

Ideology Is Still Trumping Evidence

While Mr. Allington's views occupy something of a middle ground in the debate over the report of the National Reading Panel, he believes that the federal government should not be setting policy about reading instruction. He offers recommendations that, if followed, may increase our chances of leaving no child behind.

By Richard L. Allington

THINK everyone can agree that children differ. Therein lies what worries me about "evidence-based" policy making in education. Good teaching, effective teaching, is not just about using whatever science says "usually" works best. It is all about finding out what works best for the individual child and the group of children in front of you. In an earlier *Kappan* article, I wrote about what we had learned from studying exemplary elementary teachers in six states.¹ Relying on a one-size-fits-all curriculum — even one found to be "evidence-based" — was not one of the characteristics of the nation's most effective teachers. Instead, we observed these teachers selecting and experimenting with multiple instructional approaches, always driven by the responses of their students.

These teachers were not, to paraphrase Linda Darling-Hammond,² focused on doing things "right" but were dedicated to doing the right things. They were not, to paraphrase David Pearson,³ looking over their shoulders to get their cues but were looking into the eyes of the children in front of them. These teachers were not following a set of explicit instructional directions created by someone far removed from the classroom but were teaching explicitly what they observed their students needed when they needed it. They didn't necessarily reject commercial instructional packages or the directions that invariably accompany them, but they were rarely observed actually following such advice with any fidelity. Instead, they took their cues from the children they were teaching. They realized that no researcher or curriculum developer had ever met their students, much less attempted to teach them. Thus they were reasonably sure that their own observations were far more reliable than a miscellany of suggestions offered from afar.

THE PROBLEM OF 'WHAT WORKS, GENERALLY'

Our current “scientific” method focuses almost exclusively on identifying what works best generally. That is, our research designs compare how treatment and control groups do “on average.” But no study has ever identified an educational treatment that has worked effectively for all participants. In his chapter in *The Voice of Evidence* and elsewhere, Joseph Torgeson illustrates just how many struggling readers are left behind — 8% [[AUTHOR: IS THIS THE RANGE MENTIONED ON BOTTOM OF P. 366? MINE SAYS 11%-44%.]] to 44% — in the intervention studies funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).⁴ Even with one-to-one expert tutoring, many struggling readers (50% or more) in these intervention studies still failed to learn to read anywhere near grade level.⁵ These studies did illustrate the positive effects of access to intensive, expert reading instruction for many struggling readers. For many, but not for all. The interventions were successful for the majority of struggling readers, but a significant minority — say, one-third on average — were still struggling mightily and benefited little from the intervention.

Perhaps fewer struggling readers would have been left behind if researchers were not so wedded to the idea of “replicability.” The problem of replicability is that it assumes that good instruction can be packaged and then replicated over and over again. But the evidence belies this fantasy. Effective teachers are much like the effective physician who offers a multi-pronged approach to reducing cholesterol, for instance, an approach that includes changes in diet, added exercise, and the use of drug therapy.

Physicians know that scientific “clinical trials describe population averages for the purposes of developing guidelines, whereas physicians must focus on the individual patient’s clinical responses.”⁶ In other words, controlled clinical trials are, at best, a weak proxy for the ideal physician/patient relationship. I would likewise argue that controlled research studies are, at best, a weak proxy for effective teaching. Teachers, like doctors, must make decisions based on the unique evidence they observe in their students. This makes “replicability” of effective instruction something very different from teaching from a scripted lesson plan.

As a researcher who uses multiple research methods, including randomized field trials, I often wish I could generate the absolutist sense that so many ideologues seem to accept so easily. As a teacher, I wish there were some hope of finding the one best method to teach anything — the one method that worked for every student. As a teacher educator, I wish I could tell my students some few absolute truths, other than telling them to expect children to differ. But the fact is that researchers deal in probabilities, not absolutes. Teachers deal with variation, not sameness. And

teacher educators must foster a healthy skepticism of absolutes and an expectation of population variation if they have any hope of developing effective teachers.

Given all this, where does that situate me regarding *The Voice of Evidence*? I don't share the enthusiasm of Timothy Shanahan or Peggy McCardle and Vinita Chhabra, nor do I share the level of skepticism of Elaine Garan and Stephen Krashen. I found the book uneven. Some chapters are well written and likely to be useful for the intended educator audience (e.g., the chapter by John Guthrie and Nicole Humenick). Other chapters continue the long tradition of reliance on jargon (e.g., the chapter by Sally Shaywitz and Bennett Shaywitz). And some chapters (here Robert Sweet's chapter comes immediately to mind) offer up more nonsense and misinformation than scientific evidence. (For example, see his comparison of historical literacy rates.) As for Shanahan's chapter, I wondered if he had even read my book, *Big Brother and the National Reading Curriculum*, which he skewered. I wondered because it seemed to me that if he had read the book, he had missed my point completely. My central concern was twofold: 1) there is compelling evidence that 30+ years of top-down federal mandates have not worked to improve reading achievement,⁷ and 2) federal reading initiatives have been playing fast and loose with the "actual findings" (see Shanahan, this issue) of the National Reading Panel (NRP) and of reading research in general.

'ACTUAL FINDINGS' OF THE NRP AND ***THE VOICE OF EVIDENCE***

Overall, I think I've been less critical of the full report of the National Reading Panel than Garan, Krashen, and other critics. In my view, the NRP was underfunded, understaffed, and given a time line that was far too short. Consequently, the panel members rushed a report that still arrived more than a year after the initial deadline.

Nevertheless, as Garan has so pointedly observed in *Resisting Reading Mandates* and now in these pages, there was a substantial mismatch between what the NRP actually found and what the Summary of the NRP report said the panel found.⁸ And because few people ever read the phonebook-thick full report, it was the misinformation in the Summary that became conventional wisdom. I don't think we can just sweep this concern under the rug like so much immaterial dust. I also don't think that suggesting, "The best antidote to this problem and the ones noted by Dr. Garan would be for more teachers to read the report itself,"⁹ is a viable option either. It isn't that the Summary got it all wrong, but rather that there is no excuse for the Summary to get anything wrong. The errors of fact in the Summary are not simply the result of a difficulty in

dumbing-down complicated stuff for public consumption. The errors in reporting the findings reflect, to my mind, a simple ideological bias in favor of a particular sort of reading instruction for beginning readers and for struggling readers — the sort of reading instruction that the full NRP report doggedly avoided recommending.

The full NRP report, even with its several flaws, generally made use of the fairly contingent language that researchers usually use, and it generally noted where the evidence was weak (e.g., the usefulness of systematic phonics instruction for poor readers in grades 2-6) or largely nonexistent (e.g., the role of decodable texts in beginning reading instruction).

The full NRP report was less clear on the issue of the role of independent reading. Perhaps because of Krashen's critiques, responses from NRP panel members have clarified what the NRP found on the topic of extended independent reading opportunities. Jay Samuels wrote:

I should point out that the fluency section of the NRP report (2000) neither endorses nor condemns independent silent reading. Failure to endorse should not be interpreted as a criticism of this technique. . . . The available data suggests that sustained silent reading is not an effective practice when used as the *only* type of reading instruction.¹⁰ (Emphasis in original.)

In a similar vein, Shanahan wrote:

The NRP set out to find out if the various ways that we encourage students to engage in such practice [independent reading] actually work. . . . The panel simply found too few studies of this type to make any determination based upon them. . . . In fact, the panel did not conclude that children did not need reading practice, only that how this might be best accomplished is an open question.¹¹

As Krashen points out in this issue, no one ever suggested that “just reading,” with no provision for instruction, was a viable plan for helping children acquire reading proficiency. Unfortunately, as J_?_ [[AUTHOR: FIRST NAME?]] Edmondson and P_?_ Shannon and others have pointed out, in some schools independent reading practice has been largely banned as being unscientific, based on misrepresentations of the NRP findings.¹²

What continue to bother me — and I expect bother both Garan and Krashen — are the numerous and continuing misrepresentations of the findings of the NRP and the potentially harmful influence these misrepresentations seem to be having on classroom practices, often under the guise of “scientific” or “evidence-based” criteria.

MISREPRESENTING THE EVIDENCE

In his chapter in *The Voice of Evidence*, Robert Sweet trumpets the Partnership for Reading as a wonderful accomplishment and a huge step in the direction of evidence-based teaching. He notes that this is a legislated collaboration between the U.S. secretary of education, the secretary of health and human services, the director of NICHD, and the National Institute for Literacy to disseminate information on “scientifically based” reading instruction. The most visible product of the Partnership for Reading to date is the widely disseminated booklet, *Put Reading First* (PRF), published in 2003.¹³ The back cover of this small, teacher-friendly document states that “the findings described in this document were drawn from the report of the National Reading Panel.” The same assertion is found on the Table of Contents page.

So what are we to make of the statements in the *Put Reading First* booklet that have no basis in the NRP report? While this booklet gets some things right, it also presents a set of guidelines for instructional materials. These guidelines are typically used in decisions about which instructional materials a school might purchase with federal Reading First funds. But these PRF guidelines rely more on an ideology than on evidence from the NRP or any other source.

For instance, consider the “finding” that one characteristic of “scientific” reading programs is that “the materials include books or stories that contain a large number of words that children can decode by using the letter-sound relationships they have learned or are learning” (p. 13).

But the NRP did not recommend such texts. It found, “Surprisingly, very little research has attempted to determine whether the use of decodable books in systematic phonics programs has any influence on the progress that some or all children make in learning to read.”¹⁴ Basically, no studies existed in which decodable texts had been isolated as a variable to estimate their impact on reading acquisition. None.

However, in a more recent experimental study, J. _?_ [[AUTHOR: FIRSTNAME?]] Jenkins and his [[“HIS” CORRECT?]] colleagues compared the effects of the use of decodable texts on the reading development of two randomly assigned groups of struggling readers.¹⁵ One group read texts with a high proportion of words (85%) they could decode using the letter/sound relationships they had been taught, while the other group read texts with many fewer words that could be decoded (11%). Classroom reading instruction for both groups was the same. The researchers reported that, among tutored students, those reading highly decodable texts had no advantage on any measures over those reading the less decodable, predictable [[AUTHOR: SHOULD WORD “PREDICTABLE” ALSO BE IN DESCRIPTION OF “HIGHLY DECODABLE” TEXTS?]] texts. Even when examining the children with

the lowest pretest performances, there were no observed benefits for using decodable texts. But the provision of decodable texts is now one of the required features of programs to be purchased with federal Reading First funds in state after state.

What should we think when the PRF booklet says, “Adding phonics workbooks or phonics activities to these programs of instruction [basal reading programs, literature-based programs] has not been effective. Such add-ons confuse rather than help children” (p. 17)?

Nothing in the NRP report indicates that such add-on programs are less effective than more integrated phonics lessons. Indeed, Shanahan wrote that “the authors of this summary have strayed into the realm of belief and myth rather than that of research or research combined with logic — by claiming that adding a supplementary phonics program to a basal or literature program is necessarily ineffective — [[AUTHOR: IS THIS SECOND DASH CORRECT? SEEMS LIKE THE END OF THE SENTENCE.]] NRP did not find that and, given the nature of the research findings we reported on phonics, I would be surprised if the statement were true).”¹⁶ [[AUTHOR: IS THERE AN OPEN PARENS. MISSING IN PRECEDING QUOTE?]] Nonetheless, integrated phonics curriculum materials — with decodable texts, of course — have become the standard for schools wishing to purchase “scientific” curriculum materials with federal Reading First dollars.

Then there is the assertion in PRF that “systematic and explicit phonics instruction is particularly beneficial for children having difficulty learning to read” (p. 15). This statement flies in the face of the NRP finding that “phonics instruction failed to exert a significant impact on the reading performance of low-achieving readers in 2nd through 6th grade” (p. 2-133). Evidence notwithstanding, phonics programs now seem the recommended strategy for addressing the problems of older struggling readers in the federal Reading First initiative.

I could go on, but I think the point has been made. We are faced with a substantial federally funded dissemination effort that is disseminating not research findings but “belief and myth.” This is ideology trumping evidence. And this is the one thing that has me upset.

I must note that I’ve been writing professionally for more than 30 years, and nothing I’ve ever written suggests that acquiring decoding proficiencies is not a critical aspect of early reading development, as Shanahan notes in this issue. In addition, I believe that it makes no sense to teach children any aspect of decoding without providing them the opportunity to practice that aspect while reading connected text. But there is no evidence that creating the artificial but highly decodable texts that have pigs doing jigs is necessary to foster effective decoding proficiency.

There is also no evidence that an add-on phonics pro-

gram doesn't work as well as an integrated phonics program. Struggling readers go off track in many ways, but most older struggling readers aren't just poor decoders. Some are, and those students should be provided useful decoding lessons. But the documented blanket prescriptions for a one-size-fits-all phonics intervention will fail most of these struggling readers.¹⁷

MAPLES OR OAKS?: IGNORING THE FOREST WHILE DEBATING TREES

Like McCardle and Chhabra, I champion using research to inform instruction. Like Shanahan, I worry mostly about the few things that really matter in teaching children to read. In fact, I worry that this debate too often is like arguing about whether maple or oak trees make the better forest — even as the forest is being bulldozed by developers.

But I also worry that the many mandates for scientific reading instruction routinely ignore all the scientific evidence on how to develop children who will invest huge amounts of personal energy in reading and learning to read. Guthrie and Humenick, in their chapter in *The Voice of Evidence*, provide a meta-analysis of 22 studies. They found larger effect sizes than those produced by systematic phonics instruction (according to the NRP) for the following: 1) setting knowledge goals rather than performance goals; 2) providing students with choices about what to read, where, and with whom; 3) supplying interesting texts; and 4) allowing pupils to collaborate while reading.

Too many “scientific” reading programs now being implemented in Reading First schools meet none of these criteria. None of these four aspects of effective reading instruction are being used to evaluate Reading First programs, nor are they routinely incorporated into the Reading First professional development offerings. The focus is on the “five pillars” of reading as set forth by the NRP (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, [[AUTHOR: ISN'T “FLUENCY” THE FIFTH PILLAR?]] and fluency). Other pillars, just as important to any scientific conceptualization of evidence-based reading instruction (motivation, effective instructional grouping, matching texts to students' development and needs, extended-time opportunities, instructionally informative assessment, writing, expert tutoring, and so on) are being routinely ignored.

Because the NRP issued no “finding” on instructional grouping or on matching children with appropriate texts, we now see in the classroom curriculum materials in too many schools an emphasis on providing whole-class reading instruction using a “scientific” reading series with remediation. I believe this *anti*-scientific approach is

doomed to fail the very children I've long worried most about.

B_?_ [[FIRSTNAME?]] Taylor and her colleagues, studying schools enrolling mostly low-income students, found that a reliance on whole-group reading lessons was related to lower reading achievement.¹⁸ R_?_ [[FIRST NAME?]] O'Connor and her colleagues compared the effects of tutoring struggling readers with grade-level classroom materials versus tutoring them with materials matched to their reading levels.¹⁹ They conducted the study because they found a preponderance of whole-class instruction in [[AUTHOR: "IN" CORRECT HERE INSTEAD OF "AND," NO?]] remedial and special education programs using grade-level classroom materials in their lessons, materials often two or three years above the reading level of the struggling readers. Since selecting appropriate texts for instruction is the first step in designing effective lessons, they wondered why anyone would think that struggling readers would be well served by lessons from materials far above their reading levels. They found, not surprisingly, that tutoring with materials matched to a student's reading level was more effective, especially for the lowest-achieving students.

Taking this issue a step further, Anne McGill-Franzen and her colleagues conducted a content analysis of two popular "research-based" basal reader series approved for use in Reading First schools.²⁰ They found that the teacher manuals for these materials provided almost no support for adapting lessons to meet the needs of children who were reading below grade level. The program anthologies contained grade-level reading material almost exclusively. They raise the question, How could any reading program that provides a one-size-fits-all curriculum be considered scientific? Or effective for struggling readers? Nonetheless, it is just this sort of one-size-fits-all instruction that is being mandated and monitored in classrooms across the nation.

Taylor and her colleagues also found that "telling" as a teaching style was not related to improved reading. So instead of telling a child how to spell "nuts," the more effective teacher says, "Say it slow. What sounds do you hear?" Telling students potentially undermines the development of agency and independence; at least it preempts both. It isn't that telling is *always ineffective* but rather that *always telling* is ineffective. The single-minded focus on instructional explicitness diminishes the likelihood of developing the kinds of meta-cognitive awareness and self-regulation that are essential to proficient reading.²¹ As Peter Johnston argues, "The assumption that just being more explicit will make for better instruction assumes that language is simply a delivery system for information, a literal packaging of knowledge. It is not. Each utterance in a social interaction does much more work."²²

It probably isn't fair to point a finger at the NRP or *The Voice of Evidence* for all of this. Shanahan has noted a number of topics that the NRP considered important to investigate but had to ignore because of the constraints of time and money.²³ *The Voice of Evidence* calls attention to some of these issues but wholly neglects others. It isn't the case that no empirical research exists on these additional pillars of effective reading instruction. Rather, these pillars have largely been ignored in contemporary accounts of what research says about reading instruction. Because of these errors of omission, one has to wonder how many anti-scientific mandates for reading instruction will be promoted under the guise of being "research-based." Given all the attention paid to the five pillars, one also wonders why *The Voice of Evidence* didn't include more chapters on the neglected pillars.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

If policy makers are interested in what the research says (and I remain dubious²⁴), then there are several recommendations that must be considered. Here are three that would ease my concerns.

- Any future attempts by policy makers to identify what the research says should, as suggested by Gregory Camilli, Paula Wolfe, and `??` [[FIRST NAME?]] Smith, go through an open request for proposals and an open competition for the funds to complete the task.²⁵ Adequate funding, an explicit scope of work, and a reasonable time line are essential. My hunch is that, if such a process had been followed for the NRP report and for *The Voice of Evidence*, then the advice offered in both might look very different.

- The reports generated through such competitions should go through a rigorous peer review before being released for public consumption. Again, both the NRP report and *The Voice of Evidence* would have been improved by such a process. Perhaps even a process of "adversarial collaboration," as advocated by McCardle and Chhabra in this issue, should be required before any future reports of this sort are released.

- Any "plain language" summaries of the reports should be written by (or at least vetted by) teams from national professional organizations (e.g., the National Education Association, International Reading Association, National Reading Conference, American Educational Research Association). Perhaps members of these groups will have fewer difficulties translating scientific findings into comprehensible output (here I am just slipping in a bit of reading researcher jargon).

Honestly, though, I remain largely unconvinced that such undertakings are very productive or necessary. I don't believe that attempting to mandate national curriculum

content and instructional method is an appropriate role for federal bureaucrats and policy makers. In my view, Congress and federal agencies should be supporting the adequacy of educational opportunity while encouraging experimentation and documentation. Rather than attempting to restrict the professional autonomy of educators or usurp the legal authority of state and local school boards, federal policy makers should be focused on fostering innovation and improvement. The actual role of research is to invent and document improved procedures for teaching children to read rather than to report on horse-race-type comparisons of old, tired programs and packages.

The best evidence on effective instruction that we can garner is fragile evidence, often stripped of any external validity. Almost every curriculum scheme works in some sites, and none has ever worked well everywhere. That has been the finding time after time when state and federal educational initiatives have been evaluated.²⁶ I remain puzzled by the faith that policy makers vest in packaged programs as the solution to the nation's reading ills. I'm puzzled because programs, packages, bundles, and projects seem largely impotent compared, for instance, to the absolute potency of local capacity. Report after report points to local capacity — usually a blend of variables including expertise, commitment, and financial resources — as the key factor in improving schooling and thereby improving student achievement. I know of no evidence that following the tightly scripted lessons from any reading program has ever succeeded in building local capacity or even building teacher expertise. However, there is much evidence that mandating a “scientific” instructional package will fail to improve teaching or learning if local capacity is limited or wholly lacking.²⁷

Nonetheless, federal policy makers have blindly assumed that American teachers have been using the wrong programs and packages and that by changing that fact alone, reading instruction and reading achievement will improve. The evidence for this sort of magical thinking is slim at best. It is only by fostering 1) teacher expertise about how readers develop and how teachers can help and 2) personal professional accountability for the reading development of each child under our watch that we might hope to ever leave no child behind.

We know some things about how we might foster teacher expertise. Both the NRP and the chapter by Louisa Moats in *The Voice of Evidence* offer useful advice, as do a wealth of other sources.²⁸

I believe the evidence indicates that professional accountability emerges only with professional autonomy. No one has ever taken personal responsibility for a failed plan imposed from above and afar. I think the evidence demonstrates that increased expertise is more likely as profes-

sional autonomy and accountability are enhanced.²⁹ And I think that much of the anger in the debate over the NRP report, over *The Voice of Evidence*, and over recent federal policy generally stems from the fact that none of these attempts to improve reading instruction truly champions either the development of expertise or the expansion of professional autonomy. And that failure suggests a tragic disregard for the voice of evidence.

There is a useful role for research in improving the teaching of reading. But that role is limited because the research available is limited in many ways. As the full NRP report continually reminded us, the evidence is contingent at best and incomplete too often. But a federal campaign to impose particular one-size-fits-all instructional materials and methods on America's children and their teachers is neither scientific nor productive. At worst, it seems to be an ideologically and entrepreneurially driven agenda that has co-opted the research and too many researchers. America's children deserve better.

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9. Timothy Shanahan, "Response to Elaine Garan," *Language Arts*, vol. 79, 2001, p. 71.
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14. *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read* (Washington, D.C.: NICHD, 2000), p. 2-137. As Garan has done in this issue, I will cite in text the chapter number and the page number from the *Reports of the Subgroups*.
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