

What Works Clearinghouse



Great Books

Effectiveness¹ No studies of *Great Books* that fall within the scope of the Adolescent Literacy review protocol meet What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) evidence standards. The lack of studies meeting WWC evidence standards means that, at this time, the WWC is unable to draw any conclusions based on research about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of *Great Books* on adolescent learners.

Program Description² *Great Books* is a program that aims to improve the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills of students in kindergarten through high school.³ The program is implemented as a core or complementary curriculum and is based on the Shared Inquiry™ method of learning.⁴ The purpose of *Great Books* is to engage students in higher-order thinking and collaborative problem solving. It involves teachers focusing discussion on the interpretation of a text and students participating as partners in these discussions. The program includes both oral and written activities designed to help students think and talk about the

multiple meanings of texts. *Great Books* reading selections are collections of traditional and modern literature. Typically, students read texts at least twice (either independently or with guided support), learn to ask questions, take notes, define vocabulary, and write about their reactions to what they have read. Teachers are trained by the Great Books Foundation to ask questions that encourage students to think about the meaning of what they have read. The program can be used with whole classes or selected groups of students. This report focuses on *Great Books* programs for reading in grade 4 and higher.⁵

1. The studies in this report were reviewed using WWC Evidence Standards, Version 2.0 (see the WWC Procedures and Standards Handbook, Chapter III), as described in the review protocol for the Adolescent Literacy topic area, Version 2.0.
2. The descriptive information for this program was obtained from publicly available sources: the program's website (www.greatbooks.org, downloaded July 2010) and the research literature (Nichols, 1992). The WWC requests developers to review the program description sections for accuracy from their perspective. Further verification of the accuracy of the descriptive information for this program is beyond the scope of this review. The literature search reflects documents publicly available as of August 2010.
3. The Great Books Foundation offers *Great Books* programs as a continuous sequence from kindergarten through high school. *Junior Great Books* generally applies to the intervention as implemented in grades K–5, and *Great Books* is the name generally used for the intervention in grades 6–12.
4. In Shared Inquiry™, participants search for answers to fundamental questions raised by a text by working together to explore the meaning of a work of literature. Shared Inquiry™ leaders guide participants in reaching their own interpretations. They do not impart information or present their own opinions, but instead they pose thought-provoking questions and follow up purposefully on what participants say.
5. Because the Adolescent Literacy area reviews studies of interventions administered to students in grades 4–12, studies on either *Junior Great Books* (which generally applies to the intervention when implemented in grades K–5) and *Great Books* (which generally applies to the intervention when implemented in grades 6–12) are included in this report.

Program Description (continued)

The WWC identified 36 studies of *Great Books* for adolescent learners that were published or released between 1989 and 2010.

Five studies are within the scope of the Adolescent Literacy review protocol but do not meet WWC evidence standards.

- Four studies do not establish that the comparison group was comparable to the treatment group prior to the start of the intervention. Three of these use quasi-experimental designs, and the fourth study uses a randomized controlled design but was evaluated as a quasi-experiment because a control student was added to the study sample after random assignment of students.
- One study combines *Great Books* with other interventions, which makes it impossible to attribute the observed effect solely to *Great Books*.

Thirty-one studies are outside the scope of the Adolescent Literacy review protocol.

- Sixteen of these are literature reviews or meta-analyses.
- Seven studies have an ineligible study design: a case study or a single group pre-post design.
- The remaining eight studies either do not report an eligible literacy outcome or feature students who are not in grades 4–12.

References

Studies that fall outside the Adolescent Literacy review protocol or do not meet evidence standards

American Federation of Teachers. (1998). *Building on the best, learning from what works: Seven promising reading and English language arts programs*. Washington, DC: Author.

The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.

Applebee, A. N., Langer, J. A., Nystrand, M., & Gamoran, A. (2003). Discussion-based approaches to developing understanding: Classroom instruction and student performance in middle and high school English. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 685–730. The study is ineligible for review because it does not use a comparison group design or a single-case design.

Au, K. H., & Rafael, T. E. (1998). Curriculum and teaching in literature-based programs. In T. Raphael & K. H. Au (Eds.),

Literature-based instruction: Reshaping the curriculum.

Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers. The study is ineligible for review because it does not use a comparison group design or a single-case design.

Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. G. (1999). Comprehension: The sine qua non of reading. *Teaching & Change*, 6(2), 197. The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.

Breister, L. M. (1993). *The effects of Junior Great Books on higher-order thinking skills of fourth grade students* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh. The study does not meet WWC evidence standards because it uses a randomized controlled trial design that either did not generate groups using a random process or had nonrandom allocations after random assignment, and the subsequent analytic intervention and comparison groups are not shown to be equivalent.

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- Briggs, K. L., & Clark, C. (1997). *Reading programs for students in the lower elementary grades: What does the research say?* Austin, TX: Texas Center for Educational Research. The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.
- Collins, N. D., & Aiex, N. K. (1995). *Gifted readers and reading instruction*. ERIC digest (EDO-CS-95-04). Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (Eric Document and Reproduction Service No. ED379637). The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.
- Criscuola, M. M. (1994). Read, discuss, reread: Insights from the Junior Great Books program. *Educational Leadership*, 51(5), 58. The study is ineligible for review because it does not use a sample aligned with the protocol—the sample is not within the specified age or grade range.
- Deshler, D. D., Palincsar, A. S., Biancarosa, G., & Nair, M. (2007). *Informed choices for struggling adolescent readers: A research-based guide to instructional programs and practices*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York. The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.
- Fashola, O. S. (1998). *Review of extended-day and after-school programs and their effectiveness*. Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR). The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.
- Gagliolo, C., & Galbraith, S. (2008). An integrative model for reading, thinking, writing, and technology. *Learning & Leading with Technology*, 36(1), 32–33. The study is ineligible for review because it does not use a comparison group design or a single-case design.
- Gasser, J., Smith, B., & Chapman, A. (1997). A Texas dilemma: Literature-based reading instruction or teach to the TAAS. *State of Reading*, 3(2), 21–29. The study is ineligible for review because it does not use a comparison group design or a single-case design.
- Kelly, C. (2009). Implementation of reading improvement strategies at a small elementary school in a rural area. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 70(1A), 128. The study is ineligible for review because it does not use a sample aligned with the protocol—the sample is not within the specified age or grade range.
- Killion, J. (1999). *What works in the middle: Results-based staff development*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council. The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.
- Killion, J. (2002). *What works in the elementary school: Results-based staff development*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council. The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.
- Killion, J. (2002). *What works in the high school: Results-based staff development*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council. The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.
- Ligas, M. R. (2002). Evaluation of Broward County Alliance of Quality Schools project. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 7(2), 117–139. The study does not meet WWC evidence standards because the measures of effectiveness cannot be attributed solely to the intervention—the intervention was combined with another intervention.

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- Lindstrom, D. (1997). Beyond bake sales: Junior Great Books program brings parents into the classroom. *Schools in the Middle*, 7(1), 28. The study is ineligible for review because it does not use a comparison group design or a single-case design.
- Mitchell, S., & Wile, N. (2001). *2001 literacy program evaluation: A report of the evaluation of literacy programs in elementary and middle schools*. Portland, OR: Portland Public Schools, Research and Evaluation Department. The study does not meet WWC evidence standards because it uses a quasi-experimental design in which the analytic intervention and comparison groups are not shown to be equivalent.
- Murphy, P. K., Wilkinson, I. A. G., Soter, A. O., Hennessey, M. N., & Alexander, J. F. (2009). Examining the effects of classroom discussion on students' comprehension of text: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(3), 740–764. The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.
- Nichols, T. M. (1992, November). *A study to determine the effects of the Junior Great Books program on the interpretive reading skills development of Gifted/Able learner children*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Knoxville, TN. The study does not meet WWC evidence standards because it uses a quasi-experimental design in which the analytic intervention and comparison groups are not shown to be equivalent.
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- Pogrow, S., & Perrotta, B. (1993). Middle school exemplary curricula: Language arts. *Middle School Curriculum Review Series*, 4. The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.
- Rasinski, T. V. (1990). Effects of repeated reading and listening-while-reading on reading fluency. *Journal of Educational Research*, 83(3), 147–150. The study is ineligible for review because it does not use a sample aligned with the protocol—the sample is not within the specified age or grade range.
- Sandora, C. A. (1995). A comparison of two discussion techniques: Great Books (post reading) and Questioning the Author (on-line) on students' comprehension and interpretation of narrative texts. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 56(05A), 126–1719. The study does not meet WWC evidence standards because it uses a quasi-experimental design in which the analytic intervention and comparison groups are not shown to be equivalent.
- Additional source:**
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- Schacter, J. (2001). Reading programs that work: An evaluation of kindergarten-through-third-grade reading instructional programs. *ERS Spectrum*, 19(4), 12–25. The study is ineligible for review because it does not use a sample aligned with the protocol—the sample is not within the specified age or grade range.
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- Slavin, R. E., Lake, C., Chambers, B., Cheung, A., & Davis, S. (2009). *Effective beginning reading programs: A best-evidence synthesis*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University. The study is ineligible for review because it is not a primary analysis of the effectiveness of an intervention, such as a meta-analysis or research literature review.

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- Sondel, H. B. (2009). The effects of curricular programs on aspects of critical thinking as applied to writing. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 70-A(07). The study is ineligible for review because it does not include an outcome within a domain specified in the protocol.
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- The Great Books Foundation. (2008). *Research on Junior Great Books and Shared Inquiry: Junior Great Books builds critical thinking for urban and suburban students in heterogeneous classes*. Chicago, IL: Author. The study is ineligible for review because it does not use a sample aligned with the protocol—the sample is not within the specified age or grade range.
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