

Kids can still overcome reading difficulties by Grade 3 but earlier intervention is better, new research shows

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A University of Alberta education researcher who achieved dramatic results with early assessment and intervention to help Grade 1 and 2

students with reading difficulties says there's still a chance to help these students in Grade 3.

George Georgiou, a professor in the Department of Educational Psychology, along with his collaborators Rauno Parrila at Macquarie University and Robert Savage from the University College of London, started working with 290 Grade 1 students from 11 Edmonton public schools in 2015-16.

The group trained undergraduate and graduate students to assess students' reading abilities and provide appropriate interventions, such as intensive phonics and matching of the newly learned correspondences with words in children's storybooks, to help them improve their reading.

By doing so, Georgiou and his team reduced the number of students who continued to struggle in reading to just seven.

Georgiou's team kept working with the seven students through Grade 3, while providing assessment and interventions to a new cohort of 25 Grade 3 students with poor reading skills who had not previously received an intervention.

The interventions they delivered to the Grade 3 students used evidence-based practices that focus on phonics and exploring the spelling and structure of words, as they did for the Grade 1 and 2 school children. The interventions were given one-on-one with each child during school hours, in three 30-minute sessions a week for 10 weeks.

By the end of Grade 3, four of the original seven students, and 18 of the 32 students in total, were reading at grade level. Of the 16 students included in a control group that didn't receive any interventions, only four showed improvement.

"These numbers tell us that we have much better chances to resolve the reading problems of children if we act as early as possible, ideally in Grade 1," Georgiou said. "By Grade 3, we can still be successful, but the chances of success go down exponentially. This is very much in line with earlier research findings showing that 75 per cent of the children who are diagnosed as poor readers after Grade 3 never [read](#) within grade level, even if they receive intensive intervention."

This model of early assessment and targeted intervention is now being used in more than 20 schools in the Edmonton Public School Board, as well as schools in the Black Gold Region and the Fort Vermilion school division. Georgiou said he has provided assessment tools and intervention training to more than 250 teachers in the last three years, with another 40 new teachers in line to receive training this year.

"I think it's clear what the schools need to do to see their literacy scores improve," he said. "We're providing a model which dictates when to assess the children, what reading processes to assess them on, how to screen for reading difficulties and what strategies to use to eliminate reading difficulties in the first three years of school."

Georgiou said his goal is to create internal capacity within each [school](#).

"We want specialized teachers who are well aware of best practices for teaching reading in [grades](#) 1 and 2 to provide these interventions in their schools to help children who may respond well to [intervention](#) if it arrives on time and includes the right elements," he added.

Georgiou published the results of his and his colleagues' research with Grade 1 schoolchildren in *Scientific Studies of Reading* earlier this year. A second paper focused on results with the Grade 2 students is currently under review.

More information: Robert Savage et al. Preventative Reading Interventions Teaching Direct Mapping of Graphemes in Texts and Set-for-Variability Aid At-Risk Learners, *Scientific Studies of Reading* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/10888438.2018.1427753](https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2018.1427753)

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