

Cultivating Young Readers: Seven Principles for Teaching All Children to Read in a Global Society



Reading is like air.

—Walter Dean Myers, award-winning children’s author

In today’s globalized and connected world, reading is much more than recognizing and understanding words on a page or a screen. Reading is a complex activity that is fundamental to full participation in a democratic society and essential for lifelong opportunity and success. Like air, we need reading. We use it all the time.

Readers in today’s elementary classrooms need policies and practices that address the complexities of reading and that acknowledge the multicultural and global contexts in which literacy instruction takes place. We as educators, researchers, and policymakers can use these seven evidence-based principles to help K-5 learners be passionate, critical, and successful readers.

All children have the right to exemplary classroom literacy instruction that builds on and expands their content knowledge, real-world experiences, and interests while leveraging the knowledge and resources they bring to the classroom from their families and communities.

- 1. Teach with a comprehensive approach to reading and writing.** Elementary literacy instruction must emphasize the foundational aspects of reading and writing, including phonological awareness (of which phonemic awareness is a component), decoding and word analysis, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. These foundational areas should be taught across whole-class, small-group, and individual instructional contexts. Effective instructional routines include reading to students, reading and writing with students, providing explicit instruction, and supporting and conferencing with students as they read and write independently. This instruction should occur in engaging text-rich environments in which children have ample access to print and digital texts from a variety of genres, cultures, perspectives, and complexity levels.
- 2. Foster opportunities for readers to learn from texts.** Reading is a tool that supports learning in all other content areas. Readers gain new knowledge, insights, and vicarious experiences from the concepts, characters, and worlds they encounter in texts. Although a sharp distinction has often been made between learning to read (in the early elementary grades) and reading to learn (in upper elementary and beyond), current understandings of reading development suggest that students at all levels can learn from texts while also developing their foundational reading skills. Over time, readers develop more complex ways of critically analyzing the information they learn from texts. For example, they learn to ask questions about the perspectives of authors, to investigate the credibility of web texts, and to seek out multiple voices and opinions. By creating text-rich classrooms where learners have opportunities to read, discuss, and respond to authentic texts and media, teachers can support children to build new knowledge about the world. This knowledge, in turn, will allow readers to access and critically analyze increasingly complex texts as they grow older.
- 3. Build on children’s home, community, and cultural experiences and knowledge.** Background knowledge and experiences influence children as readers. All children have the right to exemplary classroom literacy instruction that builds on and expands their content knowledge, real-world experiences, and interests while leveraging the knowledge and resources they bring to the classroom from their families and communities. Students come from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, class, language, nationality, gender, and family make-up.

Students benefit when teachers recognize and value their unique perspectives and diverse language practices. Effective reading instruction builds on this diversity.

4. Use assessment judiciously and strategically to inform instruction.

In effective literacy classrooms, assessment takes on many forms and is carefully integrated into instruction. Teachers monitor student understanding during instructional interactions and through the use of informal and formal assessment techniques. Equipped with detailed information about each learner's literacy development, teachers use their professional expertise to design differentiated and meaningful instruction. Assessment is most useful for supporting reading when multiple data sources are used for making instructional decisions, assessment tools are sensitive to children's growth in a broad range of language and literacy practices, and when assessment does not interfere excessively with instructional time.

5. Create opportunities for language development. Elementary reading instruction should support learners in their academic and social language development, both for oral language and language structures found in print and digital texts. This includes introducing all students to the language of school while sustaining and affirming home language practices. The school day should be organized with a variety of opportunities for children to engage in meaningful discussions and practice the language forms they will encounter in texts and other media across content areas.

6. Design a whole-child approach to literacy across environments. A child's health and home life provide the foundation for literacy. To support reading among young children, we must ensure that they are not struggling due to vision and hearing difficulties, hunger, medical or dental issues, mental health, or housing instability. It is important that schools involve parents through family literacy events, home reading that includes a variety of appropriate texts, and access to literacy programs in their communities.

7. Develop and support excellent teachers. Teachers are the most powerful in-school factor for ensuring students' reading success. Therefore, teachers need high quality preparation and sustained professional development. Initial preparation for elementary teachers (including special education, bilingual, and ESL teachers) must include evidenced-based content and pedagogical knowledge about reading coupled with authentic field experiences (i.e., tutoring, small group and whole class instruction, and community/family interactions). Advanced preparation through graduate programs can provide specialized expertise in teaching reading and create opportunities for teacher leadership (e.g., literacy specialists, coaches, and interventionists). Participation in dynamic professional learning communities, in which teachers are able to direct their own learning, creates opportunities for ongoing development of high-impact literacy practices.

At NC State, we are dedicated to supporting reading achievement in schools, communities and homes through our research, collaborations, and teacher education programs. Below are the faculty leading our literacy initiatives to improve reading education across North Carolina and the nation.

Angela Wiseman conducts research on visual literacies and children's literature. She is a former elementary school teacher and literacy specialist and partners with schools to support professional knowledge of writing instruction in grades K-5. Currently, she is working with community organizations to support family literacy through reading children's picturebooks. Contact her at amwisema@ncsu.edu.

Ann Harrington teaches a variety of reading methods courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. She works with elementary schools and community-based organizations to provide support for children who struggle with or need extra support in reading. Contact her at adharrin@ncsu.edu.

Brooks Bowden evaluates programs and approaches for teaching literacy and providing supplemental support to improve student learning. This research provides evidence on effectiveness and costs to aid in selecting among policy alternatives. Contact her at brooks_bowden@ncsu.edu.

Carl Young teaches and conducts research on integrating digital technologies and new literacies, effective strategies for teaching composition, literature for young adults, and content area reading. He has collaborated with teachers and schools to design and implement research-based comprehension and composition instruction and professional development initiatives focused on writing across the curriculum and effective technology integration. Contact him at cayoung2@ncsu.edu.

Crystal Chen Lee conducts research and teaches about literacy education with an emphasis on English education, critical literacy, immigrant youth, and community-based organizations. She has collaborated with urban residency programs and non-profits with an emphasis on teaching for social justice. Contact her at cchen32@ncsu.edu.

Dennis Davis conducts research and teaches about literacy education with an emphasis on supporting readers who have had difficulties with reading comprehension and readers learning to comprehend texts in a second language. He has collaborated with teachers and schools to design and implement research-based comprehension instruction. Contact him at ddavis6@ncsu.edu.

Hiller A. Spires conducts research and teaches about digital and disciplinary literacies with a focus on culturally and linguistically diverse readers. She partners with schools to conduct Project-Based Inquiry (PBI) Global in which teachers and students collaborate across time, space, and cultures to read, write and create digital products. See newlit.org. Contact her at haspires@ncsu.edu.

Jill Grifenhagen teaches and conducts research about early language and literacy development, teaching language arts in elementary schools, and academic language learning. She engages with schools and community organizations to promote teacher development and high-quality language and literacy experiences for young children. Contact her at jill.grifenhagen@ncsu.edu.

John Begeny has collaborated with teachers and schools to develop and conduct research on reading programs that improve students' text reading fluency. He has also worked with teachers, families, and other community stakeholders to develop a program that aims to support children's literacy development outside of the classroom and strengthen home-school relationships. Contact him at jcbegeny@ncsu.edu.

Michelle Falter conducts research and teaches about English language arts and literacy education with an emphasis on affective, dialogic, and critical literacy pedagogies in relation to the teaching and reading of diverse texts. She is also a teaching consultant for the National Writing Project. Contact her at mfalter@ncsu.edu.