

Original Paper

Time for Reading Instruction: How Much Time Should Schools and Teachers Devote to Reading Instruction in Grades K-2?

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Abstract

Although research has indicated that time allotted for instruction in reading is associated with reading achievement, no studies have examined what is the appropriate or optimal time that should be given to reading instruction in the primary grades (grades K-2). Given the understanding that it is the teachers themselves who would have the best sense of the appropriate time for reading instruction and its various components. Results of the survey indicate that teachers feel that 178-198 minutes be devoted to the general literacy curriculum, while 62-71 minutes be devoted to the core reading curriculum per day. We note that the allocation of time to the major components of reading instruction (word study, fluency, and comprehension) varied considerably. In follow-up survey inquiries, a significant number of teachers manifest difficulties in actually meeting their own recommendations for time appropriation for reading instruction. Among the factors that keep teachers from meeting their recommendations for instructional time are special events that disrupt and disturb the time given for instruction. Recommendations for making time for literacy instruction for effective and efficient are considered.

Keywords

reading, instructional time, word study, fluency, comprehension

1. Introduction

Over the past century, and particularly during the past 25 years, the teaching of reading has been the subject of a great deal of scientific research. Yet one issue that does not appear to have been addressed sufficiently has been the appropriate amount of time allotted for reading instruction. Researchers have

examined issues such as the major competencies or processes required for proficient reading (e.g., phonemic awareness, word recognition, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension), instruction required for various ages, grade, and reading levels of students, materials appropriate for instruction, teaching second language learners, assessment of reading, cultural, and gender perspectives on learning to read, intervention for struggling readers, defining and treating dyslexia, family literacy, and more. However, the issue of time for instruction does not appear to be a current focus.

What is the appropriate amount of time that should be allotted for instruction that is sufficient for students to ensure adequate progress in reading? In a recent blog, Timothy Shanahan (2018) noted that “there are no studies that reveal the amount of reading instruction that is necessary or sufficient to teach reading effectively to students at different levels of performance. However, there is an extensive body of literature showing the importance of the amount of instruction in reading achievement” (p. 1). Indeed, a review of the most recent Handbook of Reading Research (Kamil, Pearson, Moje, & Afflerbach, 2011), reveals that of the 30 chapters listed not one deals with the study of time allotted for reading instruction. Ironically, time for instruction is one of the essential and malleable issues that school policy makers address.

The present study, then is an initial exploration into the issue of the appropriate amount of time that should be allotted for reading instruction in grades K-2. Research into the study of time allotted for reading instruction can be approached from a variety of directions, such as associating time devoted to reading instruction with outcomes associated with those times. We felt, however, that perhaps a productive beginning approach to this question would be simply to survey the very people who deal with time for instruction on daily basis—teachers. How much time do they feel is appropriate to devote to instruction in reading? Teachers, daily, must choose to allot time for instruction in the various identified competencies in and tangential areas of reading and have the keenest sense of the amount of time that is appropriate to meet the needs of students.

Although Shanahan claimed that there are no studies that have dealt with the amount of time for reading instruction that is necessary for effective instruction, there has been research that has considered the issue of time for instruction in reading and its association with reading achievement. Allington (1983) claimed that an abundant amount of research suggests that the amount of time allocated for instruction is associated with higher levels of achievement (e.g., Berliner, 1981; Guthrie, Martuza, & Seifert, 1979; Wiley & Harnischfeger, 1974). Yet, an ideal or appropriate amount of time allocated for instruction was not been specified in this work. Allington (2002) explains that in order to improve students’ reading skills, exemplary teachers focus on reading instruction that is “responsive to children’s needs” (p. 740). Allington and his research team observed multiple first- and fourth-grade classrooms for at least ten days and reported on six common features of effective elementary literacy instruction—time, texts, teaching, talk, tasks, and testing. These six elements work together to help improve student learning and literacy; however, time spent reading in a classroom is the first essential element. He found that effective teachers “routinely had children actually reading and writing for as much as half of the school day” (Allington,

2002, p. 742). Again, the actual amount of time that students should be reading and writing and in direct reading instruction was not specified.

Connor et al. (2014) studied students' literacy learning through two different observation systems: one focused on time spent in reading instruction, and one focused on quality of the classroom environment. The study involved 27 third-grade classrooms serving 315 target students. They found that the combination of a high-quality classroom environment, as well as instructional time spent on specific literacy skills, led to student achievement gains in the specific literacy skills. Neither a high-quality classroom environment alone nor instructional time on specific literacy skills alone led to similar gains. The authors conclude that students' learning is optimized when they are provided enough time in explicit instruction from the teacher who is interactive, responsive, organized, and focused on targeted language and literacy content. Recommendations for time spent in instruction were not provided.

Brenner, Hiebert, and Tompkins (2009) examined the amount of time that third-grade students spent engaged with texts during the period designated for reading instruction. They found that, in 90-to 120-minute reading periods, students spent about 18 minutes actually reading texts. About half that 18 minutes was spent in assisted reading, the other half in reading independently. The researchers did not find differences in the amount of time that low-, medium-, and high-achieving students engaged in reading during class.

Foorman et al. (2006) studied 107 first- and second-grade classrooms in 17 high-poverty schools. Most of the reading/language arts blocks were 90 minutes long in each classroom, though a few had 120-minute blocks. In analyzing the interaction of time allocations, they found that "Teachers who spent more time reading books than giving directions and preparing to teach had students with modestly higher word attack skills at the end of the year" (p. 22). In an analysis of this study, Gambrell (2011) noted that only time spent on text reading significantly affected student growth in word reading, decoding, and passage comprehension.

Kiesling (1977-1978) reported on findings on the relationship that the amount of time spent on varying modes of reading instruction had on students' reading performance in the elementary grades. Data for this study was recorded by instructional type: large group, small group, and individualized for grade five. When combining large group, small group, and individual instruction into the time allotted for reading instruction, readers who were 2-3 levels below grade level received 182 total minutes of teaching per week, students one level below grade received 125 total minutes of teaching per week, students at their assigned grade level received 125 total minutes of teaching per week, and finally students one level above grade received 129 total minutes of teaching per week. In terms of instructional time's relationship to reading performance, Kiesling reported that small- and large-group instruction was positively related to reading achievement gains, with the greatest gains for children at or slightly below grade level.

Sonnenschein et al. (2010) investigated the relation between normative classroom instructional practices and children's reading competencies in kindergarten, first, third and fifth grades using a longitudinal, nationally representative data set. The amount of reported instruction was less in kindergarten and fifth

than in first or third grade. The mean scores ranged from 2.64 to 3.51. A value of 2 referred to 31-60 minutes a day and a value of 3 referred to 61-90 minutes per day. Looking at individual grade levels' reported data, kindergarten had a reported mean value of 2.64, first grade had a reported mean value of 3.51, third grade had a reported mean value of 3.21, and finally fifth grade had a reported mean value of 2.88.

Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (2000) investigated the relationship between reading achievement among students on subsidized lunch and characteristics of their school and classroom environments. The researchers discovered

minutes per day) versus the least effective schools (18.6 minutes per day). The researchers also noted that across the four most effective schools, teachers averaged 134 minutes a day on reading activities, (not including teacher read aloud, writing instruction, and spelling) with about 85 minutes dedicated to either small-group or whole-class instruction and 30 minutes to independent reading. The results suggest increased time devoted to independent reading can contribute to greater reading achievement among students.

The previous research, then, does suggest an association between reading achievement and the amount of time devoted to reading instruction and the amount of time in which students are engaged in authentic reading. However, there seems to be a lack of clarity in how reading instruction time is defined—reading instruction blocks vs. language arts instruction blocks, as well as how much is actually devoted to the various components of reading known to be associated with reading achievement (National Reading Panel, 2000). Moreover, the previous research does not provide guidelines on the amount of time that should be allocated to reading instruction in general, instructional components within the reading curriculum, and targeted areas related to reading instruction.

The present study, then, attempts to provide greater clarity into the actual amount of time that teachers themselves devote to reading instruction as a whole and, within the reading instruction period, the actual amount of time devoted to the various and key competencies of reading. Although an initial exploration into this issue, and recognizing the limitations to this research, we hope that this study may lead to further research and scholarly inquiry into time allotted for reading instruction.

The study's significance lies in the fact that teachers and school administrators need to make curricular decisions about the appropriate amount of time that should be devoted to instruction. Without any empirical data on which to make such decisions, teachers and administrators have little to guide them in allocating precious time in the school day. Hopefully this study may provide some parameters, based on the work of practicing teachers, for making more informed decisions about time for reading instruction.

1.1 Research Questions

The present study was guided by the following major research questions: How much time do teachers in grades K-2 allocate for reading instruction and for the various components of the reading curriculum? Secondly, to what extent are teachers in grades K-2 able to meet their own recommended time allocations in their actual instruction.

2. Method

We developed an online survey that asked teachers to report on the appropriate amount of time they feel will lead to adequate gains in students' overall reading achievement (see appendix). The survey focused on the key or core components of reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel (word study, fluency, comprehension) as well as other areas identified by scholars and practitioners that are associated with reading achievement and good reading instruction (read aloud, written response to reading, writing and writing instruction, spelling, independent work, and library) for kindergarten through grade 2. We defined word study to include instructional time devoted to phonemic awareness, word decoding, phonics, and vocabulary (word meaning).

Invitations to complete the online survey were sent to practicing teachers using the authors' personal contacts and social media. The first author maintains a professionally oriented Twitter account with over 4,000 followers. A total of 276 surveys were completed. Respondents came from 39 states and Canada. Of the 276 completed surveys, 126 met the demographic of being a practicing K-2 classroom teacher of reading.

3. Results

For each question regarding a focus on instruction, respondents were asked to report what they felt was the appropriate amount of time per day that should be devoted to that focal area in minutes; then respondents were asked to also report the appropriate number of days per week that should be devoted to each focal area. Minutes per day was multiplied by days per week in order to determine the total number of minutes per week that teachers felt were appropriate for each instructional focus area. Responses for individual question items were tallied and the means and standard deviations were calculated for each instructional question and each grade level.

Then, in order to determine the total amount of time per week that should be devoted to reading instruction we summed first the time that is appropriate for the core reading curriculum (word study, fluency, and comprehension). We also calculated the sum for all the instructional areas to determine the appropriate time for the general literacy curriculum. Results for each of the three grade levels studied are reported in Tables 1 through 3 below and summarized in Table 4.

Table 1. Instructional Time for Reading-Kindergarten Teachers (N= 25)

	Min per Day		Days per Week		Total Minutes per Week
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Appropriate Time for Word Study	24.40	18.10	4.76	.66	116.14
Appropriate Time for Rdg Fluency	13.82	5.83	4.21	1.55	58.18
Appropriate Time for Comprehension	28.30	13.52	4.79	.59	135.56
Appropriate Time for Spelling	9.52	7.57	3.43	2.02	32.65

Appropriate Time for Read Aloud	18.54	6.59	5.00	.20	92.70
Appropriate Time for Independent Work	25.83	14.65	4.33	1.49	111.84
Appropriate Time for Independent Rdg	17.40	8.18	4.50	1.18	36.81
Appropriate Time for Written Response	14.043	11.82	3.48	1.83	48.86
Appropriate Time for Writing	34.50	11.50	4.92	.408	169.74
Appropriate Time for Library	25.87	11.95	3.41	8.30	88.22

Table 2. Instructional Time for Reading-Grade 1 Teachers (N= 57)

	Min per Day		Days per Week		Total Minutes per Week
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Appropriate Time for Word Study	26.75	13.02	4.77	.57	127.60
Appropriate Time for Rdg Fluency	15.49	8.86	4.21	1.20	65.21
Appropriate Time for Comprehension	35.00	25.00	4.59	.81	160.65
Appropriate Time for Spelling	12.55	6.76	4.02	1.58	50.45
Appropriate Time for Read Aloud	17.09	6.98	4.80	.62	82.03
Appropriate Time for Independent Work	28.33	19.70	4.17	1.70	118..14
Appropriate Time for Independent Rdg	21.41	9.90	4.76	.79	101.91
Appropriate Time for Written Response	12.89	.859	3.20	1.61	41.25
Appropriate Time for Writing	36.93	11,52	4.77	.60	176.16
Appropriate Time for Library	31.07	12.85	1.57	1.06	48.78

Table 3. Instructional Time for Reading-Grade 2 Teachers (N= 44)

	Min per Day		Days per Week		Total Minutes per Week
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Appropriate Time for Word Study	24.32	13.71	4.57	.76	111.14
Appropriate Time for Rdg Fluency	14.65	8.82	3.88	1.45	56.84
Appropriate Time for Comprehension	34.60	16.46	4.72	.60	163.31
Appropriate Time for Spelling	17.09	8.54	4.15	1.24	70.92
Appropriate Time for Read Aloud	16.59	5.37	4.63	.90	76.81
Appropriate Time for Independent Work	26.67	15.99	4.15	1.39	110.68
Appropriate Time for Independent Rdg	25.28	10.06	4.64	.92	117.30
Appropriate Time for Written Response	15.79	7.47	3.98	1.30	62.84
Appropriate Time for Writing	38.14	9.88	4.49	.94	171.25
Appropriate Time for Library	30.24	11.21	1.76	1.32	53.22

Table 4. Appropriate Time for Reading Instruction–Summary

Grade	General Literacy Curriculum		Core Reading Curriculum	
	Min per Week	Min Per Day	Min per Week	Min Per Day
K	890.70	178.14	309.88	61.98
1	972.18	194.44	353.46	70.69
2	994.31	198.86	331.29	66.25

After respondents identified their recommended time requirements for literacy instruction, we asked them to rate the extent they were actually able to meet those requirements in their actual instruction. Table 5 summarizes teachers' ability to meet their own recommended time requirement.

Table 5. Extent to Which Teachers Are Able to Meet the Appropriate Time Requirements They Identified in the Survey

Able to Meet Time Requirements	Percentage of Respondents
49% or Less	6.6
50-74%	14.9
75-89%	43.8
90-100%	34.7

The survey concluded with an open-ended question asking teachers to provide two or three reasons they are unable to meet their recommended amounts of time for reading instruction. Sixty-three of the respondents provided one or more reasons.

By far, the most common impediment to devoting enough time to reading involves school-wide activities, schedule changes, and interruptions. More than half the respondents cited such disruptions as a reason they cannot always give reading the amount of time it deserves. Special assemblies and safety drills eat away at already packed instructional time. One teacher noted that the ideal allotted time works “for the perfect day” when there are “no special activities happening or surprises like fire drills.”

For slightly more than a quarter of respondents, there simply isn't enough time in the day. One respondent succinctly summarized: “It simply may be that there are too many important areas to cover in the time we have”. Another 27% of respondents specifically mentioned the challenges involved in juggling multiple subjects. Social studies and science have separate blocks, for example, without incorporating literacy. One teacher mentioned the addition of a 30-minute social-emotional curriculum. All content areas are important, but in the limited instructional hours of a school day, teachers find themselves sacrificing some subjects in favor of others: Other reasons mentioned include disruptions for behavior issues, too many required assessments, and even pull-out time for interventions for struggling, gifted, and ELL students.

4. Discussion

The results of the present study provide insights into how teachers feel about time allocation for literacy instruction. We discuss the results while recognizing the ongoing reality that reading achievement has been largely stagnant among 4th grade students in the United States for the past 2+ decades. The findings of this present study have implications for making reading instruction more effective in terms of moving a greater number of students toward higher levels of achievement.

One of our first observations is the consistency of the overall reporting of time for instruction across grade levels. In the core curriculum area (word study, fluency, comprehension) there was a difference of approximately 9 minutes per day in time for instruction (K: 62 min; 1: 71 min; 2: 66 min). Teachers felt that approximately one hour of direct instruction in these core areas was sufficient. In creating classroom curricula in reading in the primary grades, teachers and school leaders may wish to consider 60-70 minutes of core instruction as a standard. However, recognizing that reading achievement is associated with time given for reading instruction (Allington, 1983), an allotted instructional time beyond 70 minutes may yield even higher levels of achievement.

For the overall literacy curriculum, the differences in appropriate allotted time did vary by grade level (K: 178 min per day; Gr. 1: 194 min per day; Gr. 2: 199 min per day). Slightly over 3 hours per day appears to be the norm for grades 1 and 2, while 3 hours appears to be the norm for kindergarten. As suggested by previous research (Allington, 1983), increasing overall time devoted to literacy instruction and activity beyond 3 hours may also yield greater gains in achievement in reading.

A striking and consistent observation from the data is that of the three core curricular areas, reading comprehension instruction is given priority over word study and reading fluency. Given that a primary focus on reading instruction in grades kindergarten through 2 is the development of foundational reading competencies, we were surprised to note that comprehension was made a great priority in terms of allotted time. We acknowledge that comprehension is the goal of reading and reading instruction. Still, reading comprehension cannot happen unless students are able to decode and understand the words they encounter in the texts they read. Perhaps teachers and school leaders may wish to consider increasing the amount of time devoted to word study and fluency so that all three areas are in greater balance.

Similarly, we note that reading fluency is given the least priority among the three core curricular areas. Approximately 12 minutes per day was recommended for instruction in this critical area. Given that reading fluency continues to be a relatively neglected component of reading instruction (Rasinski, 2012) perhaps greater time allocation to fluency would yield significant improvements in overall reading achievement.

Once teachers identified what they felt were appropriate time allocations for reading/literacy instruction, we asked them to estimate the extent to which they were able to meet those allocations in their own instruction. A substantial percentage of teachers admitted to difficulties in meeting their time allocations at least 90% of the time. However, over 65% of the respondents indicated that they were

unable to achieve their time allocations for reading instruction 90% of the time or more. Current research indicates that a third of American fourth-grade students achieve at a level “Below Basic” in reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Perhaps a significant reason for the large number of students who are not thriving in reading is that they are not receiving sufficient instruction in reading during the critical primary grade years. Although we indicated earlier in this paper that the time allocated for instruction is correlated with reading achievement, given that time allocations do not necessarily reflect actual time given for instruction, perhaps a more precise and appropriate variable is actual time in reading instruction.

When teachers are not able to spend the time they desire and require for effective reading instruction, it is often due to school-wide issues. The primary culprit interfering with literacy instruction, as reported by teachers in our survey, is school-wide assemblies and special events. Though students benefit from special activities, administrators should carefully consider which are most important, which could be set aside in favor of classroom learning, and which could be scheduled at less disruptive times to literacy instruction.

Literacy development is perhaps the chief educational goal in the primary grades. Mandated curriculum, especially that which separates literacy from other required subjects, can prevent teachers from efficiently or effectively teaching literacy. Administrators and curriculum supervisors can examine mandates to determine not only whether they effectively contribute to student learning, but also whether they can be accomplished in the amount of available instructional time. Research demonstrates that knowledge improves comprehension (Best, Floyd, & McNamara, 2008; McNamara, Ozuru, & Floyd, 2011). Curriculum that combines literacy with other subjects can simultaneously build students’ knowledge and boost their reading ability.

4.1 Conclusion

The results of the present study suggest that teachers are quite consistent within their grade levels as to the amount of time per school day that should be devoted to core reading instruction (approximately 60 minutes) and the full literacy curriculum (3 hours per day). Additionally, the present study suggests that reading fluency continues to receive less emphasis in core reading than word study or phonics. Teachers and school administrators should be able to use the results of the present study to gauge their own or their school’s appropriation of time for reading instruction, and make changes if necessary. .

4.2 Limitations

We recognize, without question, that there are significant limitations to the present study. First, the sample size for the study is relatively small and not randomly selected. Future studies will want to increase the number of participants. Second, we recognize in retrospect the limitations to the survey. We tried to make the individual questions as specific as possible without making the survey too burdensome on teachers. Teachers could easily interpret different questions in different ways. For example, the independent work question could have been interpreted as seat work only by students or as independent reading time or a combination of the two. Moreover, we recognize the likely overlap in

categories. For example, during guided reading time, where the primary focus is comprehension, it is likely that teachable moments occurred in the areas of word study and fluency. Third, we realize that teachers may have inflated their responses knowing that a greater number of minutes devoted to instruction is usually considered a positive attribute of instruction. Future work in this area may well wish to attempt to address these and other concerns.

Despite these limitations, we feel that the present study provides an opening for scholars and practitioners to discuss issues related to time devoted to reading instruction. Very little in the way of actual empirical research has examined the ideal and appropriate amount of time that should be devoted to different aspects of reading (and literacy) instruction. With the present study, we hope that scholars will continue work in this area so that teachers, school leaders, policy makers, and the general public will have a better understanding of the role of time for instruction in producing proficient readers.

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Appendix

Time Allotments for Literacy Instruction Study Survey

Are you a classroom teacher of record for the subject of reading in grades K-5? (Mark "no" if you are an intervention specialist or Title I teacher).

Yes ____ No ____

(disqualify from survey if “no”)

What is the current grade level you teach? (Pull-down menu grades K-5)

How long have you taught at this grade level? _____ years.

How many total years have you been a teacher in an elementary classroom? (answer with drop-down menu of sets of fives - 0-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26+)

In what state do you teach? (pull-down menu of states)

In thinking about only reading instruction at your assigned grade level, and understanding the time limitations to what can be done during a normal school day, what do you feel are the appropriate amounts of time that should be devoted to each of the following areas of reading instruction? Please consider only the activities that would take place during the time in the school day that is specifically allocated for reading instruction. Consider minilessons and direct instruction time as part of each category. Use a numerical value, and please enter “0” if no time should be spent in each of these areas.

- Word Study (phonemic awareness, phonics, word recognition, vocabulary):
_____ minutes per day; _____ days per week.
- Reading Fluency (repeated readings, readers’ theater, performance of poetry, songs, choral reading):
_____ minutes per day; _____ days per week.
- Comprehension (discussion of texts, guided reading, focus on meaning):
_____ minutes per day; _____ days per week.
- Read Aloud: _____ minutes per day; _____ days per week.
- Independent Work, “Center” Time in Reading (for example, word work, letter manipulation, rehearsal):
_____ minutes per day; _____ days per week.
- Independent Reading (sustained silent reading or SSR):
_____ minutes per day; _____ days per week.
- Written Response to Reading:
_____ minutes per day; _____ days per week.

Consider the following tangential areas of reading and indicate what you feel are the appropriate amounts of time that should be devoted to each:

Writing and Writing Instruction: _____ minutes per day; _____ days per week.

Spelling: _____ minutes per day; _____ days per week.

Library: _____ minutes per day; _____ days per week.

To what extent are you able to meet the time requirements you identify above? (drop-down menu of the following categories?)

_____ 90% of the time or more

_____ 75-90%

_____ 50-74%

_____ 49% or less

If you are unable meet your identified time requirements, what prevents you from doing so? (open-ended response)

Thank you for your participation!