

A R T I C L E

# High-Quality Instructional Materials Aren't Enough: Teachers Need Literacy Professional Learning

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I once heard the phrase, “Programs don’t teach reading—teachers do.” It’s true. I’ve consulted with schools that have purchased or developed high-quality literacy instruction programs, but without teachers who possess sufficient knowledge of effective, evidence-based instruction, those programs are unlikely to be effective. Likewise, I have seen situations where teachers have deep knowledge of effective literacy instruction, but the lack of high-quality materials presents significant challenges. These teachers often must spend an inordinate amount of time creating materials for teaching foundational skills (e.g., letter–sound cards, phonics word lists, decodable texts) and locating high-quality texts needed to build students’ academic vocabulary and syntactic awareness; to teach and practice comprehension strategies and close-reading skills; and to teach writing skills that support learning.

In this post, I make the case that effective literacy instruction (**ELI**)—the kind that leads to strong literacy achievement—requires both high-quality instructional materials (**HQIM**) and high-quality professional learning (**HQPL**). I also introduce to the literacy education community a formula that captures this relationship:

$$\mathbf{HQIM + HQPL = ELI}$$

**High-Quality Instructional Materials + High-Quality Professional Learning = Effective Literacy Instruction**

## WHAT IS HQIM?

High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) are comprehensive curriculum programs and aligned resources intentionally designed to support effective teaching and learning. These materials may include scope-and-sequence documents, lesson plans, student texts, text-centered writing tasks, assessments, and teacher guidance. In literacy, such materials reflect decades of research summarized in the science of reading and demonstrate the following characteristics

- Aligned to academic standards, such as English Language Arts (ELA) standards
- Coherence and intentional sequencing, ensuring that knowledge and skills build logically over time
- Inclusion of complex text and academic language that builds knowledge and vocabulary, grounding reading, writing, and speaking in

evidence from text

- Systematic and explicit instruction in foundational skills
- Opportunities for meaningful practice and application
- An evidence-based approach to reading, writing, and language development
- Integration of reading, writing, speaking and listening, supporting students in understanding and communicating ideas.
- Usability and educative value for teachers, with clear routines, models, and scaffolds
- Accessibility of grade-level learning, achieved through embedded scaffolds and formative checks for diverse learners, including multilingual learners and students with disabilities

## Why High-Quality Materials Matter for Reading and Writing Development

HQIM improve literacy outcomes because they reduce guesswork and increase the likelihood that daily instruction aligns with what research shows students need. Well-designed materials help ensure students receive the right instruction, in the right order, with sufficient practice and feedback.

The benefits of literacy HQIM include:

- **Stronger and more equitable outcomes:** Students are more likely to receive grade-level, evidence-based instruction regardless of classroom or school.
- **Instructional coherence:** Skills and knowledge build across grades instead of being fragmented.
- **Improved teacher effectiveness:** Teachers spend less time creating materials and more time preparing to teach and responding to student learning using materials strategically.
- **Better use of assessment data:** HQIM often include aligned diagnostics and formative assessments.
- **Improved collaboration:** Shared materials support professional learning communities and common expectations, resulting in instructional consistency across classrooms.

# Where and How Literacy HQIM are Used Across K-12

The use of literacy HQIM in universal, core instruction shows up differently across grade bands because what students need changes over time.

**Grades K-2:** Students learn to read and write during a daily literacy block. HQIM support explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics; practice with decodable texts; fluency development; integrated spelling and handwriting; read-alouds to build vocabulary, comprehension and oral language; and modeled and guided writing at the sentence and paragraph level.

**Grades 3-5:** Students transition to reading to learn and develop writing stamina during ELA block as well as in subject areas. HQIM support continued growth in advanced word study and fluency, with application to grade-level text. There is an increased focus on complex texts, text structures, and comprehension strategies; vocabulary and knowledge building; text-based discussion and response writing; and writing tasks emphasizing planning, evidence use, and revision.

**Grades 6-8:** Instruction shifts toward content and disciplinary literacy, taught across all subjects. HQIM support close reading of complex texts; explicit instruction in argument, analysis, and research; academic vocabulary and complex syntax; more advanced writing skills and writing from sources; and targeted intervention for students needing decoding or fluency support.

**Grades 9-12:** Content and disciplinary literacy becomes central, taught across all subjects. HQIM support advanced vocabulary development; close reading and analysis of texts with increasing independence; advanced writing tasks; and continued targeted intervention for students who struggle with reading and writing.

Middle and high school grades differ from elementary grades as classrooms shift from models in which students have one or two teachers to subject-based instruction taught by multiple teachers. In elementary grades, high-quality instructional programs are often implemented during a designated literacy block. In the upper grades, high-quality instructional

materials support discipline-specific curricula that are implemented and taught by multiple teachers.

## **Materials Alone Do Not Improve Literacy Outcomes**

Adopting HQIM does not guarantee students will receive evidence-based instruction that improves literacy achievement. Poor implementation can negate the benefits of strong materials. HQIM work best when educators understand why design choices matter and how to deliver them effectively. Implementation may be hindered by limited teacher knowledge of evidence-based literacy instruction, including how to support diverse learners. Teachers who lack adequate pre-service or in-service training may over-modify or underuse materials or rely on practices misaligned with research.

Teachers need professional learning that builds understanding of the science of reading and evidence-based, grade-appropriate instructional practices. This includes knowledge of how reading and writing develop, explicit and structured language instruction, appropriate text selection, data-informed intervention, and how to adapt materials without undermining core design. Without this knowledge, educators may misuse HQIM, skip critical steps, mis-sequence instruction, or employ ineffective practices.

## **What is High-Quality Professional Learning (HQPL)?**

Teachers need professional learning that effectively translates science-of-reading research into classroom practice. This includes professional development that builds general knowledge of research-based, effective literacy instruction, as well as guidance on implementing high-quality instructional programs. Key areas of focus include:

- Lesson delivery
- Selection of texts used across subject areas, including analysis of qualitative text complexity
- Integration of reading and writing instruction
- Use of literacy assessment

- Support for students with literacy difficulties

Effective professional learning also includes ongoing coaching, collaborative planning time, and feedback, as well as professional development for administrators. Research indicates that high-quality professional development:

- Is sustained and intensive
- Incorporates active learning
- Emphasizes subject-specific instructional practices over content knowledge
- Is implemented school-wide
- Includes school-based coaching
- Provides opportunities for collaboration and peer observation
- Uses models of effective practice
- Offers time for feedback and reflection

(Wei et al., 2009; Gulamjusein, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2023)

## A Lack of Literacy Professional Learning

Unfortunately, many teachers across grade levels are not trained to deliver evidence-based reading and writing instruction. When pre-service preparation does not build deep, usable knowledge, novice teachers often enter classrooms without essential tools. Once in the classroom, many teachers do not have access to the type of high-quality literacy professional learning described above.

### **Elementary Reading**

Many elementary teacher candidates complete limited coursework on how written language works and how to teach reading using research-based practices. Ellis et al. (2023, p. 4) note:

*“Unfortunately, too many teachers are not trained in scientifically based reading instruction during their teacher preparation programs, so they unknowingly enter the classroom well intentioned but inadequately prepared to teach kids to read. In fact, a recent survey conducted by Education Week found most elementary special education and K-2 teachers (72%) say they use literacy instructional methods that incorporate practices debunked by cognitive scientists decades ago.”*

In 2023, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) reviewed approximately 700 elementary teacher preparation programs to determine if those programs align with empirical evidence on effective reading instruction (Ellis et al., 2023). The review found that 40% of undergraduate programs continue to teach practices contrary to long-standing research, such as three-cueing systems, running records, leveled text, and miscue analysis. These approaches are ineffective and consume time that would be better spent on evidence-based instruction.

Additional findings included the following (Ellis et al., 2023):

- Only 25% of undergraduate programs adequately address all five core components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Nearly 40% of graduate programs address none of the five components, compared to 19% of undergraduate programs.
- Nearly one-third of programs provide no practice opportunities connected to the core components of reading, despite widespread agreement among practitioners and researchers on the importance of practice.

## **Writing**

The same pattern appears in writing instruction. Writing expert and researcher Steve Graham noted in a 2019 interview that teachers often lack preparation to teach writing effectively (Liu, 2019). Many report insufficient training during college and inadequate in-service support, and indicate they do not have the skills and knowledge they need to be effective writing teachers.

## **Secondary Reading and Writing**

Lack of literacy-focused professional learning is especially pronounced for secondary educators, for whom literacy competes with other professional learning priorities. The Carnegie Council (2010, p. 18) identified teacher preparation and professional development as central to adolescent literacy reform:

*“Determining what secondary school teachers need to know, ensuring they learn it, and supporting them in implementing that knowledge in classrooms is basic to achieving our goal of literacy for all. . . . Good teachers of adolescent students not only understand their own content-*

areas deeply, they also understand the specific literacy challenges created by the texts they assign. Such teachers are prepared to address the content learning needs of struggling readers as well as on-grade level readers in their classes.”

## Summary: The Bottom Line

I began by introducing the following formula and now propose that, as a community of educators, we collectively embrace the idea that both sides of this equation are essential to increasing the likelihood of achieving strong literacy outcomes:

$$\text{HQIM} + \text{HQPL} = \text{ELI}$$

**High-Quality Instructional Materials + High-Quality Professional Learning = Effective Literacy Instruction**

High-quality, evidence-based instructional materials support literacy development from kindergarten through high school. They improve equity, coherence, and instructional quality, but only when paired with robust professional learning at both the pre-service and in-service levels. This professional learning equips teachers to understand the science of reading, deliver evidence-based instruction, use data effectively, support diverse learners, and implement high-quality instructional materials intentionally to meet the needs of all students.

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