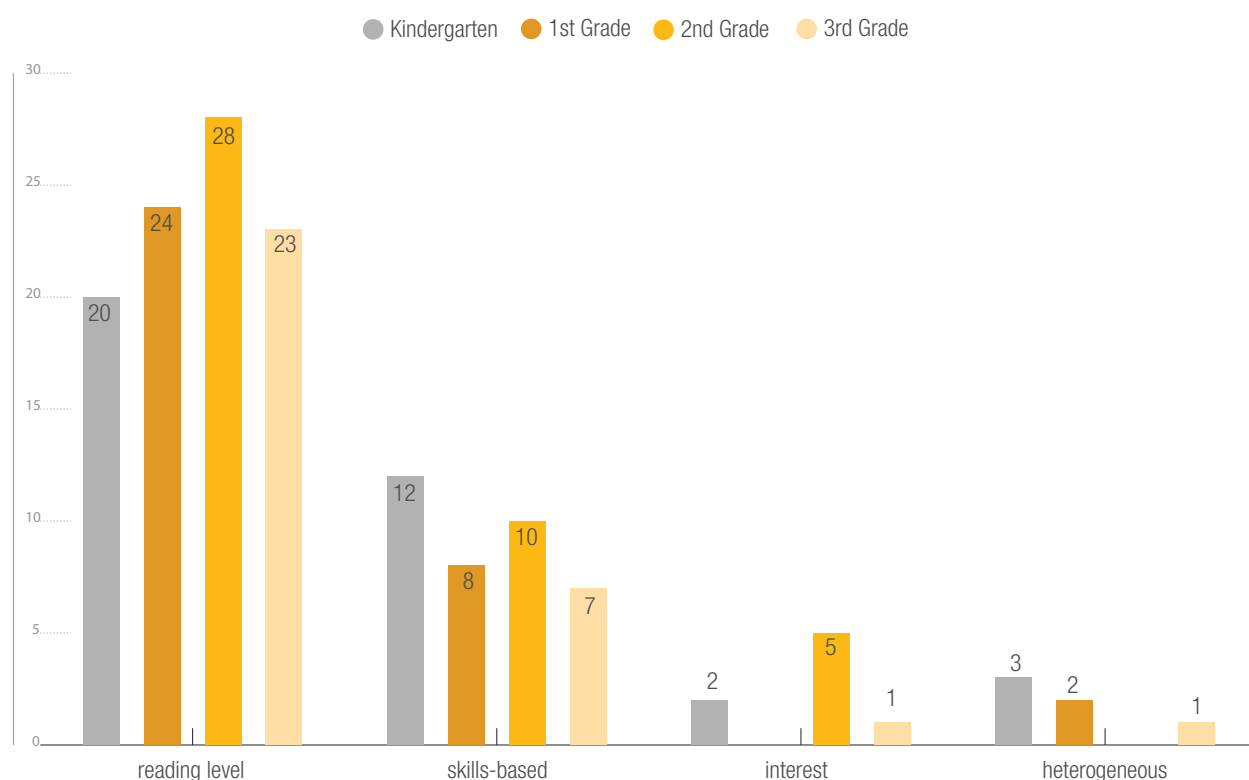
Teachers at all grades reported that reading level and skills were the major determinants for grouping students for small-group reading instruction, although a few said they occasionally group students heterogeneously and by interest. Teachers also differed in the systems they use to keep track of students' needs.

“ I have a clipboard that has all the kids' names on it. I'll write little notes about each student based on observations during our whole-class meeting and also listen to them read during independent reading. I circulate the room while they are reading and take notes like: Joey needs some practice on the “fr” blend. Oh, Megan does too. And then group them together for a small reading group. ” – Kindergarten teacher

“ It really is data-driven from the weekly assessments and from observations. We use DIBELS as our universal assessment. I analyze the data and group them accordingly, whether it's phonics, fluency, or comprehension, and so I group them according to their abilities and focus on that. ” – Second grade teacher

Figure 4 shows the contrast in teachers' responses about their criteria for grouping students.

Figure 4: How teachers organize small reading groups



Knowing what goes on during small-group reading instruction is also important. Teachers mentioned the following activities: working with groups of students who have similar instructional needs, working with students who are at the same reading level, assessing students' understanding of text, engaging in meaningful conversations about what the students are reading, and using texts to model comprehension strategies. A large majority of the teachers surveyed across all grade levels engaged in each of these activities either daily or at least twice a week (See Table 3). However, a smaller percentage of teachers across grade levels report that they can assess students' understanding of text in a small-group setting as frequently as they are able to engage in the other activities.

Table 3: Percentage of teachers engaged in the following small-group activities either daily or at least twice a week

| | Worked with a group of students who have similar instructional needs | Worked with a group of students at the same reading level | Assessed students' understanding of text | Engaged in meaningful conversations about what students are reading | Used texts to model and explain comprehension strategies |
|---------------------|--|---|--|---|--|
| Kindergarten | 69% | 95% | 75% | 86% | 97% |
| 1st Grade | 93% | 93% | 58% | 76% | 86% |
| 2nd Grade | 88% | 85% | 78% | 87% | 95% |
| 3rd Grade | 94% | 90% | 71% | 93% | 93% |

Teachers also provided details about the extent to which students engage in the specific activities during small reading groups. Table 4 provides these details, but teachers did speak about ways in which they use student need to customize the time spent with students.

“ If the group I pull needs some work in phonics, I’ll try to spend seven minutes reviewing phonics before we even open the book. And then with my lower readers we will start with a picture walk and maybe work on building some vocabulary. I’ll have them draw a picture and share with a neighbor and discuss if they have a connection to something. And then we’ll start reading the story. ” – Second grade teacher

Table 4: Percentage of students engaged in the following small-group activities either daily or at least twice a week

| | Kindergarten | 1st Grade | 2nd Grade | 3rd Grade |
|---|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Phonemic segmentation | 86% | 72% | 61% | 38% |
| Word building with letters | 89% | 62% | 27% | 42% |
| Read a decodable book | 86% | 79% | 66% | 42% |
| Listen to a book | 75% | 76% | 56% | 58% |
| Independent reading of a self-selected text for 15-20 minutes | 72% | 76% | 90% | 75% |
| Choral reading of a text | 56% | 55% | 51% | 48% |
| Sight word activities | 91% | 83% | 68% | 39% |
| Spelling activities | 64% | 79% | 76% | 49% |
| Writing letters, words, or sentences | 94% | 93% | 91% | 81% |
| Activities on a computer or tablet | 56% | 59% | 92% | 74% |

The percentage of students engaging in independent reading and writing during small groups remains consistently high across grade levels. In addition, in line with earlier findings about fewer instructional minutes allocated to phonics instruction in second and third grade, the percentage of students engaged in phonics-related small group activities declines as students progress from kindergarten to third grade. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that by third grade, there is still a large percentage of students engaging in reading decodable books, phonemic segmentation activities, and sight word activities. These students meet with the teacher during small group instruction, but also receive additional reading intervention supports.

When asked about meeting more frequently with striving readers in small groups, survey respondents across all the grade levels replied affirmative, but when asked about meeting with these students for longer periods of time, the answers were different. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate this contrast.

Figure 5: Percentage of teachers who meet with striving readers more frequently in small groups

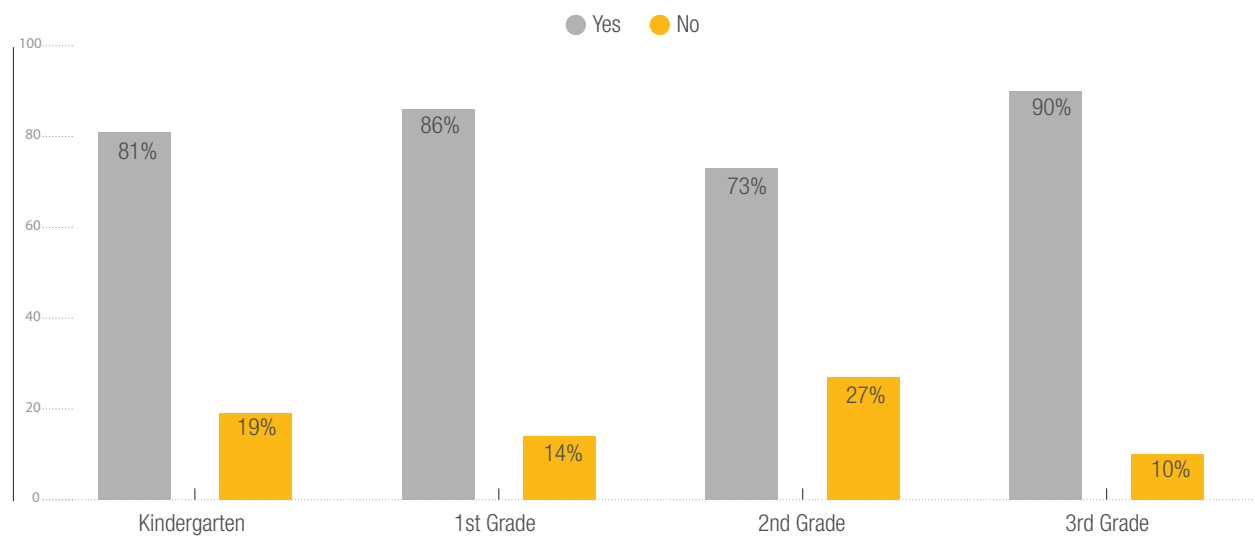
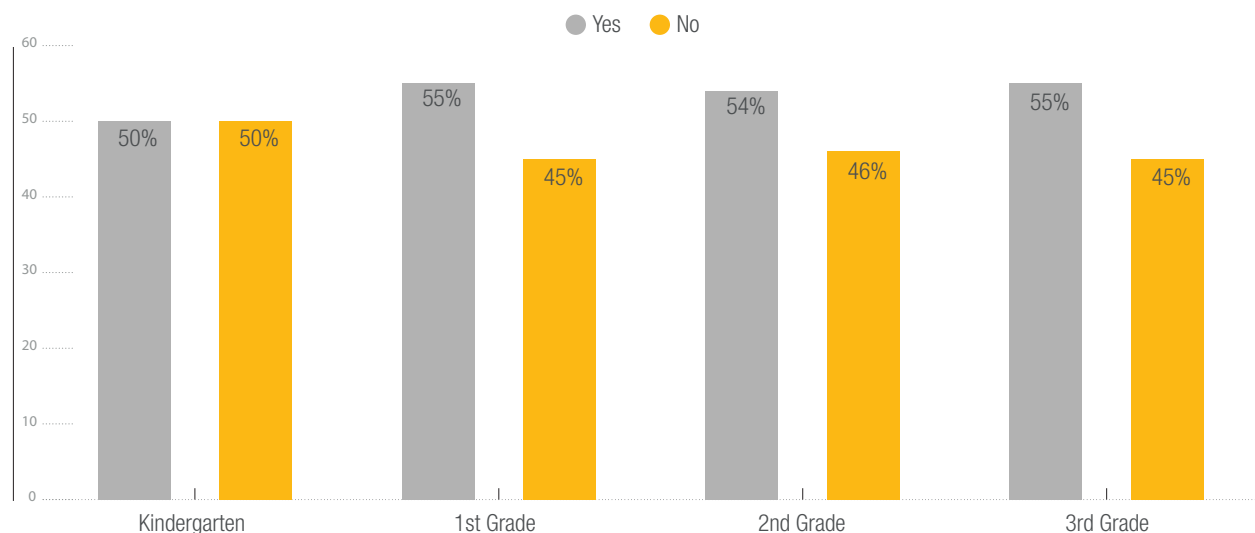


Figure 6: Percentage of teachers who meet with their striving readers for a longer duration in small groups



Again, teachers' comments provide additional details.

“Those students who are really behind, I will meet them more frequently. For the students who are strong readers by third grade, they meet in literature circles because they need less guidance from me. I might meet with them once to check in with them to see how it's going. For the struggling students who need more support from me, I meet with them about three times a week.” –Third grade teacher

“There are a lot of people who might disagree with me about this, but I give every group equal amounts of time. Our struggling readers get double dipped in so many places with intervention and I feel like our mid-range students deserve just as much time because they often fly under the radar and without enough attention, they can too easily fall into the struggling reader category. But with just a little more attention to that group, they can easily bump up to a higher level. I think our struggling readers are important, but they do get a lot of resources and opportunities for support outside of my classroom.” –First grade teacher

ASSESSING STUDENTS' READING PROGRESS

As discussed in the previous section, most teachers said they group their students for small-group reading instruction based on data gathered through both formative and summative assessments. Over half of the teachers surveyed administered formative assessments at least once a week, and a smaller percentage of teachers across all grades administered formative assessments at least twice a week or daily (See Figure 7). Summative assessments understandably are administered less frequently across grade levels as these tend to be end-of-unit type assessments. Many teachers surveyed administer summative assessments either monthly or every other month (See Figure 8).

“The kids come back individually for [assessments] once a week and that's how I keep track of their fluency levels. Those are the levels I use on students' report cards. As far as summative assessments, all the students go to the reading lab at school three times a grading period. So we have a lot of data coming out of the reading lab. They check their fluency, they check the sort level, which is a snapshot of sight words, and they use that data to look at which children could really benefit from some extra intervention supports.” – First grade teacher

Figure 7: Frequency of formative assessment administration

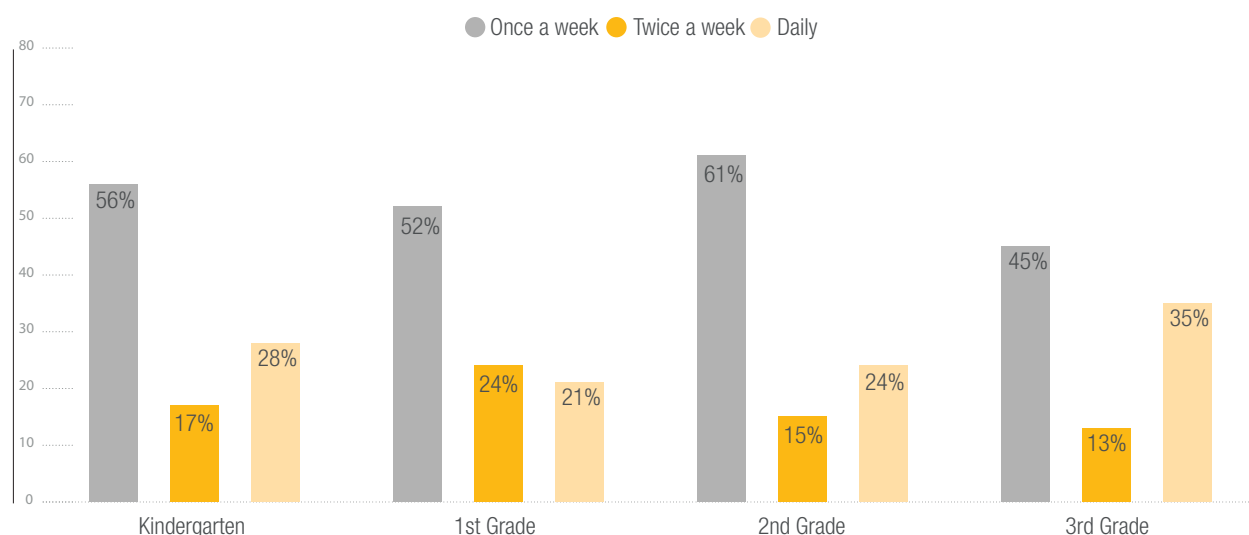
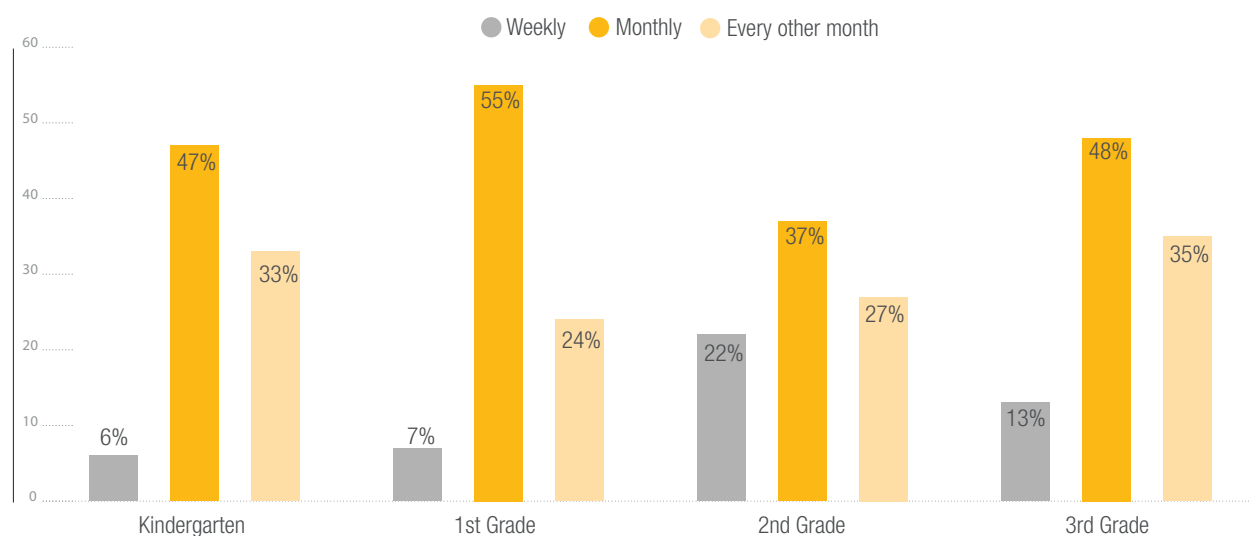


Figure 8: Frequency of summative assessment administration

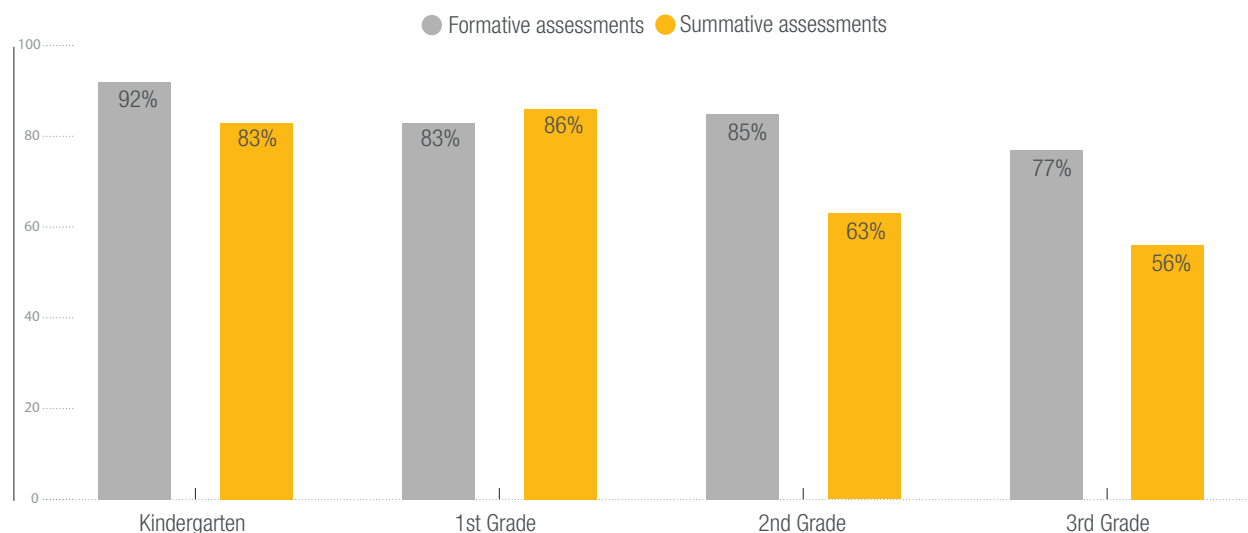


Teachers overwhelmingly use the data gathered from both formative and summative assessments to group students for small group instruction. One second grade teacher summed it up well:

“ I use a ton of data to understand where students fall. I use DIBELS, Accelerated Reader, assessments from Journeys, and information observations. ”

Figure 9 presents results from the teacher survey.

Figure 9: Use of formative and summative assessment data to group students for instruction



WRITING INSTRUCTION

Figure 14 shows that survey respondents and teachers who were interviewed recognize the importance of writing as part of the literacy block in the early grades:

■ Kindergarten:

- 10:05 – 10:25: Whole-class guided writing
- 10:30 – 10:45: Independent writing

■ First and Second Grade

- 10:00 – 10:30: Whole-class guided writing
- 10:30 – 11:30: Independent writing and small group work with teachers

■ Third Grade

- 10:00 – 10:30: Writing

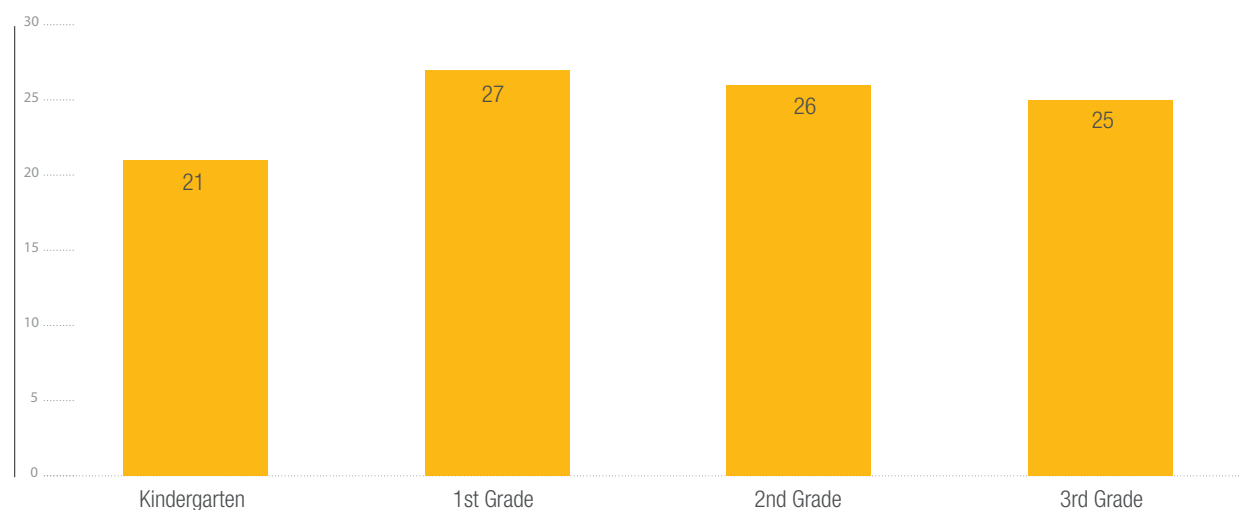
While the discussion so far has focused on reading instruction, teaching writing is an integral part of teaching literacy as well. Because of this, teachers responding to the survey and participating in the interviews were asked specific questions about how they allocate time to writing instruction and to students' practice of their writing skills. As students write,

they externalize what they are learning about letter-sound correspondences and the structure of different kinds of text. Teachers can use these written products to help them identify what students are learning and what they need to practice.

TIME ALLOCATED FOR WRITING INSTRUCTION

When asked about the number of minutes teachers allocate to writing instruction during a literacy block, teachers responded that they spend an average of 20 to 30 minutes teaching writing, with first grade teachers allocating the most number of minutes to writing instruction and kindergarten teachers allocating the least amount of minutes on writing instruction (See Figure 10). It is worth noting that during the interviews, third grade teachers shared that they regularly incorporate writing into subjects like social studies and science in order to reinforce writing skills covered during the 30 minutes of writing instruction.

Figure 10: Average number of minutes allocated to daily writing instruction



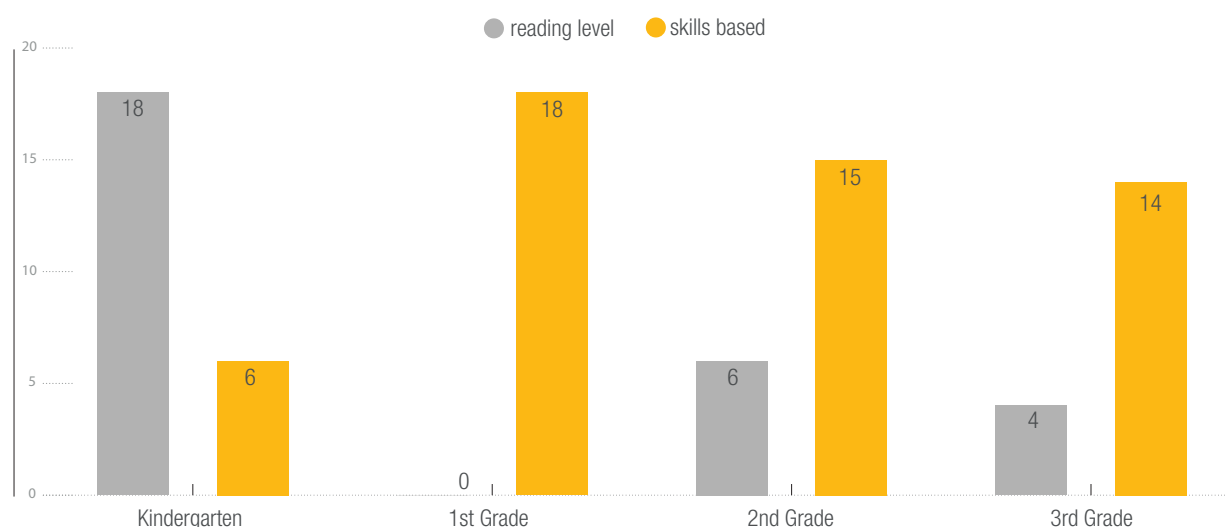
GROUPING STUDENTS FOR WRITING INSTRUCTION

While some teachers do group their students for writing instruction, survey respondents and interviewees responded that writing instruction primarily takes place in a whole-class setting followed by students writing individually with the teacher walking around to confer with students one-on-one. Compared to how teachers group students for reading instruction, which was largely based on reading level, teachers organize their small groups for writing instruction primarily as skills (See Figure 11) in Grades 1–3. As an exception, kindergarten teachers do largely base small groups for writing instruction on reading level, one teacher shared that is because

in kindergarten their reading levels and writing skills are so similar that logistically it makes it easier to keep the reading and writing groups the same. If teachers do meet with small groups for writing instruction, it is typically with just one group per day to address a targeted skill the teacher noticed needs some special attention.

“If I notice as I walk around that four or five students need to work on using capital letters at the beginning of their sentences, I’ll pull those students back maybe once or twice a week and work on skills-based groups with just those kids.”
– First grade teacher

Figure 11: How teachers organize small writing groups



INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES TO WRITING INSTRUCTION

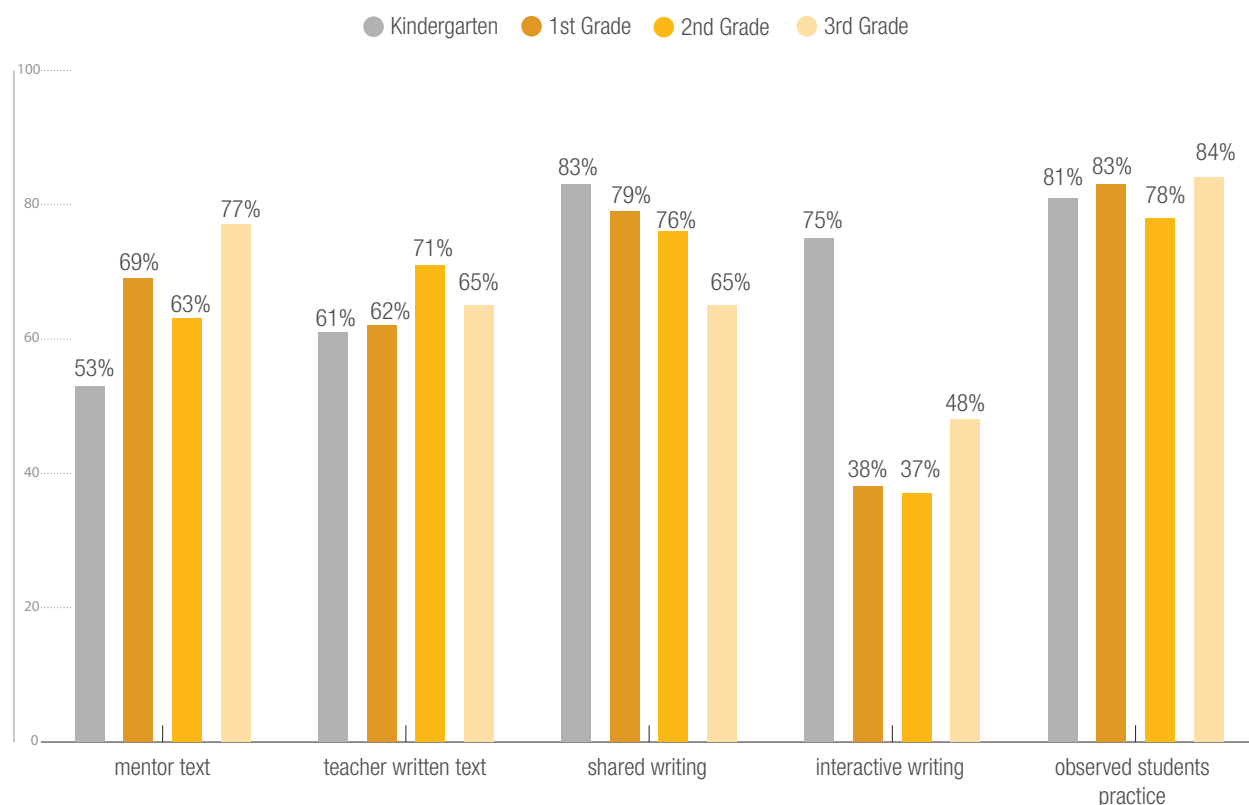
One common practice of using reading as a step to better writing is the use of **mentor texts**. Research shows that when teachers use them in the classroom, the quality of students' writing improves because they have models to emulate. To better understand teachers' approaches to writing instruction, including the use of mentor texts, we asked teachers about the strategies they use during writing instruction.

Teachers across grade levels reported that they use mentor texts as an approach to writing instruction; however, more third grade teachers report using mentor texts to teach writing than K–2 teachers. This is likely because selecting and using a mentor text requires a student to understand the text in order to analyze the text and apply it to their writing. By the time a student is in third grade, they are higher level readers who can navigate more sophisticated texts which makes it easier for teachers to use mentor texts.

K–2 teachers reported using **shared writing** to engage in writing instruction. With shared writing, students and teachers collaboratively create written text. The teacher prompts students with questions and acts as a scribe to record students' oral responses and turn it into written text. This strategy allows students to generate ideas and focus on creating meaningful text regardless of reading and writing proficiency. For early grade teachers, it makes sense that this is a highly used instructional tool for teaching writing.

Interactive writing is another supported writing tool for teachers and students to collaboratively create text. Like shared writing, students participate by sharing their ideas; however, with interactive writing, both the student and the teacher share the role of scribe. Despite the similarity of interactive writing to shared writing (with the exception of kindergarten teachers), the surveyed teachers reported not using interactive writing as much as shared writing as an instructional tool for writing. Figure 12 summarizes the writing approaches teachers report using for writing instruction.

Figure 12: Writing approaches teachers engaged in during writing instruction

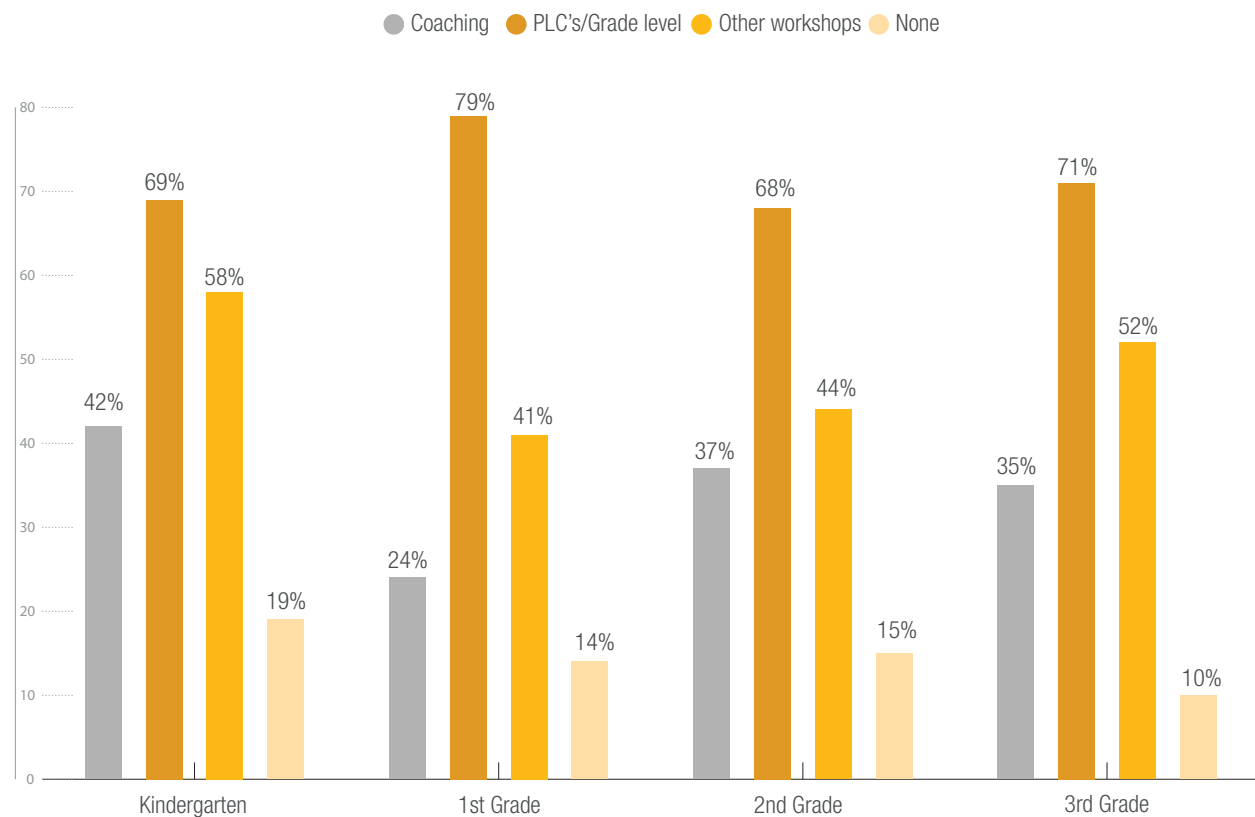


PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TO SUPPORT READING AND WRITING INSTRUCTION

Effective professional development is a key part of enabling teachers to continue to develop the knowledge and skills they need to hone their craft, teach students, and address learning challenges. In order to have high-quality literacy teaching, students need access to high-quality literacy teachers, who are the product of high-quality literacy professional development.

When asked about their experiences with professional learning specific to reading and writing instruction for the 2019–2020 school year, most teachers participated in grade-level planning and professional learning communities. Some teachers participate in coaching and external workshops. Less than 20 percent of teachers across the grade levels stated they had not participated in any professional learning for the 2019–2020 school year (See Figure 13).

Figure 13: Reading and writing professional learning for the 2019–2020 school year



MEETING THE NEEDS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS AND STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Teaching reading and writing is not an easy task and requires a lot of planning and professional development. Teaching reading and writing to English learners (EL) presents added challenges. Research shows that students will more readily learn to read in English once they are becoming fluent in spoken English. The literacy block in early grades classrooms gives ELs many opportunities to practice their English language skills.

When surveyed about the strategies they employ to teach ELs, teachers reported using a wide range of strategies, including labeling the classroom, meeting one-on-one with students, providing digital books in which students follow along, and stocking the classroom with texts in students' home language. Some teachers mentioned students' receiving support from specialists in pull-out programs. Table 5 summarizes the strategies teachers reported using with ELs.

Table 5: Number of teachers who indicate using these strategies to meet the needs of EL students when teaching reading and writing

| | Kindergarten n=36 | 1st Grade n=29 | 2nd Grade n=41 | 3rd Grade n=31 |
|---|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Numerous illustrations to help clarify the text | 26 | 20 | 23 | 15 |
| Limited text on each page | 22 | 14 | 14 | 10 |
| Text that contains repetitive, predictable phrases | 26 | 16 | 13 | 8 |
| High-frequency vocabulary and useful words | 25 | 19 | 23 | 16 |
| Text that employs simple sentence structure | 21 | 14 | 17 | 10 |
| Read at a slow to normal speed, using an expressive tone | 22 | 15 | 24 | 11 |
| Allow time after each sentence or paragraph for students to assimilate the material | 17 | 8 | 16 | 8 |
| Point to words in the text as you read them | 26 | 18 | 22 | 13 |
| Point to corresponding pictures as you read the text | 27 | 17 | 20 | 12 |
| Act out the story as you read | 10 | 11 | 9 | 8 |
| Use visuals and manipulatives | 22 | 19 | 18 | 12 |
| Verify comprehension of the story | 22 | 15 | 27 | 15 |
| Read the same story on successive days | 25 | 19 | 21 | 12 |

There was wide variety in the amount of experience interviewees had teaching EL students, but teachers were willing to share some of the strategies they use when planning lessons to incorporate the needs of their ELs:

“ I know English learners need vocabulary building and a lot more talking. So, I plan a lot of think-pair-share and turning and talking. ”

“ I like to pair my English learners with appropriate [peer] language models, so I have a seating chart on my carpet. ”

“ I like to show engaging videos before we dig into a text. It helps the students connect to the text and ground themselves in the vocabulary. That has made a huge difference. ”

“ I like to scaffold and activate students' background knowledge. When my husband talks to me about cars, I tune out because I don't have any background knowledge and I could care less. So, I'm always trying to build that background knowledge for my English learners. ”

“ I try to show real life objects or find a clip online of something that might connect to a story we are about to start reading. ”

We also surveyed teachers about strategies they employ during the literacy block to meet the needs of students with disabilities and students with dyslexia. Most teachers shared that they make additional accommodations as needed, provide additional explicit instruction, keep instructional periods short,

use assistive technology such as speech-to-text devices, or having paraprofessional support. Table 6 summarizes the strategies teachers reported using to support the needs of students with disabilities.

Table 6: Number of teachers who indicate using these strategies to meet the needs students with disabilities when teaching reading and writing

| | Kindergarten n=36 | 1st Grade n=29 | 2nd Grade n=41 | 3rd Grade n=31 |
|--|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Provide letter manipulatives for students with difficulty writing. | 28 | 12 | 18 | 8 |
| Allow students to use audiobooks to follow along. | 14 | 8 | 22 | 18 |
| Keep lessons short. | 31 | 23 | 29 | 19 |
| Use books with one sentence per page. | 24 | 12 | 10 | 10 |
| Give students extra rewards to foster motivation. | 12 | 15 | 17 | 11 |
| Teach one skill at a time. | 21 | 19 | 25 | 20 |
| Make additional accommodations as needed. | 29 | 26 | 37 | 27 |
| Additional explicit instruction | 26 | 25 | 34 | 21 |

We also asked teachers about strategies they incorporate when planning their lessons to ensure they are meeting the needs of their students with dyslexia and other students with disabilities. Although no interviewee had taught a student diagnosed with dyslexia, several said they suspected a student might have dyslexia, but they felt the students was still too young for formal testing. Teachers shared a variety of strategies to support students with disabilities.

“There’s such a range with special needs; it depends on what the need is. But I usually try to keep them closer to the front so I can be more tuned into them and their needs.”

“I try my best to give them preferential seating. I try my best to put solid, good, helpful students next to them.”

“I try to develop a relationship with the student to get to know the student and what their strengths are so I can incorporate those strengths into my lessons.”

When asked whether they received professional development so they can better meet the needs of the EL students and their students with special needs, the overwhelming response from teachers was that they had not received professional development either in the 2019–2020 academic year or in their entire career. One teacher stated, “I think I might have received a handout once on how to teach reading and writing to a child with dyslexia, but no professional development.”

It is interesting to note the teachers who are quoted above and several others mentioned pairing ELs and students with special needs with peers who can form supportive relationships and serve as models.

A PEEK INSIDE THE CLASSROOM: BOOKS AND MATERIALS TO SUPPORT LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Survey questions captured what types of materials and resources were present in students' learning environments, specifically books and literacy materials (See Table 7).

Table 7: Instructional Resources and Supplies: Percentage of Teachers that Agree or Strongly Agree

| | Kindergarten | 1st Grade | 2nd Grade | 3rd Grade |
|---|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| My classroom library represents a wide variety of genres, topics, themes, authors, and formats. | 100% | 96% | 93% | 97% |
| My classroom library collection offers a range of leveled texts. | 97% | 100% | 95% | 97% |
| My classroom library offers a range of decodable readers. | 89% | 86% | 90% | 55% |
| The range of leveled texts in my classroom represents the levels of all students in my classroom. | 86% | 96% | 92% | 90% |
| My school has a leveled book room I can use to find leveled books and materials for my students. | 72% | 72% | 66% | 71% |
| My students have access to digital resources. | 83% | 76% | 88% | 87% |
| I have access to digital resources that support my instructional goals. | 86% | 90% | 90% | 87% |
| I often have to find materials and resources outside of what I have in my classroom. | 72% | 69% | 73% | 81% |

Across the grade levels, most teachers said that their classroom libraries are well-stocked with a variety of leveled texts and that the texts represent the levels of the students in the classrooms. In addition, the majority of teachers state that they and their students have access to digital resources that support literacy teaching and learning.

However, about 30% of the teachers surveyed do not have access to a leveled book room at their school sites and need to find materials and resources outside of what is in the classroom. Support for this finding came from interviewees. Comments from a first and second grade teacher illustrate this common problem.

“ The books in the classroom library are not 100% provided by the school; I think that would be almost impossible. You build the library over time as a teacher. I get books with points from Scholastic. I go to garage sales. The district tries to be as generous as they can supplying books, but having a robust library takes a lot of time. ” – First grade teacher

“ If there is something we need, we generally have to buy it ourselves. Through the years I've bought a lot off of Teachers Pay Teachers. The stuff I have to find or supplement, I have to source it myself and pay for it myself. ” – Second grade teacher

CONCLUSION

Literacy plays a key role in students’ academic achievement, which is why teachers allocate much of their instructional day to the development of readers and writers. However, that instruction comes with several challenges. In addition to sharing their strategies and approaches to literacy instruction, teachers also shared some of the challenges they face. Responses from survey respondents can be grouped into three categories for these challenges: time, resources and materials, and the diversity in their classrooms. Table 8 summarizes the challenges faced by teachers.

Table 8: Teachers’ descriptions of the challenges they face

| TIME | MATERIALS AND RESOURCES | DIVERSITY OF STUDENT NEEDS |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Not enough time to work individually with students – both struggling readers and accelerated readers.■ Not enough time for students to free read and write for enjoyment. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ For older students who are struggling readers, appropriate leveled text is often too “baby” for the students and students are embarrassed to read them.■ Finding close read units for mentor texts are a challenge.■ It is challenging to find reading materials in multiple languages. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Varying levels of students requires a lot of differentiation.■ Keeping the high achieving students moving forward when students only meet with them once or twice a week.■ Striving readers get pulled out for intervention services but then miss out on other instruction taking place in class. |

Time is a challenge many teachers brought up in the surveys, so we asked teacher interviewees what they wish they had more time for during their reading and writing blocks. Their responses ranged from the academic to the personal.

“ I wish I had more time to support my above grade-level kids. I feel like they don’t get me as much as they deserve to get me to push them further. ”

“ I wish I had more time for discussions and reflections. Our conversations always get cut because the students have to go to recess or some other obligation. And journaling. I wish the students had more time to reflect in their journals and just write. ”

“ In an ideal world, it would be nice to have more one-on-one time with students without having to manage other behaviors. Uninterrupted quality time so that I could have a true evaluation of a student and sit with a kid for 20 minutes and give them my undivided attention for 20 minutes. ”

“ I wish I had more time to just actually get to know [my students] as human beings and have fun with them. We don’t have a lot of time for fun. ”

The desire for more time as expressed by teachers does not have to do with time for planning, but rather a desire for more time so student can have access to more high-quality learning opportunities. And so, despite the challenges and pain points, teachers continue to plan and teach using research-based strategies for 90 to 120 minutes so that their students see themselves as readers and writers. They teach phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and knowledge of knowledge. They teach writing using mentor texts, teacher-written texts, shared writing, and interactive writing. They teach whole class, meet with multiple small groups, and confer with students one on one, in addition to assessing students using both formative and summative assessments. They try to get to know their students as individuals and as learners.

The data from the survey and interviews attest to how busy the early grades literacy block can be and present some of the challenges teachers face. But the data also reveal that teachers recognize the importance of their work and the attitudes toward reading and writing they are shaping.

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APPENDIX A

TEACHER SURVEY OF READING AND WRITING INSTRUCTION

Teacher Background

- Please indicate the grade(s) you currently teach. Select all that apply.
 - Kindergarten
 - First Grade
 - Second Grade
 - Third Grade
 - Fourth Grade
 - Fifth Grade
- How many full years of teaching experience do you have? Note: This does not include the 2019-2020 school year, so if you are a new teacher, please type 0.
 - Teaching in total (at any grade level) _____
 - Teaching at current grade (s) _____
 - Teaching reading/language arts (grade levels TK-5) _____

Reading and Writing Instruction and Classroom Practices

- Which of the following descriptions comes closest to the way you would describe your overall approach to reading/writing instruction? Select all that apply.
 - A **skills-focused** approach that emphasizes direct instruction in basic skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency.
 - A **balanced literacy** approach that combines basic skills development, instruction in comprehension skills, and writing.
 - A **literature-based** approach that uses a variety of trade books as the core instructional material.
 - A **rotational model** that includes whole class, small-group, and independent work.
 - A **basal or core reading program** that sequences instruction, assessment, and reading material for students.
 - A **differentiated or "tiered"** approach that identifies students' levels and individualizes instruction to students' specific instructional needs.
 - A **blended approach** that includes work on computers and tablets.
- How long is your average daily reading/writing block (in minutes)? _____
- On average, how many minutes of your reading/writing block are allocated to the explicit and systematic instruction in the following areas?

| | Number of minutes in reading/language arts block |
|---|--|
| a. phonemic awareness | |
| b. phonics | |
| c. spelling | |
| d. fluency | |
| e. vocabulary | |
| f. g. comprehension | |
| g. building background knowledge | |
| h. knowledge of language (grammar, semantics, morphology) | |
| i. writing | |

6. On average, how many minutes of your reading/writing block are allocated to the following types of instruction?

| | Number of minutes in reading/language arts block |
|---|--|
| a. whole class reading instruction | |
| b. small group differentiated reading instruction | |
| c. whole class writing instruction | |
| d. small group differentiated writing instruction | |

To answer questions 7-19, please respond based on your classroom instruction BEFORE school closures due to COVID-19.

7. How many small READING groups do you typically meet with during your reading/writing block?

- a. One
- b. Two
- c. Three
- d. Four
- e. Five
- f. More than Five

8. How do you organize the READING groups? (open field)

9. How many small WRITING groups do you typically meet with during your 90-minute reading/writing block?

- a. One
- b. Two
- c. Three
- d. Four
- e. Five
- f. More than Five

10. How do you organize the WRITING groups? (open field)

11. Do you meet MORE FREQUENTLY each week with small groups of struggling readers who need more support than you meet with small groups of higher level readers?

- a. Yes
- b. No

12. Do you meet for a LONGER DURATION each week with small groups of struggling readers who need more support than you meet with small groups of higher level readers?

- a. Yes
- b. No

13. To what extent have you engaged in the following activities during small group instruction during the current 2019-20 school year? Check one box in each row.

| | Never | Monthly | Once a week | More than twice a week | Daily |
|--|-------|---------|-------------|------------------------|-------|
| a. work with a group of students who have similar instructional needs. | | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| b. work with a group of students who are on the same reading level. | | | | | |
| c. assess students' understanding of text. | | | | | |
| d. engage in meaningful conversations about what the students are reading. | | | | | |
| e. use the texts to model and explain a variety of comprehension strategies | | | | | |

14. To what extent have your students engaged in the following activities during small group during the current 2019-20 school year? Check one box in each row.

| | Never | Monthly | Once a week | More than twice a week | Daily |
|--|--------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| a. phonemic segmentation activities | | | | | |
| b. word building with letters | | | | | |
| c. read a decodable book | | | | | |
| d. listen to a book | | | | | |
| e. independent reading of a self-selected text for 15-20 minutes | | | | | |
| e. choral reading of a text | | | | | |
| f. sight word activities | | | | | |
| g. spelling activities | | | | | |
| h. writing letters, words, or sentences | | | | | |
| i. activities to be completed on a computer/tablet | | | | | |

15. During the last month before school closures, which of these approaches did you engage in during WRITING instruction? Click all that apply for only the month of February 2020.

- a. Showed students a familiar or new mentor text and highlighted how the author used a writing strategy.
- b. Showed students a text you wrote and explained how you used a writing strategy or had the students explain how you used a writing strategy.
- c. Did shared writing with students to compose something together.
- d. Did interactive writing with students where they each get turns to write letter, words, or sentences.
- e. Observed students practicing a strategy.

Assessments and Usable Data

16. How frequently did you conduct ONGOING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS during the reading/writing block prior to school closures?

- a. Never
- b. Once a week
- c. Twice a week
- d. Daily

17. Did you use results of formative assessments to group students for your reading/writing block?

- a. Yes
- b. No

18. How frequently did you administer end-of-unit SUMMATIVE assessments for reading/writing prior to school closures?

- a. Never
- b. Weekly
- c. Monthly
- d. Every other month

19. Did you use results of SUMMATIVE assessments to group students for your reading/writing block?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Books, Materials, and Resources for Reading/Writing Instruction

20. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the books and materials in your classroom during this school year. Check one box in each row.

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|-------|----------------|
| a. My classroom library represents a wide variety of genres, topics, themes, authors, and formats. | | | | |
| b. My classroom library collection offers a range of leveled texts (reading levels above and below grade levels). | | | | |
| c. My classroom library offers a range of decodable readers. | | | | |
| d. The range of leveled texts in my classroom represents the levels of all students in my classroom. | | | | |
| e. My school has a leveled book room that I can use to find leveled books and materials for my students. | | | | |
| f. My students have access to digital resources (e.g. digital text, audiobooks, reading applications, e-books). | | | | |
| g. I have access to digital resources that support my instructional goals. | | | | |
| h. I often have to find materials and resources outside of what I have in my classroom (e.g. books, online resources). | | | | |

21. Please indicate the reading/writing professional learning you have received at your school so far this year. Select all that apply.

- a. Coaching
- b. Professional learning communities/Grade level groups
- c. Other workshops
- d. None
- e. Meeting the Needs of All Students in Diverse Classrooms

22. Please indicate which measures you take in your classroom to meet the needs of your English Learner (EL) students during reading/writing instruction. Click all that apply.

- a. Numerous illustrations to help clarify the text.
- b. Limited text on each page.
- c. Text that contains repetitive, predictable phrases
- d. High-frequency vocabulary and useful words.
- e. Text that employs simple sentence structure.
- f. Read at a slow to normal speed, using an expressive tone.
- g. Allow time after each sentence or paragraph for students to assimilate the material.

- h. Point to words in the text as you read them.
- i. Point to corresponding pictures as you read the text.
- j. Act out the story as you read.
- k. Use visuals and manipulatives.
- l. Verify comprehension of the story.
- m. Read the same story on successive days.
- n. Other _____

23. Please indicate which measures you take in your classroom to meet the needs of your students with disabilities (SWD) and with dyslexia during your reading/writing block. Check all that apply.

- a. Provide letter manipulatives for students with difficulty writing.
- b. Allow students to use audiobooks to follow along.
- c. Keep lessons short.
- d. Use books with one sentence per page.
- e. Give students extra rewards to foster motivation.
- f. Teach one skill at a time.
- g. Make additional accommodations as needed.
- h. Additional explicit instruction.
- i. Other _____
- j. Challenges

24. What are some challenges you have with instruction during your reading/writing block PRIOR to school closures? What solutions have you employed to address these challenges? What additional supports could you use to address these challenges? _____

APPENDIX B

HHM DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN EARLY LITERACY EDUCATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background

Q1 Can you start by telling me a little bit about your teaching experience? How long have you been teaching? What grade do you teach? And how long have you been teaching at this grade level?

Reading/Writing Instruction

Q2 How do you structure your classroom in terms of whole group and small group for reading and writing during a typical reading/writing block? Probe for the following:

- Whole group reading instruction?
- Small group reading instruction?
- Whole group writing instruction?
- Small group writing instruction?
- Centers?

Q3 What does your typical reading/writing instructional block look like? How much time do you spend on each activity?

Q4 Now please tell me a little bit about how student learning centers work in your classroom?

- How do you differentiate the activities and resources in your centers to meet all your students' needs? Examples?
- How do you build in accountability to the various center activities? Examples?
- How do the students know what to do during center time? The actual activity? Rotations?

Assessments, Data, Differentiation

Q5 What types of formative assessments do you administer for reading/language arts? How frequently do you administer them? What do you use these assessment data for?

Q6 What types of summative assessments do you administer for reading/language arts? How frequently do you administer them? What do you use these assessment data for?

Q7 Can you tell me about the process involved in grouping your students? Differentiated instruction? How many groups? How often do students typically stay in one group?

Q8 In meeting with groups of varying reading and writing ability, do you also differentiate the frequency with which you meet with those groups in a given week?

Planning

Q9 Share with me a bit about how you plan your reading/writing lessons?

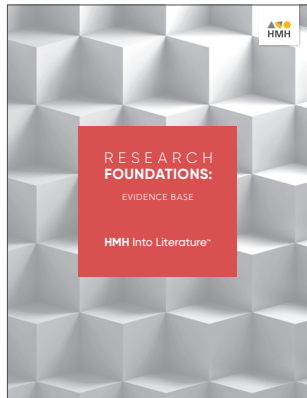
- What materials do you use? Provided? Sourced?
- What factors do you take into consideration when planning your lessons?
- What are some challenges/barriers you face in implementing a planned lesson?
- What do you wish you had more time in your reading/writing block for?

Q10 What does planning a lesson for these different ability groups look like? How long does it take to plan for a reading/writing block for whole group instruction? Small group instruction?

- Q11 What materials do you use? What materials are provided by your school? Do you find supplemental materials yourself? If so, where do you find your additional materials?
- Probe if needed: Why do you need to supplement materials (curriculum inadequate, need more materials for differentiation, etc.)
- Q12 What steps/strategies do you take to incorporate the needs of English Learners into your whole group lessons? Small group lessons?
- Did you receive professional development on attending to English Learner needs in your reading/writing lessons? If so, can you tell me more about that?
- Q13 What steps/strategies do you take to incorporate the needs of Students with Disabilities (SWD) into your whole group lessons? Small group lessons?
- Did you receive professional development on attending to the needs of SWD in your reading/writing lessons? If so, can you tell me more about that?
- Q14 What are your biggest challenges or pain points when it comes to teaching reading and writing to your class?
- Q15 What are some supports that can help you in your teaching?

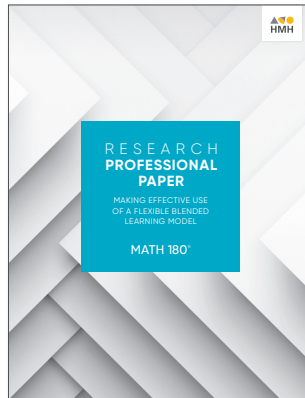
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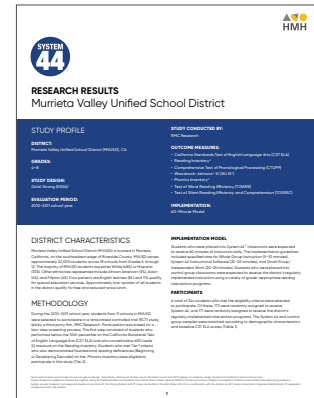
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