

Imagine a beach house designed for construction with a foundation of ten pilings. What if insufficient funds or time constraints caused it to be built with only five pilings as its base? No one would be surprised if the house collapsed during the first strong storm. Yet that seems to be the case in reading instruction.

In its systematic review of the experimental research on certain areas of reading instruction, the National Reading Panel (NRP) reported on five key areas: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These have been dubbed the “Five Pillars of Effective Reading Instruction.” I agree that each of these topics represents an important foundational area for instruction of early readers.

What concerns me at the moment, is the design of reading instruction that ignores the substantive and broad experimental research on other aspects of effective reading instruction. In the April 2003 issue of *The Reading Teacher*, IRA President-elect and NRP panel member Tim Shanahan listed 20 topics the NRP considered but ultimately did not study. Others, including noted researchers such as Michael Pressley, Jim Cunningham, and Barbara Taylor, have also noted the narrow list of topics included in the NRP report.

But I don’t fault the NRP for failing to report on the whole of reading instructional research. Congress provided limited financial support and a limited time frame. And, as I noted above, I don’t think any of the five areas the panel identified is unimportant.

At the same time, I believe there are at least ten pillars of effective reading instructional design. There likely are even more, but I’m going to suggest five additional pillars for which there exists a substantial body of experimental research. I will argue that we ignore these five pillars at our own peril.

The Missing Pillars of Effective Reading Instruction

This is one of those questions where responses would surely differ, but I will offer my candidates for the missing five pillars of effective and evidence-based reading instruction. My five have been influenced by what I’ve observed as common limitations in reading instructional plans I’ve observed in the past year, especially in schools mandated to apply the principles of scientific reading instruction.

1. **Classroom Organization.** If there is anything less scientific than a one-size-fits-all curriculum, I’m not sure what it might be. Perhaps the most recent studies to note in the ineffectiveness of whole-class, single-curriculum reading instruction were the “Beating the Odds” studies of higher poverty schools, conducted by Barbara Taylor and David Pearson and their colleagues at the Center on Improving Early Reading Achievement (www.ciera.org). Effective reading instruction provides a balance of whole-group, small-group, and side-by-side lessons every day.
2. **Matching Pupils and Texts.** This pillar is critical for those pupils whose development lags behind their peers. All pupils need texts of an appropriate level of complexity in their hands all day long. The IRA position statement *Making a Difference Means Making It Different* summarizes recent research on this topic and makes it clear that effective reading instruction provides differentiated instruction. Because children differ, no single text nor any single task can be appropriate for all children in a classroom – much less a grade level. Reporting in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Rhonda O’Conner and her colleagues provide another recent demonstration that struggling readers fail to benefit much from lessons using grade-level texts.
3. **Access to Interesting Texts, Choice, and Collaboration.** A recent book edited by Peggy McCardle and Vinita Chhabra, *The Voice of Evidence in Reading Research* (Paul Brookes Publishing), includes a report of a meta-analysis conducted by John Guthrie and Nicole Humenick. Guthrie and Humenick gathered studies of classroom lessons and then estimated the impact of several features of lesson design on outcomes. Each of the factors they studied – easy access to an array of interesting texts, providing students choices about what to read, and allowing for opportunities to collaborate with other children while reading – produced impacts that were larger than those reported by the National Reading Panel for the presence of systematic phonics instruction.
4. **Writing and Reading.** Over a decade ago, Rob Tierney and Tim Schanahan summarized the research on reading-writing relationships in the second volume of the *Handbook of Reading Research*. Since that time, researchers have simply added to the evidence that reading and writing have reciprocal relationships with each other. Composing can enhance comprehension. Spelling can facilitate decoding. And so on.
5. **Expert Tutoring.** Struggling readers benefit enormously from access to tutoring. In fact, the evidence on this is so clear that it is one of only two research findings that have been included to date on the U.S. Department of Education’s list of “Gold Standard” findings (www.ed.gov). Last month, a meta-analysis of 36 studies of Reading Recovery, an expert tutoring intervention, was published in the research journal, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, showing strikingly positive effects on reading achievement. Much of the support for the adequate yearly progress goals came from studies that provided expert tutoring, often for two or more years.

Check Your Plan

A reading instructional plan developed using only the five pillars of evidence reviewed by the NRP could very easily ignore the other five critical pillars (and vice versa). Any design that fails to attend to these ten pillars of effective reading cannot truly be called research based. I don’t think any reading program design that ignores or underemphasizes any of the ten pillars can be expected to develop the reading proficiencies of all students, especially the reading of struggling readers.

So it may be time for a spot-check on whether your reading instructional plan has paid adequate attention to all ten pillars of effective reading program design.