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LITERACY RESEARCH ASSOCIATION/NATIONAL READING CONFERENCE
POLICY BRIEF

**THE NATIONAL READING PANEL REPORT AND
EFFECTIVE BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION**
A Summary

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What is LRA?

The Literacy Research Association (LRA) is a professional organization for individuals who share an interest in research and the dissemination of information about literacy and literacy instruction. LRA was formerly known as the National Reading Conference (NRC) (www.nrconline.org)

What is the National Reading Panel Report?

In 1997, Congress charged the director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, who was to consult with the Secretary of Education, to appoint a national panel to assess research-based knowledge about teaching children to read. The National Reading Panel (NRP) was established in response to this mandate; the report described its conclusions to Congress and the public in early 2000. (4)

Why is the LRA leadership concerned about the National Reading Panel Report?

An important problem with the report was that much of the scientific evidence relating to beginning reading instruction was ignored in the development of the report. The panel decided early in its process to focus on only a very few topics and limit its review to experimental and quasi-experimental evidence. Even so, the conclusions of the Panel certainly were credible, as far as they went, covering well the teaching of some beginning reading skills--notably, letter, sound, and word-level skills. (2)

What does the LRA leadership believe about the NRP report?

The National Reading Panel was too narrow in its focus, failing to report a great deal of credible science that can and should inform policy debates about beginning literacy instruction. *There is good scientific data consistent with the conclusion that the interventions favored by the Panel are not enough. Effective reading instruction occurs over years and changes with the developmental level of the child, with these dynamics not captured by the Panel's emphases on discrete skills appropriate at only particular developmental levels* (i.e., mostly when children are mastering letter-sound associations and beginning word recognition). Effective literacy instruction is a balance and blending of skills instruction with authentic reading and writing experiences. (3)

What does the LRA leadership recommend?

Because there is more science that should be made available to educators and policy makers, *there is a real need for another document summarizing as completely as possible what is scientifically defensible in beginning reading instruction.*

Here is how this document should be constructed:

- Make certain there are checks so that important work is not excluded and the work of particular scientists is not being emphasized because of membership on the reviewing body. (33)
- Include a broad range of scientists who represent the full range of interventions being documented as affecting reading instruction and achievement. (34)
- Don't rely on a literature-integration methodology that requires many replications for conclusions to be drawn. (34)
- Don't limit acceptable evidence to that produced in experiments and quasi-experiments. Very good scientists are using more than experiments and quasi-experiments to inform about instructional issues. (34)

This brochure is a summary of Pressley, M. (2001). *Effective beginning reading instruction: Executive summary and paper commissioned by the National Reading Conference*. The page numbers in parentheses refer to the full-length pdf version available online at <http://www.nrconline.org/publications/pressleywhite2.pdf>

What were the major findings of the NRP Report?

- Phonemic awareness instruction is effective in promoting early reading (e.g., word reading, comprehension) and spelling skills. (6)
- Systematic phonics instruction improves reading and spelling and, to a lesser extent, comprehension. (7)
- Guided oral reading (i.e., a teacher listening as a student reads, providing instruction as needed) and repeated reading of texts increase reading fluency during the elementary years. (7)
- A variety of methods of vocabulary instruction make sense, with vocabulary instruction positively impacting reading comprehension. (7)
- Instruction in comprehension strategies improves comprehension, with a number of strategies positively affecting understanding of texts and summarization. Teaching students to use a small repertoire of effective strategies (e.g., predicting upcoming text content, seeking clarification when confused, asking questions, constructing mental images representing text content, and summarizing) was given an especially strong endorsement by the Panel. (8)
- Professional development can change teachers' instruction in reading, with impact on student achievement, although much more research is needed to identify helpful approaches to in-service teacher education. (8)
- Computer technology has great potential for improving beginning reading instruction, with promising approaches for promoting word recognition, vocabulary development and comprehension enjoying support in the small extant literature evaluating computer effects on literacy development. (8)

What important research findings were not included in the NRP report?

The Panel ignored scientifically-validated findings pertaining to instruction at home (e.g., storybook reading), television effects (e.g., *Sesame Street*, captioning), community resources (e.g., tutoring), whole language, language of instruction, and school reform movements, including these:

- **Community resources** that can promote young children's literacy, such as volunteers who tutor children in reading, and in doing so, improve early reading. (12)
- **When books are made available to young children**---for example, through community efforts such as Reading is Fundamental--- children are more likely to engage in literacy-promoting activities, with the result being enhanced language and literacy skills. (11)
- **Whole language interventions** at school do seem to promote some general, beginning understandings about reading and writing. (13)
- **Literature-driven instruction** increases children's autonomous reading. (13)
- Instruction featuring **strong connections between literature and concept learning** increases academic curiosity and engagement as well as the use of comprehension strategies. (13)
- **Experiences with literature** also increase understanding of the structure of stories. (13)
- Children's comprehension of the ideas in text increase when they have **conversations about literature with peers and teachers**. (13)
- **Exposure to a second language** can have positive implications for literacy development in the first language, for example, increasing vocabulary knowledge. (14)
- Some essential literacy skills that affect reading, such as **how to search texts for critical information and writing**, also were ignored entirely by the panel. (16)
- There was neglect of research on **the characteristics of schools and classrooms** where beginning literacy achievement is high, especially for students at risk for development of literacy skills. (19-25)

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