



Research-Based Reading

S.P.I.R.E.[®] 3rd EDITION **(SPECIALIZED PROGRAM INDIVIDUALIZING READING EXCELLENCE)**

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Introduction

In recent years, research in the field of literacy education has provided a clearer vision about important issues in the development of reading abilities. Three themes have gained widespread acceptance. First, reading is a strategic process. Fluent readers employ a variety of strategies to understand text (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000) and teachers should provide young students with instruction and practice in using those strategies. Second, reading instruction should be differentiated (Spiro, 2001). That is, all readers approach text in ways that vary according to their own abilities, purposes, and reading situations. Teachers should provide instruction that is varied and that results in students' ability to flexibly switch between different approaches when dealing with text. Third, the reader's ultimate goal is meaning construction, or the comprehension of text in light of prior knowledge and purpose. Teachers should continually focus students' attention on deriving appropriate understandings from text content.

The *S.P.I.R.E.*[®] curriculum addresses all three themes. Strategies for successful reading are introduced through direct teacher-led instruction and practiced by students in monitored reading situations. Second, *S.P.I.R.E.* provides instruction at a variety of different levels, matching it to student needs. Finally, each lesson in *S.P.I.R.E.* draws students back to the core of what reading is all about, employing newly learned strategies in real reading situations in order to comprehend text.

Research-Based Principles of Literacy Development—Best Practices

The search for the one best way to teach reading has been an active pursuit of educational researchers for at least 40 years. In the mid-1960s the United States Office of Education carried out the comprehensive and influential First Grade Studies, the results of which were first published in 1967 and then, because of their importance to the history of the field, were republished in 1997 (Bond & Dykstra, 1997). A wide variety of approaches to teaching early reading was evaluated. One major finding was that early reading curricula that incorporated a structured approach to teaching phonics and word recognition were superior to those that did not (p. 415).

In the ensuing years, researchers in the field of reading and literacy have repeatedly addressed this issue of identifying the best way to teach reading. Their findings have sometimes been obscured by curricular fads that have swept through the schools, by individual teachers or researchers who enthusiastically popularize some particular approaches, and by research reviewers who have highlighted highly subjective, personalized reports in their compilations of research results.

The *S.P.I.R.E.* program, which consists of Pre-Level 1 *Sounds Sensible*[®] through Level 8, is a successful, multisensory reading and language arts program that is research based and time tested. *S.P.I.R.E.*'s systematic, sequential, spiral curriculum is designed for students with language-based learning disabilities as well as at-risk or struggling readers. *S.P.I.R.E.* can be used in inclusion classrooms, specialized settings, and Title I programs.

Based on Orton-Gillingham the approach, the *S.P.I.R.E.* program reinforces all skills recommended by the National Reading Panel, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.



A wide variety of teaching strategies provide differentiated instruction for all learners.

In the confusion, a particular strand of research has consistently pointed to the same major principles of literacy development, results that confirm the findings of the early USOE First Grade Studies and go beyond them. This strand has followed scientific principles of research, basing conclusions on studies that objectively compare various teaching approaches and that subject the results to rigorous statistical interpretations. Three key principles of instruction stand out in this strand of research:

Reading lessons should be

- explicitly taught by the teacher;
- systematically planned and organized; and
- sequenced in a way that moves from simple to complex.

The first major study in this strand was carried out by the late Jeanne Chall, the noted Harvard researcher who popularized the phrase “the great debate”—meaning the ongoing divisive arguments about finding the best method to teach reading—in her book *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967/1996). Her book was based on the increasingly extensive body of research literature in existence up to that time, and she concluded that systematic phonics instruction is important (p. 307).

Some years later, Marilyn Jager Adams, with the sponsorship of the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, undertook the task of updating Chall’s efforts in *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print* (1990). In the intervening years between Chall’s work and Adams’s, the field of reading had changed dramatically under the influence of cognitive psychological research and by holistic approaches to reading instruction known as whole language. Despite the changes, however, Adams’s research survey reached much the same conclusions as had Chall’s (p. 117).

In recent years, the United States federal government’s efforts to bring some closure to this debate over reading methodology has

resulted in two large-scale committee reports on the state of the research. The first report was carried out by the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 2000), a group appointed by the National Academy of Sciences at the request of the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Their work involved examining hundreds of research studies in order to address a variety of issues related to early reading development. Once again, their conclusions supported the principles of earlier research reviews (p. 254).

The National Reading Panel (2000) carried out what has been the most extensive of all the research reviews. This panel was established by the U.S. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Their work has played a key role in the establishment of guidelines for the federal No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Office of Education, 2004) that called for explicit, systematic reading instruction (pp. 2–92).

Studies have continued to support the systematic teaching of literacy. Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, and Perney’s (2003) longitudinal study of reading concluded, “What is needed is careful, systematic teaching, along with adequate review of the concepts taught” (p. 322). Leppanen, Niemi, Aunola, and Nurmi (2004) found that systematic instruction is particularly helpful for children who are low-performing. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development’s extensive Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development found that first grade classrooms that were higher in instructional support yielded higher reading scores (NICHD Early Childhood Care Research Network, 2004).

Most recently, Hiebert and Pearson (2012-2013) analyzed innovations established under the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010). They concluded that the CCSS movement has not reversed our understanding of reading instruction. Instead, the CCSS emphasize early reading and literacy skills by clearly placing them



as foundational. “Students need to learn the underlying, consistent patterns of written words. In plain talk, they need to break the code (p. 48).” Only then can they move on to achieving the more advanced skills at upper grade levels, reading critically and writing effectively.

S.P.I.R.E. addresses the principles of best practices as set forth by the research described above, as well as in the sets of professional standards published by professional organizations such as the International Reading Association and the International Dyslexia Association.

S.P.I.R.E. lesson plans and materials provide engaging tools designed to systematically and successfully teach literacy. *S.P.I.R.E.* lessons are flexible in nature, allowing for differentiated instruction while still providing the depth of learning necessary for children to succeed in learning to read.

S.P.I.R.E. provides a sequenced lesson plan structure that gradually moves students through a developmental process from emergent levels of literacy to early reading to accomplished, fluent reading. An actively involved teacher works with students throughout each lesson, utilizing multisensory instruction, game-like activities, and engaging stories that enhance student attention. Each *S.P.I.R.E.* lesson is designed to begin the process of moving children from the skills of early reading to the beginnings of a lifelong love and commitment to literacy.

Most important, *S.P.I.R.E.* successfully guides students to comprehensive abilities in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, the five major foci of both the National Reading Panel’s report and the newer Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010) Foundational Skills. The Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by a vast majority of states, describe the Foundational Skills, which lay the groundwork for literacy, and are in complete harmony with the contents of *S.P.I.R.E.* “*Demonstrate understanding of...features of print;...spoken words, syllables, and sounds;...grade-level*

phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words; read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.” (CCSS, p. 15-17)

In their recent article titled “CCSS-ELA: Suggestions and Cautions for Implementing the Reading Standards,” Valencia and Wixon say this about adhering to the Foundational Skills: “Here we suggest close attention to the grade-level skills under the headings of Print Concepts, Phonological Awareness, Phonics and Word Recognition, and Fluency. The developmental research base for these foundational skills is well established, and the Grade-Level Standards for these Foundational Skills are helpful in determining a general scope and sequence for instruction.” (Valencia and Wixon, 2013) This is essentially the scope and sequence of Sounds Sensible and *S.P.I.R.E.*

Phonological Awareness

In their book *Struggling Readers: Assessment and Instruction in Grades K–6* (2003), Balajthy and Lipa-Wade define phonological awareness:

Phonological awareness is a general term referring to an awareness (i.e., an ability to focus on and manipulate) the sounds of words and their components....Phonological awareness includes phonemic awareness [the specific ability to manipulate individual phonemes, minimal sound units such as the /v/ in vat or the /f/ in fat], as well as such aspects of language as onsets (the initial letter sound[s] in a word, such as /b/ in book or /spl/ in splash), the sounds of syllables, and rhymes (p. 33).

Teaching of phonological awareness is supported by a broad range of professional educational organizations (International Dyslexia Association, 1997; International Reading Association, 1998), the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Lyon, 1998), and is one of the five major focuses of the federal No Child Left Behind Act as well as a key component of the Common Core State Standards.

***S.P.I.R.E.* addresses the principles of best practices as set forth by the research described above as well as in the sets of professional standards published by professional organizations such as the International Reading Association and the International Dyslexia Association. While some phonological development will occur naturally, explicit training leads to maximum development.**



In each *S.P.I.R.E.* lesson, students are led to use newly learned phonological awareness concepts in higher-level decoding and fluency tasks.

Research over the past 30 years has indicated that phonological awareness is central to the success of the reading process. O'Connor's (2011) survey of phonological awareness research found a strong relationship between those abilities and overall reading ability. McCulley, Katz, and Vaughn (2013) suggested that phonological awareness tasks have been shown to have the highest correlations of any factors with early reading achievement. Brady (2012) provides specifics on how the Common Core State Standards Foundational Skills are based on current research on both phonological awareness and phoneme-grapheme relationships (that is, phonics).

Snow, Burns, and Griffin's (1998) comprehensive survey of the research on this topic indicated that phonological awareness was a strong predictor of future reading achievement, with a correlation of .46 (p. 112). The National Reading Panel (2000) concurred, suggesting that it is one of the two best predictors (along with letter identification) of how well kindergartners would learn to read (pp. 2–11).

The National Reading Panel's survey concluded that training in phonological awareness was effective in improving that skill. Training also improved both general reading and spelling (pp. 2–3, 31–32). The study also concluded that, while some phonological development will occur naturally, explicit training leads to maximum development (pp. 2–33). A major finding pointed to the wide range of types of students with whom phonological awareness training was found to be effective. They included students at both lower and middle socioeconomic status levels, preschoolers, kindergartners, first graders, average and struggling readers, and children learning to read English as a second language (pp. 2–5).

The National Reading Conference's White Paper on Effective Beginning Reading Instruction (Pressley, 2002) concurred in its survey of the research: phonological awareness is best learned when it is mingled with letter identification

and decoding instruction (p. 180). The National Reading Panel (2000, pp. 2–4) found that teaching phonemic awareness with the actual printed letters was more effective than trying to teach it without print. Oudeans (2003) investigated the advantages of integrated instruction in phonological awareness with kindergartners exhibiting low phonological awareness abilities. The experimental group integrated letter identification, decoding, blending, and segmenting during class periods. A control group was taught using a nonintegrated approach in which skills were taught separately. The integrated group showed higher achievement.

Just as researchers have identified writing as a key ingredient in the teaching of letter identification, so have they found that writing also has a facilitating effect on the learning of phonological awareness (Morris, Lomax, Bloodgood, & Perney, 2003, p. 321). The importance of children's writing in developing phonological awareness was highlighted in Craig's 2003 work. This study, selected by the International Reading Association for its 2003 Outstanding Dissertation Award, had teachers use writing with "explicit explanations, demonstrations, and practice of phonological awareness and alphabetic skills" (p. 440). The instruction led to improvement in phonological awareness, as well as in word recognition and comprehension.

Nichols, Rupley, Rickelman, and Algozzine's (2004) research has raised concerns about the phonological development of specific groups of children. They found that Hispanic and low socioeconomic status children were more likely than others to fail to achieve an adequate understanding of phonology during their kindergarten years (p. 77). They also found that Hispanic children may need extra attention to the development of rhyming (p. 78).

Phonological Awareness in *S.P.I.R.E.*

The *S.P.I.R.E.* program provides this explicit instruction in phonological awareness. In fact,



in each *S.P.I.R.E.* lesson students are led to use newly learned phonological awareness concepts in higher-level decoding and fluency tasks.

Pre-Level 1 *Sounds Sensible*® lessons begin with the Listening Activity. Read-Alouds alternate with Same or Different tasks, supplying balance to a program that is largely focused on letter- and word-level learning. The Listening Activity is followed by the day's Rhyming Activity, developed in an hierarchy of increasingly complex skills. First, students are introduced to blending onsets and rimes using a hand motion, which helps make a concrete process of a conceptual abstraction. In later weeks they move on to more sophisticated rhyming tasks: matching rhyming words; generating their own rhymes; categorizing rhymes; and finally using rhymes with segmentation and blending. Segmentation Activities begin with segmenting sentences into their component words, then compound words into their roots, multisyllabic words into their syllables, and finally words into their component phonemes. Students also carry out phonological manipulations with individual phonemes.

The daily Phoneme/Grapheme Activity in *Sounds Sensible* (during Step 4) has to do with the development of students' understanding of phoneme-grapheme relationships. Students learn the letter name (that is, letter identification) and its sound, and they learn to print its lowercase form. They engage in a variety of games to review and reinforce learning. The study of phoneme-grapheme relationships that occurs in this step of the *Sounds Sensible* daily lesson plan is an early phonics task and one that also develops phonological awareness.

Students in *S.P.I.R.E.* Levels 1–8 work on letter identification in the first step of each day's lesson using letter cards. The Phonogram Cards and Key Word Concept Sheets are used at this stage of learning to introduce the letters and their sounds with a printed key word and its illustration to help remember the letter and sound. For example, the word *bed* is used on a Phonogram

Card to illustrate the short e sound. The letter identification skill taught in an introductory lesson is reinforced both later in that same lesson (for example, in Step 4: Decoding and Sentence Reading) and in later lessons.

Phonological awareness rhyming activities are one of the variety of activities used in Step 2 of the *S.P.I.R.E.* lesson plan for Levels 1–8. So are segmentation activities in which students consider a spoken word such as *hat*, and analyze or break it into its component sounds, /h/, /a/, and /t/. Some segmentation activities might focus on onsets and rimes, breaking a one-syllable word into two parts, such as /h/ and /at/ in the word *hat*. Phoneme Segmentation Sheets, available as blackline masters, can be used as graphic devices to help organize the segmentations. Blending activities are another activity option used in Step 2 of the daily *S.P.I.R.E.* lesson. Blending can also be used at a more advanced level, using letter sounds and their printed letter references, in Step 4.

Letter identification and phonological awareness are taught simultaneously in the *S.P.I.R.E.* daily lesson for Levels 1–8. For example, identification of and ability to print the letter e are taught in the same lesson in which its most common sound, the short e sound in the word *hen*, is taught. Children engage in writing individual letters and words composed of those letters at several points during the daily lesson. Independent workbook activities also involve learning through writing. Students engaged in the *S.P.I.R.E.* curriculum regularly use writing as a mode of learning, as it is integrated closely with phonological awareness activities.

Phonics

The importance of phonics instruction is recognized by major organizations in the field of reading education (International Dyslexia Association, 2009; International Reading Association, 2012) and by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Lyon, 1998).

Early success in learning decoding and word identification strategies is crucial to continued success in reading.



The National Reading Panel (NRP) report (2000, pp. 2–91) used a rigorous rating system to identify the research studies of decoding instruction that met the highest standards of educational research. The NRP studied the combined results using a meta-analytic statistical analysis. A major focus of the review was to determine whether approaches that provide explicit instruction—a sequenced course of study that begins simply and gradually grows toward greater complexity with a systematic organization of teaching of phonics—are effective:

The hallmark of systematic phonics programs is that they delineate a planned, sequential set of phonic elements, and they teach these elements, explicitly and systematically (pp. 2–99).

The National Reading Panel’s conclusion was that the studies suggested “systematic phonics instruction makes a bigger contribution to children’s growth in reading than alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction” (pp. 2–92). The studies indicated that children in kindergarten and first grade were capable of being effectively taught using systematic phonics instruction and, in fact, an early introduction to phonics was much better than a later start in the second grade (pp. 2–93). In addition to finding that systematic phonics improved general reading growth, the panel also concluded that systematic phonics instruction improved

- the future reading growth of kindergartners and first graders who are at risk of reading problems;
- the abilities of disabled readers, who were defined by the NRP as having average cognitive abilities but low reading scores;
- spelling among kindergartners and first graders; and
- the reading achievement of children in both lower and middle socioeconomic status groups (pp. 2–95).

Early success in learning decoding and word identification strategies is crucial to continued success in reading (Wagner & Ridgewell, 2009), though there is some disagreement as to just how it functions to improve reading ability. Garcia & Cain (2013), for example, argued that this early success results in a tendency of children to read more, which in turn results in increased reading achievement. Lack of success functions in the opposite direction: poorly performing readers becoming reluctant to read so that they fail to put in the necessary time-on-task in reading. Carver’s *Rauding Theory* (2000), on the other hand, posited that the ability to simply decode and identify words is sufficient in and of itself to lead to success in reading.

Whichever theory one might choose—and both may be right in different ways—the final conclusion is the same: success in what the Common Core State Standards call Foundational Reading Skills is critical (2010). The oddities of the English language spelling system are obvious, but an understanding of phoneme-grapheme patterns is crucial, as most English words are phonetically regular.

However, phonics ability does not occur in a vacuum. It is built on an understanding of and ability to work with the sounds of language and knowledge of letters (National Reading Panel, 2000, pp. 2–96). Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, and Perney’s longitudinal study of kindergartners and first graders (2003) indicated that the development of early reading abilities is largely sequential, with alphabet knowledge first and beginning consonant recognition occurring next with most children early in kindergarten. Then children become able to understand the concept of a printed word and to recognize beginning and ending consonants. They finally move on to advances in word recognition and beginning reading by the end of first grade.

Phonics in *S.P.I.R.E.*

Grapheme-phoneme relations are explicitly taught and reinforced in a variety of ways in the *S.P.I.R.E.* program. In Pre-Level 1 *Sounds Sensible*, the



scope and sequence of phonemes consists of twenty consonant sounds and the short *a* vowel sound. In the fourth part of each day's *Sounds Sensible* lesson plan, students learn the letter name, its sound, and how to print its lowercase form. They also engage in a variety of games to review and reinforce learning. The final step is the Dictation Activity, where students first print letters, then one-syllable words.

In Levels 1–8, a letter and its corresponding sound might be introduced with a picture card portraying a key word that will help children remember the letter-sound relationship. Later in the lesson, students may circle the letter as it occurs in a printed word list and practice blending the sounds of the letters in the words on the list. They may carry out segmentation activities on words that will appear later in the lesson in a reading activity. They may use the words in sample spoken sentences. Later, they may examine the words in printed sentences. A key objective, then, is to move from isolated study of the letter and its corresponding sound to its use in richer contexts.

Decoding and word identification are taught in a variety of ways in Levels 1–8 to help meet the specific learning needs of the variety of students in any given classroom. Students engage in listening activities. They see words and word elements in print on flashcards, in word search activities, in sentences, and in stories. They trace letter shapes on their hands, then write letters using paper and pencil. They repeat word identification elements aloud and they manipulate letter and word cards. In one *S.P.I.R.E.* activity, for example, students first use letter cards to form the word *vest*. They then are asked to exchange one card in order to make the word *rest*, then *rust*, then *must*, and so forth.

Levels 1–8 include blackline master sheets of letters to be used in creating the manipulatives as well as a set of magnetic letters and board for student use. Word-building activities take place in Step 3 of the daily *S.P.I.R.E.* lesson.

Additional instructional aids include Key Word Concept Sheets (and smaller versions distributed to students called Key Word Cards), which are used to introduce phonograms. Each has the phonogram key word and a mnemonic illustration. Phonograms are reinforced throughout the daily lesson. In Step 5, for example, prereading word work may focus student attention on phonograms appearing in the upcoming reading activity.

Levels 1–8 also utilize spelling activities to reinforce phonological awareness and decoding abilities. In Step 8, for example, the Prespelling/Phonological Awareness step of the *S.P.I.R.E.* daily lesson, students may study the spelling of a word and relate it to its sounds. Step 9, the Spelling step, calls for explicit instruction in spelling words that include the concept being studied.

Fluency and Automaticity

Samuels (2012) defines fluency as “the ability to decode and comprehend text at the same time” with “accuracy of word recognition, speed of reading, and the ability to read orally with expression” (p. 4). Fluency is often assessed with measurements of oral reading speed in words per minute, with word identification accuracy, and by evaluations of oral reading expression. It is widely recognized as a key objective of reading instruction (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). The importance of children developing into fluent readers goes well beyond issues of oral reading performance. Fluent reading and effective comprehension go hand in hand (Herbers, et al., 2012). In addition, Hitchcock, Prater, and Dowrick (2004) have reported that improvement in the fluency of learning disabled first-grade students as a result of intervention instruction was accompanied by positive teacher and parent ratings about children’s confidence, attention, effort, and reading enjoyment.

Key research in the study of reading fluency has been carried out over a period of decades

The importance of children developing into fluent readers goes well beyond issues of oral reading performance. A key ingredient of the instructional scaffolding *S.P.I.R.E.* provides is the use of decodable text.



by S. Jay Samuels (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Samuels, 2002, 2012), whose theory of automaticity is closely associated with reading fluency. Automaticity is the ability to recognize words instantly and without significant cognitive effort, thus freeing up the reader to devote cognitive resources to the higher levels of comprehension and thinking. Fluent reading requires this ability to decode words with automaticity (Herbers, et al., 2012; Garcia & Cain, 2014). Jenkins, et al. (2003), and Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, and Linan-Thompson, (2011), for example, found that poor word identification skills are associated with poor reading fluency.

Samuels' research on automaticity (2002) suggests that young readers proceed through three stages of word recognition development on their way to fluency and comprehension: non-accurate; accurate but not automatic; accurate and automatic. Samuels' third stage is what other researchers have called the Fluency Stage. At the culmination of this stage, students "can read orally with accuracy, speed, and normal expression, as if they were speaking rather than reading from text. When reading from a text, they can decode and comprehend simultaneously" (Samuels, 2002, p. 172).

Failure to achieve fluency in moving through Samuels' first two stages is called dysfluency. There are four key causes of dysfluency. Students, especially those who are struggling with reading, may be forced to move too quickly through the reading curriculum, thus spending an inordinate amount of time trying to read text at their frustration levels. Some approaches to reading may present a limited array of word identification strategies instead of emphasizing flexibility. There may be no effort to help students apply the strategies they have learned in actual reading situations. Finally, and very importantly, some classrooms and homes may not encourage reading.

Fluent reading cannot occur in a vacuum. Children acquire fluency on the basis of a firm foundation of word recognition abilities.

Schwanenflugel, et al. (2004) investigated the aspect of fluency called prosodic reading, the ability to read with expression. The study's results found that children with better developed decoding abilities demonstrated superior fluency in their reading.

Children also benefit from the guided transfer of their word recognition abilities to real reading situations. The National Reading Panel (2000), in its recommendations about word recognition instruction, noted that instruction in word recognition "is a means to an end"—that it is essential to ensure that children "know how to apply this knowledge in their reading and writing" (pp. 2–96). The panel noted that reading programs must not only focus on word recognition but must provide children opportunities to put their word recognition abilities to use in real reading:

Educators must keep the end in mind and ensure that children understand the purpose of learning letter-sounds and are able to apply their skills in their daily reading and writing activities (pp. 2–96).

Fluency and Automaticity in S.P.I.R.E.

S.P.I.R.E. incorporates fluency practice with the study of decoding. Rather than waiting until a time at which all students have mastered decoding to introduce practice in fluency, *S.P.I.R.E.* provides daily fluency activities that are integrated so as to allow the students successful experiences in fluent reading.

The *S.P.I.R.E.* curriculum addresses the issue of fluency most directly in the 15 minutes per day of Step 6: Reading. In this part of the lesson, students may engage in repeated reading of sentences and, during reinforcing lessons, the reading of a story. Students are asked to read a text silently and then read it aloud several times as they learn to produce it accurately and with good expression and speed. In their overview of



research, Rasinski, et al. (2011) found that such repeated readings are key to the development of fluency.

Each of the levels 1–6 of *S.P.I.R.E.* includes twenty fully illustrated Decodable Readers with word counts on the back cover, allowing for easy assessment of fluency while promoting enjoyment of the reading process.

Practice is key to reading fluently, and the *S.P.I.R.E.* Decodable Readers provide an excellent way to practice. Children can read them in school and can take them home to practice reading with their families. Valencia and Wixson state that “teaching Foundational Skills should always include having children read continuous text...” The Decodable Readers provide an ideal way for children to read text at which they can be successful. (Valencia and Wixson, 2013)

The *S.P.I.R.E.* Decodable Readers are now available in an eBook format, as well, providing both convenience and motivation. The *S.P.I.R.E.* eBooks can be particularly motivating for struggling readers, and the device tools allow them to mark text that is confusing, take notes, and ask questions for later discussion.

Part of the success of any fluency development program is the ability to provide sufficient instructional scaffolding to ensure student success. A key ingredient of the instructional scaffolding *S.P.I.R.E.* provides is the use of decodable text. Such text ensures that students are not reading at their frustration level, since the phonic elements and words used have been previously taught. If any words may present difficulty for students, they are taught as part of a Prereading activity.

Decodable text is of particular use with children at the developmental levels addressed by the *S.P.I.R.E.* curriculum, having “learned enough letter-sound correspondences to begin to sound out words, but not enough to handle the whole range of English patterns presented in uncontrolled text” (Mesmer, 2001, p. 136). The National Reading Panel’s (2000) survey of the literature noted that many

of the most effective early reading programs used decodable text (pp. 97–98).

Vocabulary and Comprehension Development

Vocabulary knowledge is essential if students are to make meaning from the printed page; numerous studies reveal that word knowledge and comprehension are inextricably linked. Even students who are skilled in phonics will read with diminished comprehension after third grade unless they are exposed to a wide range of vocabulary words (Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin, 1990). Students benefit from discussing new vocabulary words before they encounter them in text and from repeated exposure to new words in a variety of contexts (McKeown & Beck, 2011).

Successful comprehension is not a stand-alone process, but rather the end result of a constructive process that integrates all other aspects of reading ability. Comprehension is described by literacy expert Durkin (1993) as “the essence of reading.”

The National Reading Panel (2000) strongly advocates purposeful, goal-centered reading in multiple genres and the express, formal teaching of comprehension strategies. Prereading strategies such as predicting and activation of prior knowledge schemas are also recommended by the NRP. Vacca and Vacca, and Mraz (2010) suggest that the prereading component of a lesson have three purposes: to provide students with purpose and direction, to support them with necessary prior knowledge, and to motivate them to read.

As Pressley has noted, “A good reader does not just dive into a text, proceeding from beginning to end” (2002b, p. 294). Instead, students should be taught to be discerning, active readers. They use their experience and knowledge of the world, their knowledge of vocabulary and language structure, and their knowledge of reading strategies. They should be taught to monitor their understanding of a text.

The National Reading Panel (2000) strongly advocates purposeful, goal-centered reading in multiple genres and the express, formal teaching of comprehension strategies. The *S.P.I.R.E.* curriculum is designed to lead students to apply their decoding ability in comprehending reading situations.



Discussion of the story is guided by teacher questions, one of the comprehension development strategies that is solidly supported by research (National Reading Panel, 2002). Teacher questions do not simply focus on the literal meanings in the story, but help children become more personally involved in the reading by asking higher-level questions, as highlighted by the Common Core State Standards (2010).

Vocabulary and Comprehension Development in *S.P.I.R.E.*

The *S.P.I.R.E.* curriculum is designed to lead students to apply their decoding ability in comprehending reading situations. Three major components of the daily lesson plan help students use their word-level learning for the purpose of comprehension: Step 4 (Decoding and Sentence Reading), Step 5 (Prereading), and Step 6 (Reading). Step 4, the Decoding and Sentence Reading step, allows students to use their newly learned decoding and word identification strategies in actual reading. As new decoding strategies are taught, students are heavily scaffolded to insure success in their reading. Reading is provided in individual sentences that help students apply the new strategy and also reinforce previously learned strategies.

The Prereading component (Step 5) is a crucial preparatory step for successful reading. *S.P.I.R.E.* teachers prepare students in varying ways depending on the purpose of the lesson. They may review a decoding principle so that it can be applied in an automatic way during reading. As each sequence of lessons progresses, this Prereading step grows in length to provide students with sufficient support. In *S.P.I.R.E.*, when the task in Step 6 is to read a story, teachers provide necessary prior knowledge in Step 5 to support that reading, including needed vocabulary terms. They also provide motivation to read and specific directions for reading. An important component of the Prereading step is the connection of the reading topic to the students' own lives—for example, before a story

about a baseball game, the teacher will ask students to share their own experiences with baseball, helping them see the relevance of the story to their lives.

There has been some controversy around the Common Core's perceived initial stipulation that students should just jump into a text without any prereading guidance. In response to the controversy, the authors clarified their meaning. One of the concerns was that too much prereading guidance is sometimes given at the expense of students' enjoyment of the story itself. "Preparing students to read a text is perfectly reasonable, and it's compatible with the Common Core State Standards. But such preparation should be brief and should focus on providing students with the tools they need to make sense of the text on their own. Some texts may require providing students with a context to minimize interpretive problems; with other texts, it might make more sense to *not* provide background but to carefully observe as students confront the information, querying them about the potentially confusing stuff and adding any necessary explanation before a second reading" (Shanahan, 2012/2013). The *S.P.I.R.E.* Decodables are ideal for this level of prereading guidance.

Step 6, the Reading step, is the major comprehension development step in *S.P.I.R.E.* At the beginning of an instructional sequence of lessons, when decoding strategies are introduced, reading is heavily scaffolded and is limited to individual sentences. Sentences may be read several times. This makes use of the power of repeated readings for development of fluency and comprehension. Choral reading provides each student the opportunity to practice the sentence reading aloud. In choral reading, both the teacher and the more advanced students function as models of fluent reading. Because the Readers are not illustrated, students also utilize visualization strategies to extend their reading comprehension skills. They can then move on to the *illustrated* Decodable Readers in print



or ebook format, to compare and contrast the pictures in their own minds with an illustrator's depiction of events in the story.

As each sequence of lessons progresses and student word-level learning becomes more automatic, the reading requirement in Step 6 becomes more sophisticated. Students are prepared to read the story in the Prereading step, then actually carry out a teacher-guided reading of a story from the Reader. They continue to be scaffolded by the use of controlled text that provides them with greater potential for successful word identification, and by use of repeated readings. Discussion of the story is guided by teacher questions that do not simply focus on the literal meanings in the story, but help children become more personally involved in the reading by asking higher-level questions. A comprehension activity follows, using a specific comprehension skill such as cause and effect, sequencing, or main idea and details. Teachers give a brief explanation of the comprehension skill and the help students find examples from the story to complete a graphic organizer.

Response to Intervention (RTI), Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS), and Assessment

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a system for identifying struggling students and a model of instruction that provides support, instruction, and assessment for them. It includes early intervention to prevent reading failure. RTI is a problem-solving approach that utilizes performance data to inform decisions for instruction.

Instead of waiting for students to fail on high-stakes tests before providing services, IDEA (2004) encourages the use of RTI and mandates that schools provide a more intensive level of instruction when a student's response to research-based general classroom instruction is unsatisfactory. As such, RTI is a more sensible plan than past policies for providing prompt help for struggling learners and special education students (Gersten and Dimino, 2006).

RTI is often conceptualized as a three-tier model (Fuchs, Fuchs & Vaughn, 2008; Shores & Bender, 2007).

- Tier 1 students receive core instruction, usually provided to the whole class.
- Tier 2 students set targeted intervention. Tier 2 instruction is generally supplemental to Tier 1 classroom instruction and is provided in small groups, often within the classroom or a resource room. According to Vaughn and Roberts (2007), as many as 20 to 30 percent of students will require supplemental Tier 2 instruction to prevent reading difficulties.
- Tier 3 students need intensive intervention. These interventions involve instruction that is often in a one-on-one instructional situation in a resource room setting. Bender and Shores (2007) estimate that 5 to 6 percent of students will need this more intensive Tier 3 instruction.

It is common to hear the terms RTI and MTSS used interchangeably. However, the newer MTSS framework, adopted by more than 40 states, is a more comprehensive model, aiming to meet both the academic and behavioral needs of *all* students by providing a continuum of multiple supports. RTI, with its tiered approach to instruction and intervention, where Tier 1 is instruction for all students, is a part of the larger MTSS. This puts *S.P.I.R.E.* squarely in place as part of both initiatives (NCLD, 2012).

Reading assessment allows us to evaluate and understand the strengths and needs of each student. Recent advances in understanding of educational process have highlighted the importance of assessment to the achievement of students (Gersten et al., 2008). Part of this new understanding involves the recognition that assessment is only useful if it is used to plan instruction and to revise those plans when the need arises.

It is the action around assessment—the discussion, meetings, revisions, arguments,



and opportunities to continually create new directions for teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment—that ultimately have consequences. The ‘things’ of assessment are essentially useful as dynamic supports for reflection and action, rather than as static products with value in and of themselves (Darling-Hammond, Aneess, & Falk, 1995, p. 18).

Assessment can be divided into informal and formal assessments to show progress within a program and outside of a program. Informal assessments take place during or at the conclusion of instruction, while formal assessments take place at set, consistent times outside of instruction. Within a program, there are also formative and summative assessments. Formative assessment includes progress monitoring, and assures that the instruction meets the student’s needs. Summative assessment refers to data gathered at the end of a unit, level, or year to determine the effectiveness of instruction. General outcome measures outside of a program, such as *Path Driver for Reading (PDR)*, or Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), show how students perform at various grade-level benchmarks during the year, usually in the fall, winter, and spring.

Since assessment plays such an important role in teaching and learning, educators have come to recognize several important ways to implement effective assessment systems. An important aspect of an effective assessment system is the provision of multiple measures, a diverse set of assessments designed to provide comprehensive feedback as called for, for example, by the IDEA (2004) guidelines to “use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental, and academic information” (614, b, 2) for both RTI placement (Gersten, et al., 2008) and ongoing instructional feedback (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004, p. 19).

RTI, Differentiation, Assessment, and S.P.I.R.E.

While *S.P.I.R.E.* is most appropriate for struggling readers in Tiers 2 and 3, the program has been used in a variety of settings, whether classroom, small group, or one-on-one. The depth, nature, and intensity of skill reinforcement available in *S.P.I.R.E.* is unique in educational publishing and provides the resources needed to differentiate instruction. For example, after the short a Introductory Lesson in Reader 1, five additional Reinforcing Lessons are provided, each with a reading passage and extensive practice. A teacher can differentiate instruction by choosing the number of Reinforcing Lessons to use based on students’ individual needs. For example, Tier 2 students may need only the Introductory Lesson and one review with a Reinforcing Lesson, while Tier 3 students may need two or more Reinforcing Lessons. School districts facing serious achievement challenges may use *S.P.I.R.E.* to teach entire classes of Tier 1 students. Using *S.P.I.R.E.* with small groups of struggling readers would be considered Tier 2, and Tier 3 would include students who need intensive one-on-one instruction with *S.P.I.R.E.*

The Common Core State Standards state that instruction should be differentiated. Referring to the Foundational Skills, the CCSS state, “...good readers will need much less practice with these concepts than struggling readers will. The point is to teach students what they need to learn and not what they already know...” (CCSS, p. 15)

- Frequent progress monitoring ensures that goals and expectations are clear so that educators can adapt instruction as needed. Most of the assessments in *S.P.I.R.E.* are formative—to inform and revise instruction. Only the Post-Level Assessment is summative. All of the assessments provide the opportunities for data collection to support progress monitoring and evaluating instruction.
- The Initial Placement Assessment (IPA) assesses a student’s knowledge of phonemes and phonics.



This formal formative measure helps place a student in the appropriate *S.P.I.R.E.* level.

- Decoding Assessment Form A is used as a formal formative measure to confirm the correct placement, as well as a pre-test to assess a student's knowledge of a concept for the teacher to confirm the number of Reinforcing Lessons needed to ensure mastery. There is one Form A for each concept, and it includes twenty concept words and sentences that contain ten concept words.
- Quick Checks are informal formative assessments to measure students' understanding on a daily basis as a "ticket out the door" (Shores & Chester, 2009) to see how well students are learning the concept after each lesson. There is one Quick Check per lesson, and it is made up of decodable and recently-learned sight words in four concept words, two phrases, and two sentences.
- Decoding Assessment Form B is administered as a post-test to measure 80% mastery of the concept. Like Decoding Assessment Form A, there are twenty concept words and sentences that contain ten words using the concept. The two scores from Form A and Form B can be weighed against each other as a before-and-after snapshot.
- The Post-Level Assessment is a formal, summative assessment administered upon each student's completion of each level. It includes single-word reading, sentence reading, a reading passage, and five short-answer questions. If a student does not show mastery, the level's concepts need to be reviewed further, and the teacher can work with the student on the concepts that need additional reinforcement.

Conclusion

The past 40 years have seen researchers in the field of reading and literacy provide a rich array of studies that can guide teachers in their choice of curricula. The *S.P.I.R.E.* curriculum is based on the most solid findings of these research studies in its direct, systematic, and sequential approach to guiding children in literacy acquisition. Students are led to proficiency in the foundations of reading through instruction in letter identification and phonological awareness. At the same time, they are guided to apply their learnings to the higher-level learnings involved in word identification and the end goals of fluency and comprehension.

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