# It’s never too late to help students learn to read

By Callula Killingly



Learning to read is a complex process. It requires children to master and integrate multiple skills, from mapping abstract symbols to the right speech sounds to understanding what all the words mean. This is why reading is one of the first and most important things children are taught in the early years of school.

Still, many children have reading difficulties that persist into high school. According to the most recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data, one in five (21 per cent) of Australian 15-year-olds had reading scores below the baseline proficiency.

The national curriculum expects children to achieve the necessary reading foundations in their first few years of school. By upper primary, children are required to make the leap from learning to read to reading to learn, and classroom teaching shifts accordingly.

Due to this shift in focus, children who do not master the core components of reading in early primary school may never have another opportunity to learn these skills.

When reading difficulties go unidentified and unaddressed, students experience immense barriers to learning, as well as in life beyond school. So, it is crucial we know what works to put these students back on the path to reading easily and well.

Our new research puts this to the test.

**A complex situation**

Reading difficulties in older students can often go unnoticed. Sometimes they show up as anxious or disruptive behaviour.

Sometimes school staff assume it is too difficult to improve an older student’s reading skills. They may think a student’s difficulties are the result of not being exposed to written and spoken language in the home, having a learning disability, or

speaking English as a second language – and assume there is nothing school can usefully do.

**Our study**

My colleagues and I conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 106 interventions aimed at improving the reading skills of older students. Together they involved more than 156,000 students in Years 4 to 12. Most studies were conducted in the United States.

We wanted to look at all the available relevant research on what approaches were used to boost reading skills with the aim of determining the most effective.

The interventions we examined ranged in hours of duration and targeted skills (for example, comprehension, fluency, vocabulary) either on their own or in combination. Interventions were delivered to a variety of group sizes (whole classroom, small groups, one-on-one), generally by teachers or researchers.

**What we found**

Overall, we found reading interventions for older students improved students' skills on a range of reading outcomes. We found gains, regardless of which school year students were in. This shows even for older students, it's not too late to provide support for reading difficulties.

The more effective interventions focused on reading comprehension skills or vocabulary knowledge, suggesting these skills might be easier to build for older students.

Somewhat surprisingly, shorter interventions, of between six-15 hours, were more effective than those extending beyond 15 hours. And there were no overall differences in effectiveness between teacher-led or researcher-led interventions, or whether the interventions were delivered to the whole class, small groups, or individually.

What seems most important, then, is not that interventions are lengthy, or who conducts them, or the group size. Our findings indicate what works is targeting the right reading skills.

We also uncovered some important gaps, showing where more research is needed. Most interventions were for students in Years 6 to 8. Beyond those years, the number of interventions targeting the upper years of school tapered off dramatically, with only one intervention found for Year 11 students and none for Year 12.

**What does this mean for schools?**

Schools should screen all students' reading skills at school entry and then at least once a year, to identify which students need more help and in
which skills.

Supports should then be delivered in increasing levels of intensity, so students receive intervention at the appropriate amount. These should target the specific components of reading students have not yet mastered.

Our research shows teacher-delivered interventions are just as effective as those delivered by researchers and led to some of the strongest improvements in vocabulary.

We also found group size may be less important than previously thought, and interventions may not need to be delivered one-to-one. When interventions are evidence-based and aligned to relevant reading skills, small groups can be just as effective.

However, our findings also suggest we need to equip all teachers, including teachers of other subjects (such as science), to support ongoing development of core reading skills. This is especially so in high school, given the significant increase in literacy requirements and specialist vocabulary.

**What can parents do?**

Parents play a key role in supporting their children's reading development. From reading street signs and cereal boxes in everyday activities and bedtime stories at night, parents provide valuable support for reading and model the importance of reading for life.

They can also sound the alarm when children might not be progressing as well as might be expected. If children cannot sound out basic unfamiliar words by the end of Year 1, or are demonstrating reluctance to engage in reading activities, it is

time to start asking questions.

Raising concerns with their child's teacher is one place to start. As time goes on, if those difficulties are at risk of becoming entrenched, parents should question what interventions are being employed and ensure they are evidence-based.

They can also seek assessment by a certified speech-pathologist to help determine which component skills need support and provide that report to their child's school, with a request for additional support.

The most important thing to remember from this research is that it's never too late to support students' reading development.

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