



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Reading for Meaning: Key Findings From the IES Practice Guide

Timothy Shanahan, Ph.D. • November 2010

Topic: Improving K-3 Reading Comprehension

Highlights

- Dr. Timothy Shanahan, chair of the IES panel that developed the practice guide *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, describes the rationale and audience for the guide.
- Shanahan summarizes the major instructional recommendations from the practice guide: teach comprehension strategies using carefully selected text, help students identify and use a text's organizational structure, and establish a motivating environment to engage students with reading and text discussion.

About the Interviewee

Timothy Shanahan, Ph.D., is professor of urban education and director of the Center for Literacy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research focuses on the relationship between reading and writing, reading assessment, and improving reading achievement. Dr. Shanahan served as a member of the National Reading Panel from 1997 to 2000 and as president of the International Reading Association from 2006 to 2007. He is on the advisory boards of the National Institute for Literacy, the National Center for Family Literacy, and

Reach Out and Read, and he was inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame in 2007. Dr. Shanahan is a former director of reading for the Chicago public schools and a former first-grade teacher. He is author or editor of more than 175 publications, including *Teachers Thinking—Teachers Knowing* and *Reading and Writing Together*.

Full Transcript

I'm Timothy Shanahan. I'm professor of urban education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I was the panel chair for the IES practice guide *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress tells us that a very large percentage of fourth graders are struggling in reading. In fact, more than a quarter of our children don't read well enough to do well in school. It's important that in the primary grades, we raise comprehension abilities to a level that allows these children to fully participate academically in their school life from third grade on.

A lot of times, teachers believe in these early grades that the only thing that you can really do about reading comprehension is to teach kids enabling skills, that is, to help them to decode better. Certainly, if you can recognize the words, you're more likely to understand what you're reading. But I think one of the big takeaways from this guide is that, in fact, you can teach children to think more effectively when they're reading in ways that actually improve their ability to remember what they have read or to understand it and to be able to do things with that information.

One of the important recommendations or guidances that is given in this guide is that teachers should be teaching children what we refer to as *comprehension strategies*. What this means is that we want teachers to teach children ways of thinking, really what to do with your mind when you're reading and trying to think about a text.

So for example, it can be really useful if children know how to ask themselves questions and then to try to answer those questions. Children get used to adults doing all of that work for them, and so the idea here is that he has to read some portion of text, and then asks themselves a question about it, tries to answer that question. And, of course, if they can answer it, then they're ready to go on. If they have some trouble answering it, maybe they'll go back and look at the text again and think about it a little bit more. But in doing that, in carrying on that kind of a conversation in their mind, they come away with more understanding of what they've read.

When you're teaching reading comprehension, text is really important—what we have children read. Obviously, we want high-quality text that's interesting and engaging. But it also matters how well it matches up to what you're trying to teach. So it's really important that the teaching match the text and that the text match the teaching.

One of the recommendations of the guide is that teachers should teach students how to think about the organizational structure of the text. Now, it's easy to just think about the ideas and what this character's doing or what the author is telling you about something. But what we're really suggesting is that children learn to sort of step back and look at how the ideas have been organized or sequenced so that they're easier to remember, they're easier to think about. Research shows us, for example, that when children think about stories in a way that represents the plot structure—so thinking about the character and the setting and what the problem is that the character faces and how he or she attempts to solve the problem and what the outcome of that is—when children start to learn that those structures are there, that kind of information should be sought for, they get better at understanding the stories, they get better at remembering the stories.

Learning to comprehend when you read is hard work for children five to eight years old, and so it's important that the teacher sort of keep them interested in it and keep them excited about it. Motivation really does matter. And in fact, when we reviewed the research literature here, we were very pleased to find out the research clearly supported the importance of supporting young children's motivation when they were trying to learn to comprehend.

Some of the kinds of things that teachers can do to motivate young children's reading comprehension are things like helping children to work together. Children love to collaborate on things. They love to work with others. And a lot of times reading is a lonely kind of a process for them; teachers will send you off to read a book by yourself. To get really excited, what kids like to do is maybe have a project around a book that they're going to read together or get involved in a discussion with the book with a friend. Those kinds of things are much more interesting to them.

I was a first-grade teacher, and I can remember vividly just that that clock is always running, and there is so much to accomplish. I think one of the things that it's really important to do in terms of reading comprehension is to really set aside time, to really block out the notion that you are going to have maybe 30 minutes to work on nothing but reading comprehension, and if teachers do that, I think that really helps a lot.

I hope that what teachers come away with is that there is more to reading comprehension than just having kids read. The teacher has a role to play and, in fact, a very important role to play.