

# Junior Great Books and the Science of Reading

The Great Books Foundation provides outstanding inquiry-based English language arts programs for grades K–12 that improve students’ academic achievement and contribute to vibrant, collaborative classroom communities in a wide variety of schools across the US and internationally.

Junior Great Books® programs combine high-quality classroom materials and the Shared Inquiry™ method to **develop student competencies that directly align with best practices according to the science of reading**. Junior Great Books uses rich, complex texts and student-centered inquiry to increase reading comprehension, develop critical thinking skills, foster civil discourse, and engage students in authentic learning experiences. Great Books programs and the evolving science of reading share the understanding that listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking are interconnected skills that build on each other.<sup>1</sup>

Our approach systematically supports students in putting foundational reading skills into action—using deliberate, guided practice to **build students’ background knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension through repeated readings of complex texts**. Shared Inquiry helps students acquire the habits and strategies of self-directed critical thinkers, readers, and communicators who thrive in collaborative settings.

Renowned for its interactive professional learning, and for decades of use in gifted programs, Junior Great Books also has proven to **positively impact students who are still learning to decode**.<sup>2</sup> Multilingual learners (ML) in particular benefit from our program because of its strong and sustained oral component and its focus on open-ended questions.<sup>3</sup> In fact, our inquiry-based curriculum inherently values divergent thinking, and teacher materials include suggestions for differentiating instruction to best support all learners.

Research confirms that the role of the teacher, and support for professional learning, are essential to achieving the desired impact from well-designed curricula.<sup>4</sup> The Great Books Foundation’s **professional development in Shared Inquiry improves teachers’ listening, questioning, and discussion facilitation skills, leading to improved student engagement and achievement** across the curriculum.

The chart below delineates the characteristics of Great Books programs in relation to what the science of reading identifies as essential components for enabling all students to become engaged, proficient readers. The final section shows how the program also incorporates additional best practices from the science of learning (brain-based education).<sup>5</sup>

# Junior Great Books and the Science of Reading

Reading and Language Comprehension	
Science of Reading Components	Junior Great Books
<p>The ability to understand what you are reading is the product of word recognition and language comprehension.<sup>6</sup></p> <p>The latest research indicates this includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal reasoning (inferences, metaphors, etc.)</li> <li>• Language structures (syntax, semantics, etc.)</li> <li>• Literacy knowledge (print concepts, genres, etc.)</li> <li>• Background knowledge<sup>7</sup></li> <li>• Active self-regulation, including executive function skills, motivation and engagement, and strategy use</li> </ul> <p>Best practices include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read-alouds from a variety of complex texts to build knowledge and vocabulary</li> <li>• Robust conversations to develop students' academic language (e.g., narrative and inferential language)<sup>8</sup></li> </ul>	<p>Junior Great Books improves reading comprehension and critical thinking by providing students <b>deliberate, systematic practice in reading for meaning</b>. The program's focus on open-ended, interpretive questions requires students to infer and analyze, as well as develop and support claims about the meaning of complex texts of various genres. <b>Text-dependent questions require synthesizing information from a wide range of literary concepts, language structures, and background knowledge</b> with diverse personal experiences to create a deeper understanding.</p> <p>The learner-centered Shared Inquiry method motivates and engages students, as teachers coach students to <b>activate and integrate executive function skills</b>, gradually releasing responsibility for deeper inquiry into text meaning.</p> <p>The Shared Inquiry sequence of activities includes <b>read-alouds, student questioning, close rereading of a variety of texts, and metacognitive reflection</b>. Activities can be differentiated to help all students authentically build background knowledge, use strategies, integrate information, and create meaning.</p> <p>Throughout the process, and especially in the core activity of Shared Inquiry discussion, <b>students actively engage in robust, collaborative conversations that rigorously examine and weigh the evidence for claims about the meaning of text</b>, building lifelong critical thinking skills, as well as improving reading and language comprehension.</p>

Fluency	
Science of Reading Components	Junior Great Books
<p>The ability to read words, phrases, sentences, and stories correctly, with enough speed and with expression.</p> <p>Best practices include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeated readings of a complex text with a focus on reading for meaning</li> </ul>	<p>Junior Great Books provides <b>outstanding complex texts that students want to read, reread, and discuss</b>. These texts from a variety of genres raise big questions that engage all readers in thinking deeply about essential issues and ideas.</p> <p><b>Students purposefully read texts multiple times, practicing speed and expression to convey meaning.</b> Teacher’s Editions include activity suggestions for dramatizing and engaging in close reading in response to prompts and questions.</p>

Vocabulary	
Science of Reading Components	Junior Great Books
<p>Knowing what words mean and how to say and use them correctly. Intersects with background knowledge and morphological awareness.</p> <p>Best practices include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeated exposure to words in rich contexts</li> <li>• Explicit instruction of high-value words</li> </ul>	<p>Curiosity about and careful analysis of the meaning of words is at the heart of all Junior Great Books activities. Texts are carefully selected for their literary quality and suitability for Shared Inquiry.</p> <p>Students <b>learn to consider multiple meanings of rich vocabulary</b> as well as to <b>monitor their own comprehension and ask a variety of questions about texts, including the meaning of words, phrases, idioms, and figurative language</b>.</p> <p>Students also engage in prereading activities and ask questions to build background knowledge and make connections to prior learning and life experiences.</p> <p>Junior Great Books teacher materials suggest <b>Tier 2 words and activities for additional, focused vocabulary practice</b>.</p>

## Phonics and Phonemic Awareness

Science of Reading Components	Junior Great Books
<p><b>Phonics</b> Reading instruction on understanding how letters and groups of letters link to sounds to form letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns.</p> <p><b>Phonemic Awareness</b> The ability to identify and play with individual sounds in spoken words.</p>	<p>With its <b>focus on reading for meaning</b> and literature, and as one component of an effective reading language arts curriculum, Junior Great Books complements other programs used for phonics and phonemic awareness instruction.</p> <p>Junior Great Books teacher materials in the lower grades provide <b>tips for reinforcement of phonics and phonemic awareness</b> by offering suggested words from each text to highlight.</p>

## Related Science of Learning Additional Best Practices

### Oral Language Development

Additional Best Practices	Junior Great Books
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaking</li> <li>• Listening</li> </ul>	<p>As noted above, and especially in relation to MLs, oral language development overlaps with and is essential to reading comprehension. The collaborative interpretive activities in Junior Great Books provide a purposeful, text-focused environment in which students want to <b>share and listen to the ideas of others</b>. Students learn to put academic concepts, such as making claims and using text evidence, into an authentic setting, observing their peers, and being coached by the teacher.</p>

### Supportive Classroom Communities

Additional Best Practices	Junior Great Books
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of belonging<sup>9</sup></li> <li>• Collaborate with peers</li> </ul>	<p>Junior Great Books helps <b>build vibrant, respectful, thoughtful communities of learners</b>. The use of outstanding literature from diverse authors, cultures, and time periods coupled with the focus on open-ended, interpretive questions establishes a climate where every viewpoint is valued. Students learn that <b>collaboration and examining multiple perspectives helps everyone gain deeper understanding</b>.</p>

## Social and Emotional Development

Additional Best Practices	Junior Great Books
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-awareness and self-management</li> <li>Social awareness and relationship skills</li> <li>Responsible decision-making</li> </ul>	<p>In Junior Great Books, students learn more about themselves and others by reading and discussing outstanding texts that explore genuine essential questions. Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share personal connections to the text and listen to the perspectives of others</li> <li>Build cognitive control by tracking and recording their responses</li> <li>Take turns <b>sharing their own perspectives and listening to others</b>, with an emphasis on comparing and explaining the meaning of what they read</li> <li>Learn that they can <b>purposefully persist and change their thinking</b> as they grapple with learning challenges</li> </ul> <p>Developing and explaining a personally satisfying answer to the Shared Inquiry discussion focus question, while hearing and considering the evidence for other claims, prepares students to make responsible choices in other complex situations.</p>

## Teacher Questioning and Facilitation

Additional Best Practices	Junior Great Books
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intentional use of open-ended and follow-up questions<sup>10</sup></li> <li>Inquiry stance— teacher as “guide” leading to gradual release of responsibility to students</li> </ul>	<p>Junior Great Books uses age-appropriate, high-quality, meaningful texts that <b>stretch and challenge all readers, including teachers!</b> The distinctive role of the teacher as leader in Shared Inquiry is as fellow learner and “guide on the side.”</p> <p>Through Great Books professional development, <b>teachers learn to use backward planning to identify interpretive questions and sharpen their follow-up questioning skills.</b> Teachers integrate their questions and activity suggestions in the Teacher Editions with student questions and needs (both in general and for specific texts).</p> <p>With deliberate guided practice, <b>students gradually assume more responsibility for driving the learning process over time.</b> Teachers sharpen questioning and discussion skills they use across the curriculum.</p>

## Footnotes

1. “The Science of Reading: The Basics,” National Center on Improving Literacy (2022). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, National Center on Improving Literacy. Retrieved from <http://improvingliteracy.org>.
2. “Evidence for the Effectiveness of Great Books K–12 Programs and Inquiry-Based Learning,” The Great Books Foundation, <https://greatbooks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Evidence-for-the-Effectiveness-of-Great-Books-Programs-2.pdf>.
3. Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan, *Literacy Foundations for English Learners: A Comprehensive Guide to Evidence-Based Instruction* (Baltimore: Brookes Publishing, 2020), 38.
4. “High-Quality Curricula and Team-Based Professional Learning: A perfect partnership for equity,” Learning Forward, 2018, <https://learningforward.org/report/high-quality-curricula-and-team-based-professional-learning-a-perfect-partnership-for-equity/>.
5. “The Science of Learning,” Deans for Impact, 2015, [www.deansforimpact.org](http://www.deansforimpact.org).
6. P. B. Gough and W. E. Tunmer, “Decoding, Reading, and Reading Disability,” *Remedial and Special Education*, 7 (Jan/Feb 1986): 6-10.
7. H. S. Scarborough. “Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (Dis)Abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice.” In *Handbook for Research in Early Literacy*, edited by S. Neuman & D. Dickinson, 97-110. New York: Guilford, 2001.
8. Nell K. Duke and Kelly Cartwright, “The Science of Reading Progresses: Communicating advances beyond the simple view of reading,” *Reading Research Quarterly*, Vol. 56, S1, S25-S44, <https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/rrq.411>.
9. “What Is the Science of Reading?” The Reading League, 2022, <https://www.thereadingleague.org/what-is-the-science-of-reading/>.
10. Sarah Johnson, “To Accelerate Student Learning, We Must First Understand How to Improve Teaching.” *THE Journal* (Oct 2021).