

RESEARCH EVIDENCE REPORT

Research background and evidence supporting El próximo paso al éxito

The “El próximo paso al éxito” curriculum (or El próximo paso) is a research-based program designed to provide foundational literacy skills to students learning to read in Spanish. It is designed to systematically develop **phonological awareness** and **phonics** skills so that students can **decode** and **read** syllables, words, and high-frequency words with **automaticity** and apply these skills to reading decodable text. The program can be used as a stand-alone intervention or can be used to support acquisition of foundational skills alongside an evidence-based curriculum. El próximo paso is intentionally designed to accelerate student progress in mastering foundational skills.

El próximo paso uses a systematic decoding method to help early readers develop the accuracy and automaticity needed to become fluent, independent readers. The systematic scope and sequence also support students identified with dyslexia.

El próximo paso provides a structured approach to teaching foundational skills using explicit instructional routines. The activities included in the program are listed below:

- Learn the name and sound each new letter and the sound of digraphs, blends and diphthongs
- Segment syllables into sounds
- Blend sounds into syllables
- Read letters, digraphs, blends and diphthongs
- Read syllables with scaffolding
- Read words
- Read high frequency words
- Learn new vocabulary encountered in stories
- Read sentences and stories composed entirely of high frequency words or words with sounds and syllables they have already learned
- Answer comprehension questions, and
- Practice fluency.

The program includes everything needed to teach throughout the year:

- 120 daily lesson plans in five teacher's guides
- 5 books for each student that include target sounds, syllables, high-frequency words and decodable stories
- Explicit and scripted instructional routines that are easy to follow
- Placement and benchmark assessments
- Comprehensive practice sheets and materials for lesson support
- Regular fluency and comprehension evaluation
- Extension activities that reinforce learning and/or support independence
- Option to create learning centers
- Visual aids for instruction and student reference.

Early Support is Needed in First Grade

Researchers studying early literacy, both in English and in Spanish, have demonstrated the importance of early support for struggling readers. Their research indicates the following:

- Children who are poor readers when they leave first grade almost never catch up to their peers by the end of elementary school.

(Juel, 1988; Adams, 1990; Lesaux & Siegel, 2003).

- Research conducted specifically with Spanish readers shows the following:
 - Children who arrive in first grade lacking phonemic awareness skills are going to have a difficult time learning to read.
(Bravo-Valdivieso, 1995; Carillo, 1994).
 - Poor phonological awareness affects the ability of Spanish readers to acquire alphabetic understanding skills (Carillo, 1994; Jimenez and Ortiz, 2000).

Alignment with the RtI-MTSS Model

The Response to Intervention – Multi-tiered System of Support (RtI/MTSS) model was created in 2004 as part of the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as a way of early identification of students that are not responding to core curriculum and providing them with beneficial intervention. The RtI model consists of three tiers. El próximo paso can be adapted for use with each tier as described below.

Tier 1 – For first grade: Students are provided with core reading instruction that is evidence-based. El próximo paso can be adapted for small group differentiated instruction to supplement the development of foundational literacy skills in lessons that last 20 minutes.

Tier 2 – For first grade: Students that are not making sufficient gains in Tier 1 instruction can be placed into intervention groups of 3 to 5 students with similar needs that meet regularly for 30 minutes.

Tier 3 – For second or third grade: Students who do not respond to intervention can be placed into more intensive, individualized intervention.

Essential Components of Intervention

Gersten and Dimino (2006) demonstrated that interventions are most effective when they consist of the elements described below, which are each incorporated into El próximo paso.

Explicit Instruction. Each of the routines in El próximo paso contain the following:

- **Teacher Explanation and Model.** The teacher quickly explains each activity and demonstrates how the activity is to be conducted.
- **Signaling.** Cues are used to signal when students are to think and when they are to respond together.

- **Choral Response.** When reading sounds, syllables, words, and connected text, the teacher provides a signal for students to respond in unison. This gives the students multiple opportunities to respond. This is crucial for developing automaticity.
- **Individual turns.** Each student is given a turn to make sure that they have learned the skills or strategies.
- **Immediate feedback.** An error-correction procedure is provided for each routine.

Systematic Scope and Sequence. The instructional scope and sequence are designed to include the building of background knowledge of students before new information is presented. This is accomplished with the provision of scaffolding to assist students to read and write syllables and words.

Homogeneous Grouping. The placement assessment helps to place students in groups with similar decoding needs and identifies instructional entry points for the group.

Assessment. Assessments are also provided at the end of each of the five volumes to assess if the students are learning the skills being taught and to evaluate if reteaching is needed.

Evidence-Based. The most effective intervention programs are based on evidence and/or data showing them to be effective.

Alignment with the Science of Reading

The elements of the El próximo paso program are aligned with the science of reading, following the recommendations for instruction of foundational skills of the Institute of Education Sciences (2019). These recommendations include:

- Develop awareness of sounds and teach how they map onto letters.
- Teach students how to decode words, analyze word parts, and recognize and write words.
- Allow students to read connected text every day to begin to develop accuracy and fluency and comprehension.

Support for Dyslexia

El próximo paso provides a structured literacy approach that is essential for students with dyslexia as well as students struggling with other reading difficulties. The explicit routines and immediate feedback, multiple opportunities for practice, and multisensory instruction allow students with reading difficulties to develop the foundational skills necessary for reading independence. A discussion follows of some of the current research regarding dyslexia, with an emphasis on dyslexia in Spanish.

Dyslexia is the most common learning disability affecting students (Fletcher et al., 2019). It occurs across all languages, regardless of IQ or sociocultural conditions. Dyslexia is defined as a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. (British Dyslexia Association (BDA), 2009; International Dyslexia Association, 2002). Current research suggests that there are no absolute criteria for diagnosing if an individual has dyslexia. The BDA (2009) states that the severity of the disability can only be evaluated by examining how well an individual responds to a good intervention.

Dyslexia Models

Some of the early research assessing the causes of dyslexia proposed a single-deficit model in which a deficit of phonologic awareness (PA) was the primary cause (Ramus et al., 2003). However, it was soon noticed that many students with strong PA and decoding skills still labor to read with fluency. Research by Wolf and Bowers (1999) developed a double-deficit hypothesis (DDH) as the best predictor of dyslexia in which a deficit in either PA or the naming speed of a series of familiar items (Rapid Automatized Naming (RAN)) is present in students with dyslexia. A deficit of PA appears to affect reading accuracy, whereas a deficit of RAN affects fluency. Wolf and Bowers (1999) noted that these deficits can occur together, resulting in the most severely impaired students with dyslexia.

Much of the early research into dyslexia, since the 1970s, has been conducted with English-speaking students learning to read in English. During the last 20 years more research has been conducted in other languages as well. One such study was conducted by López-

Escribano (2007) with dyslexic students learning to read in Spanish, in Spain, confirming the existence of a double deficit of PA and RAN in the most severely impacted readers.

Phonological Development Before Beginning to Read

The emergence of phonological awareness, which is defined as the “ability to recognize, identify or manipulate any phonological unit within a word, be it phoneme, rime or syllable” (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005, p. 4) begins with a sensitivity to large phonological units such as syllables, and develops into an awareness of smaller phonological units, such as individual phonemes. Syllable awareness is generally noted in Spanish between ages 3 and 4, when a child can count the number of syllables in a word. This is followed by the ability to detect individual phonemes in a word or syllable, beginning with onset-rime. “In languages like Spanish, onset-rime segmentation is equivalent to phonemic segmentation for many words (e.g., for a word like “loro,” the onset-rimes are /l/ /O/ /r/ /O/ and so are the phonemes)” (Jiménez, 2012, p. 42). Awareness of onset-rime is usually present between ages 4 and 5. Phoneme awareness only develops once children are taught to read and write, regardless of the age at which reading and writing is taught (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005). During this time, PA becomes a good predictor of successful reading. Cross-linguistic studies show this to be true in Spanish as well as across all alphabetic orthographies (Jiménez, 2012; Serrano & Defior, 2008; Vaessen et al., 2010).

Reading Acquisition in Spanish

Languages vary in the grain size of lexical representations used to map phonology onto orthography. In more transparent languages such as Spanish, children first learn the sounds of individual letters, and then learn to blend phonemes together to read a two-letter syllable such as “me.” Once students can read two-letter syllables with automaticity, they can begin to combine two syllables to read a word like “me-sa.”

Once students are reading age-appropriate words with 70 to 80 percent accuracy, their fluency begins to increase. (Altani et al., 2020; Juul et al., 2014). Children in transparent orthographies such as Spanish, Finnish, Greek, or Italian master decoding much earlier and

begin to read with 90% accuracy, by the end of Grade 1 (Altani et al., 2020; Seymour et al., 2003). In contrast, English-speaking children do not generally reach 90% accuracy until age 9 or 10 (Altani et al., 2020; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005).

Components That are Helpful for Dyslexia

El próximo paso is designed to progressively move students through the skills necessary to learn to read. The early lessons focus on being able to segment a word into syllables, followed by hearing the initial sound of a word, and progressing into segmenting a syllable into its phonemes and blending the phonemes to read a syllable. When students can read syllables with accuracy and fluency, they begin to read words that contain the same syllables they are learning. The sentences that the students read daily are composed entirely of high-frequency words or words with sounds and syllables that they have already learned. Multisensory instruction that is beneficial for students with dyslexia includes using fingers to segment and blend phonemes in syllables. It also includes speaking aloud and pointing to each letter in high-frequency words while spelling the words.

About the Authors

Kerry Gavett grew up in Spain, Canada and Greece and developed a love for Spanish culture and Spanish-speaking people. She especially has a heart for underprivileged students who struggle to learn to read in Spanish. She has over 15 years' experience teaching reading interventions to small groups of kindergarten through 2nd grade students learning to read in Spanish. She holds a Master of Science degree in Education. Kerry led a team of educators in 2006/2007 at Metzger Elementary School in Oregon to create a Spanish phonics curriculum for early reading called El camino al éxito. Together with Carmenza Sarvay, Kerry has collaborated to create a Spanish phonics program called El próximo paso al éxito which is designed to continue where El camino al éxito leaves off. It provides extra support for 1st and 2nd grade students learning to read in Spanish.

Carmenza Sarvay was born and raised in Colombia. She lived in Europe for eight years and has lived in the United States for more than 35 years. Carmenza is passionate about languages,

teaching, and inter-cultural relations. She is fluent in three languages and proficient in two others. Carmenza is a retired teacher with many years of experience in Elementary school. She taught first grade in Colombia. In Oregon, she has taught Spanish native literacy, English to speakers of other languages, first grade reading in a dual language setting, and first grade. Carmenza's passion for helping Spanish-speaking students struggling to read, and her frustration with uninspired Spanish reading programs, led her to develop a program that could serve both teachers and the students she cares so much about. Carmenza obtained her bachelor's degree in education with specialization in Languages from Universidad Industrial de Santander in Colombia, and her Bilingual Education, ESOL certification, and master's in education from Portland State University in Oregon.

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