



Getting it Right from the Start

An intervention to improve oral language and reading outcomes in the early years of school.

Importance of educational attainment and early inequities

Educational attainment is recognised as the most influential social determinant of life-long physical and mental health, and school engagement predicts later social, emotional, and economic wellbeing. However, even at the start of primary school there are significant inequities in health and development. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), a nationwide measure of early childhood development completed by teachers about all children at school-entry, shows significant socioeconomic status (SES)-based disparities across all key areas of early childhood development (domains). Children in areas of greatest SES disadvantage have the highest rates of developmental vulnerability on the language and cognitive domains (12.4%) compared to those in the most advantaged (3%) areas. These recognised inequities are also reflected in later schooling and do not resolve over time.

Developmental pathways in language and reading and the early years of school

Oral language development in the early years of school is strongly linked to a broad range of outcomes including reading competence, social skills, friendships, prosocial problem solving and conflict resolution skills, self-esteem, school attachment and subsequently mental health. In the early years of school, oral language competence underpins the emergence of reading skills, including the ability to decode and understand text, as well as writing and spelling. These skills then become the main mechanism through which learning occurs in late primary and secondary school.

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Children who do not master the basics of reading in the early years of school face long-term academic challenges, are often ambivalent towards school and may face a range of behavioural, social, vocational, and social-emotional difficulties into adolescence and adulthood. Addressing these student needs becomes more challenging and expensive the further children progress through school.





In contrast, research has shown the feasibility of establishing the foundations of reading in the early primary school years to place children on more positive developmental trajectories.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

RTI is a multi-tiered conceptual framework for considering the academic and behavioural needs of children in mainstream classrooms. The RTI model provides universal access to high quality classroom instruction in language and reading for all students, while providing intensive intervention for those students identified as 'at-risk' (i.e. intensity is proportional to the needs of individual students). RTI supports student learning through early identification of students with additional learning needs and early intervention.

In a RTI model:

- Tier 1 refers to universal whole of population/classroom delivery, supporting teachers to provide high-quality evidence-based instruction in oral language and reading for all students.
- Tier 2 refers to interventions targeting specific needs identified within a subgroup of students (e.g. students identified as at-risk for language and/or reading learning difficulties). Interventions are more intensively focused, allowing more time and specialised instruction for students' skill levels. Tier 2 interventions are expected to accelerate learning and minimise the impact of difficulties over time.
- Tier 3 refers to more intensive and specialised assessment and intervention for individual students (ideally no more than 5%) based on the severity of their difficulties.

Central to the RTI model is ongoing universal screening, assessment, and progress monitoring, that generates data to inform instructional practice at each of these tiers but also student's placement in, and movement across, the tiers.

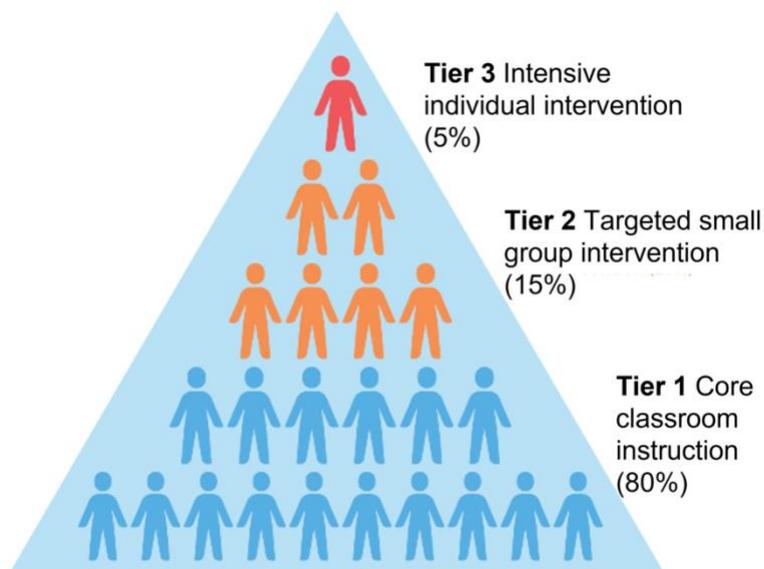


Figure 1. Response to Intervention model.



Rationale for the study

Focused efforts to improve oral language skills in the early years of school should lead to gains in reading, social and emotional wellbeing, and academic trajectories, even when taking into account the considerable impact of SES on language. We expect that we can achieve this through changes to the delivery of education in these critical years through sound evidence-based interventions (e.g. high quality instruction) delivered through sustainable and scalable school-based systems. Whilst our previous studies have shown promising results, more investigation is required to better understand the enablers and barriers to sustainable implementation of interventions.

Project overview and objective

This project's overall aim is to evaluate whether a specifically-designed RTI approach for oral language and reading instruction targeted to the early years of school (Foundation and Grade 1) can improve children's language and reading when compared with usual teaching practice.

Our focus will be testing the processes and impact of implementation of an intervention system in the 'real world'. The mixed methods research design will innovatively combine (1) a staged rollout to determine impact, (2) a detailed implementation methodology to ensure that the interventions are implemented and sustained within a school system over time, and (3) qualitative data to investigate the barriers and facilitators to success. The project will focus on improving equity by targeting low language performing schools in partnership with Victorian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) and Melbourne Archdioceses Catholic Schools (MACS) to maximise the potential of sustainability.

Summary of progress to date

Preparation phase

A systematic review was completed that identifies evidence-based Tier 2 interventions for improving oral language and reading outcomes for students in the early years of school. This work is a valuable resource for schools to use when considering Tier 2 interventions. This work was funded by the Victorian Government DET and MACS and published (doi: [10.1080/19404158.2021.2011754](https://doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2021.2011754)).

Preliminary step

A preliminary step was conducted in 2021 in two schools. This work identified potential barriers and enablers to implementation and informed important refinements to the main phase protocol to enable success. The manuscript has been submitted to the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties.

Main phase

16 schools are involved in the main phase. Schools were randomly allocated into Cohort 1 (implementation commencement 2022) or Cohort 2 (implementation commencement 2023). As part of the project, schools aim to establish a RTI framework over 2 years. Schools are supported with professional learning (course,



resources and implementation support partner). Student outcomes are collected at the start of each year. School leadership and teachers are asked to complete surveys at different timepoints and are interviewed yearly to understand the process of implementation. The second year of the study is now underway.

Collaborators

Getting it Right from the Start is a partnership between the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI), Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools, the Victorian Department of Education, La Trobe University, Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) at the University of Melbourne, Deakin University, and The University of Queensland.

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