The six elements of effective reading instruction don't require much time or money—just educators' decision to put them in place.

Every Child, Every Day

Richard L. Allington and Rachael E. Gabriel

Every child a reader" has been the goal of instruction, education research, and reform for at least three decades. We now know more than ever about how to accomplish this goal. Yet few students in the United States regularly receive the best reading instruction we know how to give.

Instead, despite good intentions, educators often make decisions about instruction that compromise or supplant the kind of experiences all children need to become engaged, successful readers. This is especially true for struggling readers, who are much less likely than their peers to participate in the kinds of high-quality instructional activities that would ensure that they learn to read.

Six Elements for Every Child

Here, we outline six elements of instruction that every child should experience every day. Each of these elements can be implemented in any district and any school, with any curriculum or set of materials, and without additional funds. All that's necessary is for adults to make the decision to do it.

1. Every child reads something he or she chooses. The research base on student-selected reading is robust and conclusive: Students read more, understand more, and are more likely to continue reading when they have the opportunity to choose what they read. In a 2004 meta-analysis, Guthrie and Humenick found that the two most powerful instructional design factors for improving reading motivation and comprehension were (1) student access to many books and (2) personal choice of what to read.

We're not saying that students should never read teacher- or district-selected texts. But at some time every day, they should be able to choose what they read.

The experience of choosing in itself boosts motivation. In addition, offering choice makes it more likely that every reader will be matched to a text that he or she can read well. If students initially have trouble choosing texts that match their ability level and interest, teachers can provide limited choices to guide them toward successful reading experiences. By giving students these opportunities, we help them develop the ability to choose appropriate texts for themselves—a skill that dramatically increases the likelihood they will read outside school (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001, Reis et al., 2007).

Some teachers say they find it difficult to provide a wide selection of texts because of budget constraints. Strangely, there is always money available

for workbooks, photocopying, and computers; yet many schools claim that they have no budget for large, multileveled classroom libraries. This is interesting because research has demonstrated that access to self-selected texts improves students' reading performance (Krashen, 2011), whereas no evidence indicates that workbooks, photocopies, or computer tutorial programs have ever done so (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Dynarski, 2007).

There is, in fact, no way they ever could. When we consider that the typical 4th grade classroom has students reading anywhere from the 2nd to the 9th grade reading levels (and that later grades have an even wider range), the idea that one workbook or textbook could meet the needs of every reader is absurd (Hargis, 2006). So, too, is the idea that skills developed through isolated, worksheet-based skills practice and fill-in-the-blank vocabulary quizzes will transfer to real reading in the absence of any evidence that they ever have. If school principals eliminated the budget for workbooks and worksheets and instead spent the money on real books for classroom libraries, this decision could dramatically improve students' opportunities to become better readers.

2. Every child reads accurately.

Good readers read with accuracy almost all the time. The last 60 years of research on optimal text difficulty—a body of research that began with Betts (1949)—consistently demonstrates the importance of having students read texts they can read accurately and understand. In fact, research shows that reading at 98 percent or higher accuracy is essential for reading acceleration. Anything less slows the rate of improvement, and anything below 90 percent accuracy doesn't improve reading ability at all (Allington, 2012; Ehri, Dreyer, Flugman, & Gross, 2007).

Although the idea that students read better when they read more has been supported by studies for the last 70 years, policies that simply increase the amount of time allocated for students to read often find mixed results (National Reading Panel, 2000). The reason is simple: It's not just the time spent with a book in hand, but rather the intensity and volume of *high-success* reading, that determines a student's progress in learning to read (Allington, 2009; Kuhn et al., 2006).

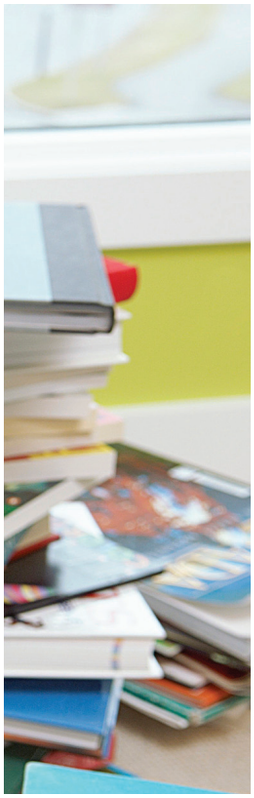
When students read accurately, they solidify their word-recognition, decoding, and word-analysis skills. Perhaps more important, they are likely to understand what they read—and, as a result, to enjoy reading.

In contrast, struggling students who spend the same amount of time reading texts that they can't read accurately are at a disadvantage in several important ways. First, they read less text; it's slow going when you encounter many words you don't recognize instantly. Second, struggling readers are less likely to understand (and therefore enjoy) what they read. They are likely to become frustrated when reading these difficult texts and therefore to lose confidence in their word-attack, decoding, or word-recognition skills. Thus, a struggling reader and a successful reader who engage in the same 15-minute independent reading session do not necessarily receive equivalent practice, and they are likely to experience different outcomes.

Sadly, struggling readers typically encounter a steady diet of too-challenging texts throughout the school day as they make their way through classes that present grade-level material hour after hour. In essence, traditional instructional practices widen the gap between readers.

3. Every child reads something he or she understands.

Understanding what you've read is the goal of reading. But too often, struggling readers get interventions that focus on basic skills in isolation, rather than on


© MONALYN GRACIA/CORBIS

reading connected text for meaning. This common misuse of intervention time often arises from a grave misinterpretation of what we know about reading difficulties.

The findings of neurological research are sometimes used to reinforce the notion that some students who struggle to learn to read are simply "wired differently" (Zambo, 2003) and thus require large amounts of isolated basic skills practice. In fact, this same research shows that remediation that emphasizes comprehension can change the structure of struggling students' brains. Keller and Just (2009) used imaging to examine the brains of struggling readers before and after they received 100 hours of remediation—including lots of reading and rereading of real texts. The white matter of the struggling readers was of lower structural quality than that of good readers before the intervention, but it improved following the intervention. And these changes in the structure of the brain's white matter consistently predicted increases in reading ability.

Numerous other studies (Aylward et al., 2003; Krafnick, Flowers, Napoliello, & Eden, 2011; Shaywitz et al., 2004) have supported Keller and Just's findings that comprehensive reading instruction is associated with changed activation patterns that mirror those of typical readers. These studies show that it doesn't take neurosurgery or banging away at basic skills to enable the brain to develop the ability to read: It takes lots of reading and rereading of text that students find engaging and comprehensible.

The findings from brain research align well with what we've learned from studies of reading interventions. Regardless of their focus, target population, or publisher, interventions that accelerate reading development routinely devote at least two-thirds of their time to reading and rereading rather than isolated or contrived skill practice (Allington, 2011). These findings have been consistent for the last 50 years—yet the typical reading intervention used in schools today has struggling readers spending the bulk of their time on tasks other than reading and rereading actual texts.

Students read more, understand more, and are more likely to continue reading when they have the opportunity to choose what they read.

Studies of exemplary elementary teachers further support the finding that more authentic reading develops better readers (Allington, 2002; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003). In these large-scale national studies, researchers found that students in more-effective teachers' classrooms spent a larger percentage of reading instructional time actually reading; students in less-effective teachers' classrooms spent more time using worksheets, answering low-level, literal questions, or completing before-and-after reading activities. In addition, exemplary teachers were more likely to differentiate instruction so that all readers had books they could actually read accurately, fluently, and with understanding.

4. Every child writes about something personally meaningful.

In our observations in schools across several states, we rarely see students writing anything more than fill-in-the-blank or short-answer responses during their reading block. Those who do have the opportunity to compose something longer than a few sentences are either responding to a teacher-selected prompt or writing within a strict structural formula that turns even paragraphs and essays into fill-in-the-blank exercises.

As adults, we rarely if ever write to a prompt, and we almost never write about something we don't know about. Writing is called *composition* for a good reason: We actually *compose* (construct something unique) when we write. The opportunity to compose continuous text about something meaningful is not just something nice to have when there's free time after a test or at the end of the school year. Writing provides a different modality within which to practice the skills and strategies of reading for an authentic purpose.

When students write about something they care about, they use conventions of spelling and grammar because it matters to them that their ideas are communicated, not because they will lose points or see red ink if they don't (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2010). They have to think about what words will best convey their ideas to their readers. They have to encode these words using letter patterns others will recognize. They have to make sure they use punctuation in a way that will help their readers understand which words go together, where a thought starts and ends, and what emotion goes with it. They have to think about what they know about the structure of similar texts to set up their page and organize their ideas. This process is especially important for struggling readers because

it produces a comprehensible text that the student can read, reread, and analyze.

5. Every child talks with peers about reading and writing.
Research has demonstrated that conversation with peers improves comprehension and engagement with texts in a variety of settings (Cazden, 1988). Such literary conversation does not focus on recalling or retelling what students read. Rather, it asks students to analyze, comment, and compare—in short, to think about what they've read. Fall, Webb, and Chudowsky (2000) found better outcomes when kids simply talked with a peer about what they read than when they spent the same amount of class time highlighting important information after reading.

Similarly, Nystrand (2006) reviewed the research on engaging students in literate conversations and noted that even small amounts of such conversation (10 minutes a day) improved standardized test scores, regardless of students' family background or reading level. Yet struggling readers were the least likely to discuss daily what they read with peers. This was often because they were doing extra basic-skills practice instead. In class discussions, struggling readers were more likely to be asked literal questions about what they had read, to prove they "got it," rather than to be engaged in a conversation about the text.


© SUSIE FITZHUGH

Time for students to talk about their reading and writing is perhaps one of the most underused, yet easy-to-implement, elements of instruction. It doesn't require any special materials, special training, or even large amounts of time. Yet it provides measurable benefits in comprehension, motivation, and even language competence. The task of switching between writing, speaking, reading, and listening helps students make connections between, and thus solidify, the skills they use in each. This makes peer conversation especially important for English language learners, another population that we rarely ask to talk about what they read.

6. Every child listens to a fluent adult read aloud.
Listening to an adult model fluent reading increases students' own fluency and comprehension skills (Trelease, 2001), as well as expanding their vocabulary, background knowledge, sense of story, awareness of genre and text structure, and comprehension of the texts read (Wu & Samuels, 2004).

Yet few teachers above 1st grade read aloud to their students every day (Jacobs, Morrison, & Swinyard, 2000). This high-impact, low-input strategy is another underused component of the kind of instruction that supports readers. We categorize it as low-input because, once again, it does not require special materials or training; it simply requires a decision to use class time more effectively. Rather than conducting whole-class reading of a single text that fits few readers, teachers should choose to spend a few minutes a day reading to their students.

Things That Really Matter

Most of the classroom instruction we have observed lacks these six research-based elements. Yet it's not difficult to find the time and resources to implement them. Here are a few suggestions.

First, eliminate almost all worksheets and workbooks. Use the money saved to purchase books for classroom libraries; use the time saved for self-selected reading, self-selected writing, literary conversations, and read-alouds.

Second, ban test-preparation activities and materials from the school day. Although sales of test preparation materials provide almost two-thirds of the profit that testing companies earn (Glovin & Evans, 2006), there are no studies demonstrating that engaging students in test prep ever improved their reading proficiency—or even their test performance (Guthrie, 2002). As with eliminating workbook completion, eliminating test preparation provides time and money to spend on the things that really matter in developing readers.

It's time for the elements of effective instruction described here to be offered more consistently to every child, in

every school, every day. Remember, adults have the power to make these decisions; kids don't. Let's decide to give them the kind of instruction they need. EL

First, eliminate almost all worksheets and workbooks.

References

Allington, R. L. (2002). What I've learned about effective reading instruction from a decade of studying exemplary elementary classroom teachers. *Phi Delta Kappan, 83*(10), 740–747.

Allington, R. L. (2009). If they don't read much . . . 30 years later. In E. H. Hiebert (Ed.), *Reading more, reading better* (pp. 30–54). New York: Guilford.

Allington, R. L. (2011). Research on reading/learning disability interventions. In S. J. Samuels & A. E. Farstrup (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (4th ed., pp. 236–265). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Allington, R. L. (2012). *What really matters for struggling readers: Designing research-based programs* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Aylward, E. H., Richards, T. L., Berninger, V. W., Nagy, W. E., Field, K. M., Grimme, A. C., Richards, A. L., Thomson, J. B., & Cramer, S. C. (2003). Instructional treatment associated with changes in brain activation in children with dyslexia. *Neurology, 61*(2), E5–6.

Betts, E. A. (1949). Adjusting instruction to individual needs. In N. B. Henry (Ed.), *The forty-eighth yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education: Part II, Reading in the elementary school* (pp. 266–283). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cazden, C. B. (1988). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (1998). The impact of print exposure on word recognition. In J. Metsala & L. Ehri (Eds.), *Word recognition in beginning literacy* (pp. 235–262). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Cunningham, P. M., & Cunningham, J. W. (2010). *What really matters in writing: Research-based practices across the elementary curriculum.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Dynarski, M. (2007). *Effectiveness of reading and mathematics software products: Findings from the first student cohort.* Washington, DC: Institute for Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20074005

Ehri, L. C., Dreyer, L. G., Flugman, B., & Gross, A. (2007). Reading Rescue: An effective tutoring intervention model for language minority students who are struggling readers in first grade. *American Educational Research Journal, 44*(2), 414–448.

Fall, R., Webb, N. M., & Chudowsky, N. (2000). Group discussion and large-scale language arts assessment: Effects on students' comprehension. *American Educational Research Journal, 37*(4), 911–941.

Glovin, D., & Evans, D. (2006, December). How test companies fail your kids. *Bloomberg Markets*, 127–138. Retrieved from http://timeoutfromtesting.org/bloomberg_education.pdf

Guthrie, J. T. (2002). Preparing students for high-stakes test taking in reading. In A. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (pp. 370–391). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Guthrie, J. T., & Humenick, N. M. (2004). Motivating students to read: Evidence for classroom practices that increase motivation and achievement. In P. McCardle & V. Chhabra (Eds.), *The voice of evidence in reading research* (pp. 329–354). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Hargis, C. (2006). Setting standards: An exercise in futility? *Phi Delta Kappan, 87*(5), 393–395.

Ivey, G., & Broaddus, K. (2001). Just plain reading: A survey of what makes students want to read in middle schools. *Reading Research Quarterly, 36,* 350–377.

Jacobs, J. S., Morrison, T. G., & Swinyard, W. R. (2000). Reading aloud to students: A national probability study of classroom reading practices of elementary school teachers. *Reading Psychology, 21*(3), 171–193.

Keller, T. A., & Just, M. A. (2009). Altering cortical activity: Remediation-induced changes in the white matter of poor readers. *Neuron, 64*(5), 624–631.

Krafnick, A. J., Flowers, D. L., Napoliello, E. M., & Eden, G. F. (2011). Gray matter volume changes following reading intervention in dyslexic children. *Neuroimage, 57*(3), 733–741.

Krashen, S. (2011). *Free voluntary reading.* Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

Kuhn, M. R., Schwanenflugel, P., Morris, R. D., Morrow, L. M., Woo, D., Meisinger, B., et al. (2006). Teaching children to become fluent and automatic readers. *Journal of Literacy Research, 38*(4), 357–388.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.* Rockville, MD: National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development. Retrieved from www.nationalreadingpanel.org/publications/summary.htm

Nystrand, M. (2006). Research on the role of classroom discourse as it affects reading comprehension. *Research in the Teaching of English, 40*, 392–412.

Reis, S. M., McCoach, D. B., Coyne, M. Schreiber, F. J., Eckert, R. D., & Gubbins, E. J. (2007). Using planned enrichment strategies with direct instruction to improve reading fluency, comprehension, and attitude toward reading: An evidence-based study. *Elementary School Journal, 108*(1), 3–24.

Shaywitz, B., Shaywitz, S., Blachman, B., Pugh, K., Fulbright, R. K., Skudlarski, P., et al. (2004). Development of left occipito-temporal systems for skilled reading in children after phonologically based intervention. *Biological Psychiatry, 55*(9), 926–933.

Taylor, B. M., Pearson, P. D., Peterson, D. S., & Rodriguez, M. C. (2003). Reading growth in high-poverty classrooms: The influence of teacher practices that encourage cognitive engagement in literacy learning. *Elementary School Journal, 104*, 3–28.

Trelease, J. (2001). *Read-aloud handbook* (5th ed.). New York: Viking-Penguin.

Wu, Y., & Samuels, S. J. (2004, May). *How the amount of time spent on independent reading affects reading achievement.* Paper presented at the annual convention of the International Reading Association, Reno, Nevada.

Zambo, D. (2003). The importance of providing scientific information to children with dyslexia. *Dyslexia* [online magazine]. Retrieved from Dyslexia Parents Resource at www.dyslexia-parent.com/mag47.html

Richard L. Allington is a professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville; richardallington@aol.com. **Rachael E. Gabriel** is assistant professor at the University of Connecticut in Storrs; rachael.gabriel@uconn.edu.