



edited by
Richard D. Allington

BIG BROTHER
AND
NATIONAL
READING
CURRICULUM

How Ideology Trumped Evidence

*Big Brother and the National
Reading Curriculum*

How Ideology Trumped Evidence

Richard L. Allington

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HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Credits continue on p. 304.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Big brother and the national reading curriculum : how ideology trumped evidence / [edited by] Richard Allington.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-325-00513-3 (alk. paper)

1. Reading—United States. 2. National Reading Panel (U.S.).

I. Allington, Richard L.

LB1050 .B52 2002

372.4'0973—dc21

2002009620

Editor: Lois Bridges

Production editor: Sonja S. Chapman

Cover design: Lisa Fowler

Cover photo: Scott Barrow Inc./Superstock

Compositor: House of Equations, Inc.

Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

06 05 04 03 02 VP 1 2 3 4 5

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INTRODUCTION

*Setting the Stage for the
Federalization of American
Reading Instruction*

1 ■ Troubling Times: A Short Historical Perspective

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American education, and especially reading instruction, is once again under attack. In many respects, this attack isn't much different than earlier ones: The politicians and pundits unrelentingly bemoan the low levels of academic performance demonstrated by children and adolescents and criticize the recalcitrance of the education profession to address the problem. National reports concerning the failure of American schools to educate students well have been around for more than a century. Media reports on what high school or college students don't know have been an almost annual event for the better part of the past century (Bracey, 1997). Compelling narratives of personal illiteracy, even after years of school attendance, continue to appear in books, television documentaries, and promotional materials for various products, programs, and political movements.

So what's new? Why should anyone be concerned about *this* campaign to improve schools, teaching, and reading instruction? More attention to these things usually means more money to fund educational improvement attempts. It means that this time around, and Lord knows more money would help.

Whether or not the most recent attacks on reading education mean more money, I am concerned about the campaign to convince everyone that not only is there a reading crisis, but that those in the education profession have routinely ignored “scientific evidence” detailing the nature and form of effective reading instruction. I’m concerned that this supposed ignoring of the evidence is being used to justify an unwarranted federal intrusion for control of the reading curriculum.

I’m worried about this new push for “evidence-based” instruction because, as the articles in this volume demonstrate, the scientific evidence we do have about teaching and learning to read is now being selectively reviewed, distorted, and misrepresented by the very agents and agencies who should give us reliable reports of what the research says. I’m worried because ideology is trumping evidence at the moment and teaching and learning to read will be both be worse for it.

In this chapter I hope to situate the current state of affairs in the recent historical context. It’s often my personal historical context, too, because I’ve now spent thirty-five years worrying and thinking about children who struggle in learning to read.

Thirty Years as Reading Researcher

For thirty of those thirty-five years I’ve worked as a reading researcher. I’ve conducted experimental, quasi-experimental, descriptive, correlational, and qualitative research studies, mostly on reading instruction in elementary classrooms and resource rooms. Most of those studies were funded by one governmental agency or another. Most were conducted in collaboration with colleagues who made me think about the problems we were studying in ways that would never have occurred me without their insistence.

I also worked as a professor, primarily teaching graduate courses to aspiring teachers of reading. I was a member of an author team that developed several reading series for one of the major textbook publishers. I authored or coauthored a number of professional books and lots of research and professional journal articles. I also helped raise five children, now grown.

In each of these roles I've relied on "what the research says" to guide my decisions. My teaching drew heavily on research, especially the research I was most invested in—my own. As a basal author I drew on the research about more effective lesson designs. When one of my sons had difficulty learning to read, the research helped guide my family's decisions about appropriate (and inappropriate) interventions. The books I've written or helped write have likewise drawn upon the research, and they have been far more successful than any of us involved had optimistically expected. My experiences suggest that the notion that educators have largely ignored the available research is simply wrong.

A few years ago, I decided that I wouldn't continue working for the basal publisher I'd worked with for over a decade. I made this decision primarily over the issue of author authority, of who would have the authority to make final decisions about the design of a program that would have had my name listed as an author. My concerns had been heightened by the passage of a Texas State Board of Education regulation requiring that all reading series submitted for adoption in the state must include texts that were 80 percent decodable. There was no research supporting this mandate—none. So I went public on the issue. (See Chapter 9 for more details on the lack of research.) A corporate vice-president, asserting that my public comments on this topic, and others, might harm sales—a hint of a gag order—essentially forced my decision to leave the author team.

The publisher was worried about losing its sales in Texas (and other states) if its series did not include the mandated decodable texts. And because those in the business of producing reading textbooks are judged more on their sales than on their reliance on the research, it had a right to be concerned. As it turned out, the publisher created decodable texts—as did virtually every other publisher—and made money in Texas and other states. But it made that money by ignoring scientific evidence at the behest of ideological policy mandates.

It is probably easier for a professor to stand on principle than it is for the publisher or editor of a basal series. Neither my regular paycheck nor my career were threatened by my terminating the relationship with the publisher. My experience with

publishers over the years had led me to believe that they were keenly interested in producing reading programs that helped teachers develop children's reading proficiencies, and that they were interested in using research to design those programs. But instead, publishers have been essentially driven to produce what politicians and policy makers in the big textbook adoption states (California, Florida, and Texas) mandate, even when the mandates don't reflect the available research.

I admit it, I am not a strident anti-basalist. But over the years I have become more concerned that the purchase of basal reading series has the potential for producing unintended negative effects.

My primary concern is that in adopting a reading series, a school district's officials might think they have purchased a reading curriculum. They may also believe that they don't have to worry about teachers who aren't very expert in the teaching of reading, because they think teachers can just follow the instructional guides that accompany each series. But there is a long history of research that indicates that teachers, and teacher expertise, matter much more than which reading series a school district might choose. (I must point out that Peter Johnston first raised this issue with me, and it was only after those discussions that I began to understand Pat Shannon's [1989] arguments about deskilling—but that's another story.) The reliable evidence on the importance of expertise in reading instruction is being routinely ignored, distorted, or misrepresented in policy talk and in the popular press (Shaker & Heilman, 2002). Even more pointedly, the reading achievement of American students is routinely misrepresented to the public (Bracey, 2002). Because it is the supposedly inferior (and even declining) reading performance of American students that is driving so much of the current reform agenda, it seems important to briefly review the status of American reading achievement.

The Status of American Reading Achievement

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data indicate that reading achievement has remained relatively stable

for thirty years. Obviously, it is difficult to make an argument that things are getting worse. Have American schools been failing to teach children to read for a long time? Such questions are hard to answer with much precision, but the evidence that's available indicates that more kids read better today than at any point in our nation's history. To go back further than the NAEP data, we need to consider the test re-norming data, for instance. Test publishers re-norm standardized tests regularly. And every time publishers re-norm their reading tests, average reading achievement has risen. In other words, reading achievement has risen slowly but steadily since the turn of the century (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Kibby, 1995). But more children attend school, and attend for more years, than they did in the early 1900s or in the 1940s. As a result, good reading is simply more common and low levels of literacy are less common. There is simply no evidence that American reading achievement has declined. None. Even the National Research Council (Snow, Burns, & Griffen, 1998) opened its *Preventing Reading Difficulties* report with the following assertion:

Current difficulties in reading largely originate from rising demands for literacy, not from declining absolute levels of literacy.
(p.1)

In fact, the reading achievement of fourth-grade students has inched up on each assessment since 1988. The achievement levels have risen primarily in states that have invested heavily in teacher development. There's little progress evident in the states that have invested heavily in testing and curriculum standards (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

NAEP PROFICIENCY LEVELS

Politicians are, nevertheless, relentless in their proclaiming that 40 percent of American fourth graders cannot read independently—and that more testing and more phonics will solve this rampant illiteracy. American students cannot read even simple texts with understanding, they say. Cannot read at all, they rant (Sweet, 1997). And, more recently, that 70 percent of urban fourth graders cannot read independently. This evidence means that

American schools are still failing, and American educators are inept, or ignorant, or both. *Something* must be done!

And once again, that something seems to be testing and accountability mandates that further shift educational decisions away from the classrooms, schools, districts, and even states, placing increasing authority at the federal level. But the NAEP scores have not dropped. Just the opposite—they have risen a bit in recent years. So how is it that 40 percent of kids cannot read?

First of all, it is simply not true that 40 percent of American fourth graders cannot read independently. It's just not true. Such a misleading notion may result from the fact that the NAEP proficiency levels—Basic, Proficient, Advanced—used to report reading performances are substantially flawed. Both the General Accounting Office (GAO) and the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences (Pellegrino, Jones, & Mitchell, 1999) have recommended that their use be discontinued because the proficiency levels mislead the public and politicians.

Here's why. Achieving Basic proficiency at the fourth-grade level requires children to demonstrate an overall understanding of what they have read when they read texts that are appropriate for fourth-grade students. They must be able to summarize the basic story elements and make connections between the text and their own experiences (Williams, Reese, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Phillips, 1995, p. 4). In other words, kids who achieve the Basic level should have literal comprehension of grade-appropriate texts. To achieve the Basic level requires what has historically been considered on-grade-level reading performance. (To achieve the Proficient level a student must be able to read grade-appropriate texts and draw conclusions, make inferences, and make connections to their own experiences.)

All we really know about the students who fail to achieve the Basic level on the NAEP reading assessments is that they were not able to read fourth-grade texts with literal comprehension. That's it. It may be that they can read fourth-grade texts accurately but without comprehension. Or maybe they can read accurately and with comprehension, but so slowly that they fail to complete enough passages and tasks to achieve the Basic level

score in the time allotted. They may not be able to read some of the words in a fourth-grade passage, but do fine when reading texts typically used in third grade (or second, or first). They may be able to read texts on familiar topics with comprehension, but have difficulty when reading about unfamiliar topics. At least, these are the sorts of things that NAEP informational materials suggest might be true of the 40 percent (actually it is 38 percent) of students who fail to achieve the Basic proficiency level.

What we do know is that it is patently false to suggest that these students are non-readers or that they cannot read independently or cannot read simple children's books.

Historically, half of school children read below grade level. Grade level has been defined as the average reading achievement level at any particular grade. As with any average, half the population is, by definition, above average and half is below average. But using average performance as a benchmark for elementary school reading achievement was seriously flawed. As achievement rose, so did the average, and so did the fourth-grade (or second-grade or sixth-grade) level of difficulty. So the NAEP folks decided to develop stable, or fixed, benchmarks. They then set three difficulty levels and labeled them Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. When these levels were first used a decade ago, a little more than half of fourth-grade students achieved the Basic proficiency level, which suggests that the Basic level was set somewhere near the traditional fourth-grade reading level. In other words, since about half of the kids scored above Basic and about half below it, Basic proficiency approximated what had historically been considered reading on grade level.

The problem seems to be in the use of the term *basic*. "Basic proficiency" has connotations of a dumbed down, of "minimal competence," of something less than on-grade-level reading achievement. For whatever reason, the press, the public, and, yes, the politicians, understood Basic very differently from the NAEP designers. This misunderstanding is one of the reasons that the GAO and the NRC recommended that the NAEP stop using those proficiency levels. But the ranking of American students on international literacy assessments also played a role.

THE INTERNATIONAL LITERACY STUDIES

Probably the best-kept secret in the reading world is the fact that the reading performance of American fourth graders ranked second in the world (Elley, 1992). American adolescents ranked lower, but right in the middle, in that assessment, and again ranked in the middle in the most recent assessment (fourth graders were not tested in the most recent round). In other words, early adolescents in the U.S. read as well as the average early adolescent in the international arena (Elley, 1992; NCES, 2001).

The fact that our elementary school children ranked quite a bit better than our adolescents indicated that reading instruction in middle schools and high schools could be improved. The rankings in the study where both elementary and adolescent achievement were measured indicate that American students demonstrated substantially less reading development between ages nine and fifteen than did students in most other nations (Allington, 2001). Given this information, I'm not sure why so much attention has been paid to K-4 reading instruction and so little to reading instruction in grades five through ten.

So the international comparisons indicate that our elementary schools are doing a good job teaching reading, compared to elementary schools worldwide, but that reading instruction in our middle and high schools needs improvement. I'll buy that. But, like the NRC and GAO, I won't buy the ideological sales pitch

Top Ten Nations Ranked by Fourth-Grade Reading Achievement

1. Finland
2. United States
3. Sweden
4. France
5. Italy
6. New Zealand
7. Norway
8. Iceland
9. Hong Kong
10. Singapore

Source: Elley, W. B. (1992). *How in the world do students read?* The Hague, Netherlands: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

that tries to convince me that lots of our fourth graders cannot read at all. I won't buy the argument that this indicates that more federal control of education is needed.

THE RICH/POOR READING ACHIEVEMENT GAP

What I do find enormously troubling is the difference in reading achievement exhibited by children from families of different income levels. The NAEP reading data provide strong evidence of the extent of the rich/poor achievement gap. For instance, twice as many (58 percent) poor fourth-grade students scored below the Basic proficiency level as students who were not poor (27 percent). Far fewer poor students (13 percent) achieved the Proficient level, compared to 40 percent of their peers from more advantaged families (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999, p. 82).

We hear more about the problems of urban schools than we do about the rich/poor achievement gap. But more kids live in rural areas than in urban centers. We hear about the black/white achievement gap, but the rich/poor gap is larger. American schools have never found it as easy to educate poor kids as they do rich kids (indeed, poor kids don't fare well in most countries). So why has the problem so rarely been characterized as a problem of poverty? A problem of vastly uneven income distribution? Why is it a "school" problem as opposed to, say, a "wages" problem? Or an income problem, a salary inequity problem, or a social safety net problem? I'll leave such issues to my colleagues who have spent far more time considering them (Coles, 1998; Kozol, 1991; Shannon, 1998), but it does seem just too convenient that the failure of poor kids to fare as well as other kids is seen almost exclusively as a school problem by politicians and their corporate sponsors.

[It] does seem just too convenient that the failure of poor kids to fare as well as other kids is seen almost exclusively as a school problem by politicians and their corporate sponsors.

I also worry about the troubling recent trend that has the reading achievement of the best readers rising, while the achievement

of the poorest readers remains steady or declines (NCES, 2001). I worry that recent educational policies have resulted in decisions that are working to reverse a twenty-year trend of narrowing the gap between rich and poor children. As more and more testing takes place and more and more accountability policies are put into practice, the rich seem to be getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Raising average reading achievement in a school or district can be accomplished by raising the reading levels of any group of kids, as long as no group has its performance decline. Focusing greater instructional resources on the higher achieving students may be the most cost-effective method for raising average reading achievement levels. Moving a few more high-achieving kids into to the top reading category (the NAEP's Advanced, for instance) typically takes less effort than moving the lowest achieving students up to the target standard (the NAEP's Basic).

What I've learned from thirty years of doing research in high-poverty schools is that those schools could do better, but it would cost more. Schools in poor communities usually don't have funding that's on a par with schools in wealthier communities

In addition to proclaiming that 40 percent of fourth graders cannot read (or read independently, or read a simple book), powerful politicians and policy makers have recently asserted that the NAEP data show 70 percent of urban fourth graders fell below the Basic proficiency level. Imagine that, seven out of ten city kids cannot read well enough to achieve the Basic performance level. But wait! Once again, these folks who are so concerned with "scientific evidence" seem to have a difficult time getting their numbers right. The NAEP data show that 47 percent of the fourth-grade students in central cities failed to achieve the Basic level (Bracey, 2001). Not 70 percent—47 percent. The NAEP data also show that 60 percent of poor children, children eligible for free lunches, fail to meet the Basic level. There is that poverty problem again—more evidence that the most serious reading problem is the problem of teaching poor kids, most of whom do not live in big cities and most of whom are not members of an ethnic or linguistic minority. Most of whom are just poor.

Source: Bracey, G. W. (2001). The condition of public education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83, 157-169.

(Kozol, 1991). The U.S. educational system is structured such that wealthy communities have well-supported schools and poor communities have poorly supported schools. This spending pattern holds true even in large districts, where the highest-poverty schools typically employ the least experienced, least credentialed, and therefore the least expensive and least expert teachers. Schools serving many poor children, then, often have more limited capacity—less expertise—than other schools.

Even though schools in high-poverty communities have less money to spend and more limited capacity, there is some evidence that the instructional outcomes are often not very different from those achieved in many schools in better advantaged communities (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997). That's hard to believe, but the evidence is both scientific and compelling.

The Baltimore Beginning School Study, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), gathered student reading achievement data from the beginning of grade one to the end of grade six. Researchers had randomly selected almost eight hundred students from schools in high-poverty and economically better-advantaged neighborhoods. Reading achievement was measured each fall and spring to allow comparisons during the school year and during summer vacation. The researchers concluded their longitudinal study by noting that "the achievement levels of children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds increase on par with those from favored economic backgrounds when school is open" (Entwisle et al., 1997, p. 152).

The researchers found that the reading of poor kids improved just as much as the reading of their wealthier peers, *during the school year*. Teachers and programs in the high-poverty schools were just as effective at developing literacy skills and strategies as those in schools in wealthier communities.

But every summer the poor kids' reading achievement experienced a setback. They tested lower in September, at the end of summer vacation, than they had in June (about three months lower). Children from more-advantaged homes experienced no similar setback. In fact, they typically tested a little higher in September than they had in June. Thus, every two or three years,

this summer setback expanded the achievement gap by one additional year. By sixth grade the gap stood at more than two years.

Other researchers have studied this phenomenon and reported similar results (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2001), but this research has largely been ignored in attempting to address the rich/poor achievement gap. The problem is poverty. The best indicator of whether children will improve their reading or suffer a setback during the summer months is simply whether they read during the summer. Rich kids read, poor kids don't. Rich kids have books in the home and bookstores in the neighborhood, and poor kids don't (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Purchasing books and magazines requires both opportunity and discretionary income. Both are in short supply in poor communities.

But summer setback has hardly ever been on the policy makers' agenda, even though the scientific evidence has been accumulating for almost thirty years (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2001). Politicians, policy makers, and pundits have been more likely to name poor parenting, poor teaching, lack of initiative, or some other personal failing of the victims as the source of the reading achievement gap. Even among educators and educational researchers, such explanations were more common than interventions aimed at minimizing summer reading loss. The limited access that poor children have to books and magazines in their schools, neighborhoods, and homes has barely been on the federal agenda, or on the agenda of state and local reform initiatives. The negative portrayals of high-poverty schools led us to ignore what the scientific evidence suggests is the most critical factor in fostering the reading achievement gap—opportunity to read.

THE ADULT LITERACY SURVEY

The average citizen has been so steeped in negative information about the literacy performance of Americans, both children and adults, that even horrendously inaccurate information on reading achievement is seldom questioned. The best recent example of this phenomenon comes from the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). That 1993 report, issued by the National Center for

Educational Statistics (NCES), indicated that 47 percent of American adults were largely illiterate, scoring in the two lowest levels of literacy. One of five adults scored in the lowest literacy band. Imagine that! Almost half of the adults studied could not interpret information from a simple newspaper article. No more evidence was needed that our schools were failing. The political calls for educational reform, accountability through more testing, and higher standards poured forth. Something had to be done and, obviously, educators could not be trusted to know what to do. Neither could local school boards or local educational leaders. Thus, federal educational reform began to focus on mandates for the adoption of “proven programs” and schoolwide, systemic reform. The educational system was broken.

But in a reanalysis of the very same adult literacy data, researchers discovered that the original statisticians “misread the data” (Baron, 2002). A correct reading of the evidence indicates that fewer than 5 percent of American adults were illiterate. Two-thirds of that group never completed high school, and a quarter were immigrants. So much for the notion that U.S. schools have failed to produce a literate population. But have you read the headlines announcing the reanalysis? Probably not, unless you read *Education Week* or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In fact, the week after the new analysis was announced, enclosed with my utility bill was a pamphlet noting that “more than four of ten American adults” have serious reading problems.

The most interesting bit about this fiasco is how many of us—yes, us: you and me and our educator colleagues—bought the original report hook, line, and sinker. Same goes for the news media. We should be expert enough, and they should have been cynical enough, to ask: Where do all these adult illiterates live? Think about it, half the population unable to read a newspaper. Where are these folks? How could we have believed that half of the folks sitting in church with us were illiterate. Couldn’t read the Bible or the hymnal! That half the folks at the local high school play or concert were illiterate. Couldn’t read the program. That half the folks at Home Depot couldn’t read the labels or the signs. But we bought it. The public bought it. Probably even the politicians bought it. What’s worse is that the same phenomenon

is still occurring: It is the worst news about schools that most often makes the news, that drives our thinking about teaching and learning to read and what needs to be done.

CONCLUSION

I'll grant that American schools could be improved, and that we could improve children's reading proficiency, but it seems to me it that it's almost time for a national celebration of what we have accomplished to this point (at least in our elementary schools). I'll grant that the rich/poor achievement gap is a terribly pressing problem and that we must develop school programs that do more to address it. I'll even grant that there's a body of research that might guide us in these efforts. But I will also argue, just as the National Research Council did, that

If we have learned anything from this effort, it is that effective teachers are able to craft a special mix of instructional ingredients for every child they work with. (Snow, et al., 1998, p. 2)

In other words, I will argue that we have compelling scientific evidence that it is teachers and their expertise that matter the most in solving both problems—evidence that seems largely ignored in the current policy-making environment.

No Such Thing as a Proven Program

The early evidence about the primacy of the teacher effect came from the First Grade Studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). The researchers concluded their large-scale multisite study of the effectiveness of different reading series with the recommendation that, "Future research might well center on teacher and learning situation characteristics rather than methods and materials" (p. 123). They arrived at this conclusion when multiple studies conducted by multiple researchers across the nation provided no clear evidence of the superiority of any one reading series or any particular approach to teaching reading. In other words, nothing worked everywhere and everything worked somewhere.

Likewise, a decade later, the independent evaluators of the Follow Through Project (House, Glass, McLean, & Walker, 1978), another large-scale evaluation of different early education programs, indicated that none of the intervention curricula, including Direct Instruction, produced consistently superior results. None consistently outperformed early education classes that were not using a special intervention program. The evaluators' terse conclusion, "If the concentrated effort of highly competent and well-funded sponsors with a few sites cannot produce uniform results from locality to locality, it seems doubtful that any model program could" (p. 154), summarized one consistent finding in educational research: Programs don't teach, teachers do.

Thus, similar findings (Pogrow, 2000; Venezky, 1998) concerning the inconsistency of the politically popular Success For All program should surprise no one. Nor should we be surprised to observe that districts across the country are dropping Direct Instruction and Success For All programs, even while other districts are adding them. Nor should we be surprised that many districts are looking to replace one basal reading series with another. Everyone is hoping for the magic potion, the quick fix to the reading ills of the school, the district, the state.

PROVEN PROGRAM ADOPTION AS AN ADMISSION OF LIMITED LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Expert teachers produce readers regardless of the reading series they are mandated to use (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Collins-Block, & Morrow, 2001). Expert teachers alter and modify reading programs to better meet the needs of their students. Expert teachers simply ignore mandates and go about teaching all their students to read. But it is the absence of expertise—let's call it naivete—that leads teachers and administrators to hope upon hope that a new reading series or new intervention program will solve all their woes. It is a sad day when school-district administrators flaunt their limited expertise about effective teaching—their naivete—and publicly announce the purchase of a "proven program." I would think most school administrators would be more than a bit embarrassed to admit they have so little capacity for educational problem solving that they

are buying someone else's idea of what might work. It is an even sadder day when a teachers' union (in this case, the American Federation of Teachers) flaunts its naivete by demanding that "proven programs" be implemented in the schools where their members work.

The notion of "proven programs" is simply so wrongheaded that it is hard to believe that it has such widespread currency in the current debates on reforming reading instruction. Can you

But it is the absence of expertise—let's call it naivete—that leads teachers and administrators to hope upon hope that a new reading series or new intervention program will solve all their woes.

imagine a "proven" emergency room program? One that provides the emergency room physician with a script to follow? A "one size fits all" script, identical for every patient from the one with

appendicitis to the one with an arrow lodged in the forehead? A script that ignores the expertise of the physician? That ignores that available diagnostic evidence on the medical condition?

Good teaching may actually be more complicated than emergency room medicine is, if only because of the sheer number of students (patients) that need near-constant attention and the general lack of support staff to help attend to those students' needs.

The key question that needs to be asked more often is this: Which would you prefer for your child or grandchild—an expert and engaging teacher who has a mediocre reading program available, or a mediocre teacher with a "proven" reading program? The ideal might seem to be an expert and engaging teacher with a "proven" reading program. But no proven programs make mediocre teachers expert and engaging. The expert and engaging teacher doesn't really need the proven program. In fact, if provided with that program, the expert teacher will reject it or tailor it until it no longer is recognizable.

It isn't that expert primary grade teachers don't use commercial reading programs; they do (Pressley, Allington, et al., 2001). But they dip into those programs selectively rather than using them as designed. They supplement the programs, perhaps because no reading series has ever contained enough reading

“The biggest impediment to substantive [change] . . . has been the [federal] push for schools to adopt comprehensive schoolwide reform models. Having a vendor take over the curriculum and staff development for a school and provide a one-size-fits-all model is much simpler than struggling to implement improvement principles.

The rhetoric claiming that the effectiveness of the schoolwide reform model has been proven is belied by the fact that during the past decade—when this approach predominated—the achievement gap widened for the first time in decades.

Why would anyone think that a one-size-fits-all schoolwide reform model would work effectively for such a complex process as teaching—especially in schools dealing with an increasingly diverse student body? True leadership occurs when a school or district gets it own act together instead of looking for an outside savior to take control of its basic professional functions and provide a quick fix. A quick fix does not exist.”

Source: Pogrow, S. (2002). Avoiding comprehensive school reform models. *Educational Leadership*, 58, 82–83.

material to develop proficient readers. The reading series do offer stories or book excerpts as reading material, and they offer a lesson structure that may make sense for some kids on some days. But the series too often fill up reading lesson time with lots of mindless activity, typically an incoherent array of lower-order tasks and assignments. The criticisms of reading series as a primary reading curriculum go back the full hundred years of debate on improving American reading instruction and enhancing reading achievement.

So why now, one might ask, are “one size fits all” reading series being touted as the next best fix? Why is it that federal and state agencies are now so interested in whether a reading series is based on “scientific research”?

THE 10 PERCENT FALLACY

There is gossip about, gossip that suggests that mandating a “proven program” is necessary because the research says most teachers are not well prepared to teach children to read. For instance, United States Senator Thad Cochran (1997) stated that

The National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) findings underscore the need to do a better job of training teachers, as researchers found fewer than 10 percent of teachers actually know how to teach reading to children who don't learn to read automatically. I am surprised that the Education Department hasn't looked into this study and found a way to effectively get the information to teachers, schools, parents, and, most importantly, teacher colleges. (P. S6002)

Representative Bill Goodling (1998), chairman of the United States House of Representatives Education and Workforce Committee, repeats this statistic

Fewer than 10 percent of teachers have been taught to teach reading. (p. 1)

This incantation was picked up and disseminated by the popular press. *USA Today* (May 17, 2000) editorialized on the topic, noting that

The effect of teacher colleges' recalcitrance is dramatic: Only about 10 percent of the nation's elementary teachers have the skills to teach phonics effectively, estimate researchers at the National Institutes of Health.

But where do these politicians and the press get such information? What evidence is available to support their assertions?

Actually, tracking down the source of the assertions was relatively easy. The first report I found was offered by Heritage Foundation writer Tyce Palmaffy (1997). In an interview with NICHD bureaucrat G. Reid Lyon, Lyon cites his survey on teachers' perceived adequacy of their preparation (Lyon, Vaasen, & Toomey, 1989). Later Lyon (1997) himself testified before the House Workforce and Education Committee that

Unfortunately, several recent studies and surveys of teacher knowledge about reading development and difficulties indicate that many teachers are under prepared to teach reading. . . . In reading education, teachers are frequently presented with a "one size fits all" philosophy that emphasizes either a "whole language" or

“phonics” orientation to instruction. No doubt, this parochial type of preparation places many children at continued risk for reading failure. (p. 9)

But is this what Lyon’s 1989 study found (Lyon, Vassen, & Toomey, 1989)? This survey of approximately four hundred teachers reported that most education students had not observed their professors demonstrating “methods of reading instruction tailored to children’s differing needs.” But given the structure of teacher education, it is hardly surprising that few students had observed their professors demonstrating instructional strategies with children. On the other hand, only 22 percent of regular education and 12 percent of special education teachers responded “no” to a survey question that asked whether their undergraduate teacher education had “adequately prepared me to meet the educational needs of a diverse student population” (78 percent and 88 percent, respectively, of the two groups reported that their preparation had generally prepared them to meet this challenge). Nothing in the study, however, suggests that 90 percent of teachers don’t “know how to teach reading to the children who don’t learn automatically,” as Senator Cochrane suggested. Nothing in the study indicates that teacher education provides a “one size fits all” philosophy, as Lyon testified.

There seems no other “scientific” evidence to support either the 10 percent assertion or the “one size fits all” assertion. For this study to be accepted as reliable evidence of either assertion requires ignoring self-reported teacher satisfaction data from the study (the vast majority felt they had been well prepared) while accepting as fact the responses to a series of unsupported hypothetical characteristics of effective teacher preparation programs.

It is easier for me to understand how a writer from the conservative Heritage Foundation or a conservative politician might misinterpret the study than to understand how the Learning First Alliance (LFA) could do the same. The LFA is a consortium of education professional organizations, including the two major teacher unions (but not including any literacy-oriented professional organizations). The LFA (1998) similarly argued that preservice teacher education is often “discrepant with the research on effective methods” (p. 62), but cited no studies to

support this assertion. It couldn't—there are no such studies, only “estimates,” as *USA Today* noted, offered by bureaucrats from the NICHD.

ROCKET SCIENCE AND RESEARCH ON TEACHING TEACHERS
TO TEACH READING

Both the AFT (1999) and NICHD project director Louisa Moats (1997; 2000) make the same assertion about the shortcomings of teacher education and call for restructuring teacher education through mandated course content and teacher testing. But there are no scientific studies that support the assertion that teacher preparation is “nonscientific” or that it offers a “one size fits all” approach to teaching children to read.

So what evidence was offered to support such claims? The AFT offers none. In her testimony before the House Workforce and Education Committee (1997), and in her paper for the conservative Fordham Foundation (2000), Moats provides a good example of the unreliable evidence that seems to rule when it comes to bashing teachers and teacher education.

In both cases, Moats reported on the survey studies she had conducted in a paper first published (Moats, 1994) in *Annals of Dyslexia* (a later and adapted version was published in *American Educator*, the magazine of the American Federation of Teachers). Let's take a closer look at Moats' “research” (since the National Reading Panel didn't include it in its review of research on teacher preparation).

The data in this report come from eighty-nine surveys given at the beginning of “a number of classes” in a course titled Reading, Spelling, and Phonology. As science goes, this is already off to a shaky start because you can't assume that teachers who choose to take a course of this nature represent a random population. They might be from that minority of teachers who feel that their teacher preparation has not prepared them well to teach reading, or who have been mandated to use a multisensory phonics approach and felt they needed more expertise in phonology and the development of phonological skills. They cannot be said to reflect the expertise (or lack of it) of any representative body of teachers. Thus, Moats' study is unscientific from the get-go.

Interestingly, Moats notes that “about 10 percent” of the teachers who completed the course were unable to develop phonemic awareness during it. She suggests that teacher candidates be screened for phonological awareness before taking coursework and that they be “counseled” about the professional implications of their difficulties. It seems that it never occurred to Moats that someone might similarly counsel her about the effectiveness of the course design or the reliability of the testing she did for phonological awareness development. I have not been able to find a single study that indicates that a teacher’s phonological awareness is related to teaching effectiveness. It could be true, of course, but there is no scientific evidence that suggests it is.

Continuing on, Moats reports that this survey “revealed insufficiently developed concepts about language and pervasive conceptual weaknesses in the very skills that are needed for direct, language focused reading instruction” (p. 91). But she provides no evidence that teachers who had “sufficiently developed” skills taught differently or were more successful in developing children’s reading, writing, or spelling proficiencies. She argues that, while many of these teachers had developed adequate linguistic awareness to become personally literate, that linguistic awareness was not sufficient to allow them to teach reading and spelling “elements” explicitly to children. But she provides no evidence that supports that assertion. She also asserts that “lower-level language mastery” is as essential for teachers as anatomy is for physicians. That is an impressive claim, so impressive that the AFT used it as a basis for its suggested redesign of teacher education. But there is no scientific evidence to support the claim. None. Reporting on what seem to be the same survey data with the addition of responses from another class of teachers, Moats and Lyon (1996) repeat virtually the same assertions. And still no scientific evidence is offered in support of these claims. None. Nada. Ideology trumps evidence.

Finally, Moats, writing originally under the sponsorship of the International Dyslexia Association (1997), continued this line of argument in calling for a restructuring of teacher education programs. A later version of this report, *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science*, was circulated to its member colleges by the National

“When, for example, the federal government adopts a policy urging reading programs to be based on ‘reliable, replicable research’ and accompanies that legislation with a declaration that testimony before the adopting committee indicates that there have been ‘scientific breakthroughs’ in our knowledge that support direct phonics instruction, the result is a powerful legitimization of phonics-based instruction, quite independent of the extent to which this body of research is complete, accurate, or unchallenged.” (p. 331–332)

From: Boyd, W. L., & Mitchell, D. E. (2001). The politics of the reading wars. In T. Loveless (Ed.), *The great curriculum debate*. (pp. 299–342). Washington, DC: Brookings.

Commission on Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and was widely disseminated by the AFT (1999). All in all, it was an impressive public relations feat. It was even more impressive as a fraud perpetuated on the profession.

My calling this report fraudulent may seem harsh, but I will repeat myself: There was no reliable evidence to support either the implicit assertions or the explicit recommendations on the importance of teacher expertise in phonology, morphology, and so on. No reliable evidence supporting the assertion that 90 percent of teachers are incapable of teaching children to read. No reliable evidence that teacher education favors a narrow and unscientific approach to teaching reading. No reliable evidence that the recommended restructuring would improve reading instruction (or student reading achievement). None. Instead, the reports offered individual ideological interpretation of largely anecdotal information, unreliable “evidence” by anyone’s standards. Once again, ideology trumps evidence.

And yet the AFT, the LFA, and NCATE all bit on Moats’ recommendations. Moats may be onto something important that is missing from teacher preparation. I doubt it myself, but I hope that before anyone seriously considers making dramatic changes to teacher preparation, someone will produce reliable evidence to support Moats’ assertions and recommendations. It wouldn’t take a rocket scientist to conduct such a study. But in order to get reliable, unbiased evidence, the study should be conducted independently of Drs. Moats and Lyon, the AFT, the LFA, and NCATE.

Columnist William Raspberry (2000) wrote that educators, and especially professors of education, ignore research and promote fads in the teaching of reading:

[Doug] Carnine [the direct-instruction guru] says it's because the other programs are supported by what amounts to a closed circle of true believers—educators and educationists—for whom evidence is less important than faith.

Was Raspberry talking about Moats? About Lyons? About Senator Cochrane? About the AFT? The LFA? Unfortunately, no. But to accept that 90 percent of America's elementary teachers "don't know how to teach children who don't learn automatically" requires a reliance on faith, not evidence. To assert that a lack of knowledge of phonology is at the root of teachers' inadequacies also requires a huge leap of faith—again, no evidence links such knowledge with effective teaching (even effective teaching of dyslexics, which was Moats' original topic).

WHO BENEFITS FROM BASHING TEACHERS AND TEACHER EDUCATION?

What purpose is served by bashing elementary teachers' ability to teach reading? Or by bashing teacher preparation efforts? I see several possibilities. For one, if teacher preparation is so bad, maybe we should hire teachers without regard to whether they have earned teaching credentials. Columnist Thomas Sowell (2000) wrote

*Studies show no correlation between education courses and teaching success. Many private schools don't require such courses, and some don't even want to hire people who have been through such drivel. . . . So long as education courses drive away intelligent people, more money will just mean **more expensive incompetents** in the schools. [Emphasis added] (p. A16)*

There you have it: Credentialed teachers cost more! Of course, there is a substantial body of research contradicting Sowell's assertions about the impact of teacher education coursework, but then, he is a columnist, not a researcher, so how would he know?

Where does Sowell get his information? He writes,

A recent book—A Conspiracy of Ignorance by Martin Gross [2000]—says [teachers are drawn from] the bottom third, but in any case, we are talking about having our children taught by the dregs of the college-educated population.

Former secretary of education Bill Bennett (1998) also cited the Gross “study” in a *Washington Post* column about teacher capacity as a primary problem in reforming schools.

But Gerald Bracey (2002) notes that the key “study” Gross cites—one purported to show that teachers ranked in the bottom third of their high school class—does not exist. Gross says the study he’s referring to was completed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, but that department conducted no such study. Pennsylvania education officials note that gathering data on high school students’ grades and ranks and then linking that to college degree earning patterns would pose enormous difficulties. In fact, the evidence is actually quite different. But Gross said he had “heard about” the study in a campaign speech given by the governor of Pennsylvania. The governor couldn’t recall mentioning such a study.

On the other hand, Bruschi and Coley (1999) reported that

On average, teachers perform as well as other college-educated adults. . . . In prose literacy teachers score higher, on average, than managers and administrators . . . they perform at a similar level with lawyers, electrical engineers, accountants and auditors, financial managers, physicians. . . . There are large differences in earnings between teachers and other managerial and professional workers. Teachers rank near the bottom of the list [in earnings]. (p. 3)

The only area in which teachers were deficient compared to other similarly competent and qualified adults was earnings.

As far as the relationship between teaching credentials and student outcomes, Johnston (1999), Darling-Hammond (1996, 1999), Ferguson (1991), Ferguson and Ladd (1996), Fuller (1999), NCTAF (1997), Pearson (2001), and Wenglinsky (2000) all provide powerful quantitative evidence of the positive impact that teacher

education and quality professional development have on teaching quality and student achievement.

Darling-Hammond (1999) noted that the quality of a state's teaching force (measured in various ways) is a powerful predictor of student achievement levels, much more powerful than other factors, including student demographic characteristics and measures of school resources. Overall, teacher quality accounted for 40 to 60 percent of the variance in NAEP achievement for fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math. Likewise, Ferguson (1991) noted that in Texas the effect of teachers' academic qualifications and certification was such that "the large disparities between black and white students were almost entirely accounted for by differences in the qualifications of their teachers" (p. 8).

So much for ideological rantings about teachers' lack of intellectual quality and the impotence of teacher education. But how many politicians read Sowell's or Bennett's syndicated columns and how many read Bracey's book? How successful has this "teacher stupidification" campaign been in convincing the public, the press, and the politicians that expert teachers do not much matter in the quest to improve America's schools?

Is it any wonder that there is much political interest in alternative certification programs (e.g., Troops to Teachers, Teach For America) but little support for investing in improving teacher preparation or professional development programs? Is it any wonder that various interest groups keep insisting that anyone with a college degree should be allowed to try out teaching? But if America's elementary schools are filled with inexpert teachers, whether they're credentialed or uncredentialed, how will we ensure that our children will routinely receive high-quality reading instruction?

SCRIPTED CURRICULUM MATERIALS: "ONE SIZE FITS ALL" IS NOT A SOLUTION

One solution that's being touted as the "quick fix" for America's reading "problems" is the wider use of scripted curriculum materials, materials that have been "teacher-proofed." Sigfried Engleman, the advertising executive-turned-curriculum developer, asserted on the television show *20/20* that teachers need

not—and indeed could not—“reinvent the wheel,” but should instead rely on “proven” lesson scripts such as those provided by his direct-instruction materials. Thus the perceived problems of limited teacher intellectual quality and inexpert teacher preparation can be “solved” by using scripted instructional materials. If that were true, we wouldn’t have to worry about hiring people who graduated from college, much less people who completed a professional preparation program. Gosh, maybe even paraprofessionals with no college degree could teach reading. Think how much money that would save!

The problem with that argument is, a veritable trove of scientific research tells us that effective teaching is not standardized and cannot be scripted (Allington & Johnston, 2001;

Effective teachers do not offer the “one size fits all” lessons that Lyon (1997) decried, but if scripted curriculum materials are faithfully implemented, that is the only sort of lesson that will be offered.

Berliner, 1986; Haberman, 1995; Knapp, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Mendro, Bembry, & Jordan, 1998; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, et al., 2001; Ruddell, 1995; Spencer &

Spencer, 1993; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999). Studies of effective teachers quite consistently portray the nature of effective teaching as complex and based essentially on appropriate moment-by-moment instructional decision making. Effective teachers do not offer the “one size fits all” lessons that Lyon (1997) decried, but if scripted curriculum materials are faithfully implemented, that is the only sort of lesson that will be offered.

The available evidence suggests that more-effective teachers are better prepared and more likely to be credentialed than less-effective teachers are. As the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1997) noted,

What teachers know and understand about content and students shapes how judiciously they select from texts and other materials and how effectively they present material in class. Their skill in assessing their students’ progress also depends upon how deeply

they understand learning, and how well they can interpret students' discussions and written work. No other intervention can make the difference that a knowledgeable, skillful teacher can make in the learning process. (p. 8)

And,

Investments in teacher development produced far greater student achievement gains than [other] investments . . . spending on teacher education swamped other variables as the most productive investment for schools. (p. 9)

But investments in teacher development, both preservice and inservice, seem to be a less commonly used avenue for improving reading instruction than buying new phonics workbooks (or a new reading series) is.

In the end, it is the less-expert teacher who relies most heavily on packaged curriculum products. Doyle (1986) argued that when teachers are inexpert they tend to create “dumbed down” curricula that rely on seatwork and low-level tasks, because it takes expertise to develop and orchestrate complex academic tasks. Inexpert teachers are less successful than expert teachers at teaching children to read even when packaged curriculum products are available. Schools have only two sources for expertise: Buy it or create it.

Schools might look to hire only the most expert teachers, but there is little incentive for expert teachers to work in the least successful schools. It is these schools that are most likely to latch onto the highly structured reading programs and to exert pressure on teachers to use those programs just as the developer mandates. In those schools, being an expert or acting upon one's expertise is a potential liability.

McNeil (2000) demonstrated this dilemma in her study of mandated instruction in Houston:

They tried to teacher-proof the curriculum with a checklist for teaching behaviors and the student minimum competence skills tests. By doing so, they have made schools exceedingly comfortable for mediocre teachers who like to teach routine lessons

according to a standard sequence and format, who like working as de-skilled laborers not having to think about their work. They made being a Texas public school teacher extremely uncomfortable for those who know their subjects well, who teach in ways that engage their students, who want their teaching to reflect their own continued learning. (p. 187)

The expert teachers McNeil looked at found teaching more and more stressful as they had to teach against the grain of the mandates to act on their expertise. As one teacher told McNeil, "I am tired of having to lie to do my work" (p. 189).

Schools could work to create expert teachers, but it requires expertise to foster expertise in others. The short supply of such expertise is signaled when a school hops onto the proven-program bandwagon. It requires time and commitment to foster expertise. Far too many schools (and school districts) either have failed to buy (that is, hire) teachers with the expertise needed to offer effective reading lessons, or are ignoring the expertise of their instructional staff. Few school districts (or state education agencies) seem to have a plan for creating expert teachers. In other words, while most school districts have a long-term plan, and a funding stream, for replacing or rehabilitating the roofs of school buildings, almost none has a plan, or the funding, for developing teacher expertise through professional development activities (Allington & Cunningham, 2002).

Most of the heavily promoted packaged reading programs promise a quick and relatively inexpensive solution. "Buy our stuff and your scores will rise next year" is the sales pitch. And for "only a few dollars per kid," too! But reliable scientific evidence demonstrates that investing in developing teacher expertise produces greater student improvement (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Ferguson, 1991) than similar investments in curriculum packages or testing programs do. The evidence on the effectiveness of proven programs is at best mixed (Pogrow, 2002; Sacks, 2002), but funding to buy these programs is now codified into federal law even in the face of evidence of the ineffectiveness of these approaches.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT THE TEACHER STUPIDIFICATION CAMPAIGN?

What seems to be under way is an attempt to portray teaching as a blue-collar job: No special skills are needed. Heck, even intellectual capacity doesn't really matter! Teacher education is portrayed as unnecessary—and even damaging. Reading instruction can only be effective when teachers are required to use “proven programs” and follow scripted lesson plans. Reading professionals are not to be trusted. These arguments appear in public testimony, popular media, and trade publications. Why has this campaign gotten this far?

Because, as Reutzell, Hollingsworth, and Cox (1996) report, the information sources that legislators consult most frequently are newspaper articles (85 percent of legislators), national magazine

At the 2002 Research Awards session of the International Reading Association convention in San Francisco, David Pearson, Dean of the College of Education at the University of California at Berkeley, noted that California policy makers and educational leaders find themselves in a terrible bind. With some 40,000 uncertified teachers working in California schools, primarily in high-poverty schools, the dilemma is whether to provide these teachers with a highly scripted and regimented curriculum or to allow them to teach based on some personal recollection of what teachers do.

Neither option is a good one. The reality is that California policy makers have been unwilling to make teaching attractive enough to entice certified teachers to actually teach in California schools. Darling-Hammond (2001) reports that California has 1.3 million certified teachers and only 300,000 teaching positions. In other words, there are roughly 1 million certified teachers living in California who are unwilling to fill 40,000 positions now occupied by uncertified personnel.

The core problem policy makers should address is this: How to make teaching an attractive professional career option. But addressing that problem will likely cost some real money and will also require policy makers provide teachers with professional autonomy on curricular and instructional issues.

articles (80 percent), and radio and TV broadcasts (79 percent). The legislators studied considered information provided to them by legislative research teams and through expert testimony to be sufficient for decision making. But who decides who gets to testify at a legislative hearing? Who gets quoted in a news article?

Lieberman (2000) studied these issues and found that private think tank and corporate personnel are the folks who get quoted and invited to testify. The Enron fiasco illustrates just how much political access big money can buy outside the bright lights of hearing rooms or the media sideshow. Lieberman notes that a primary reason for such exposure is that it is the think tanks and corporations that write most of the press releases that news media rely upon as sources to fill their papers and magazines. She relates that news consultants tell journalists to use these press releases and from one to three sources—and take no more than an hour on a story. In other words, consultants suggest that it's reasonable for a journalist to be expected to produce forty or so stories every week. If you have just an hour to write a news story, a press release is a wonderful thing to have in your hands, especially if that press release also lists the telephone numbers of sources that you can quote to make your story "unique" or "authoritative."

Lieberman (2000) illustrates just how some groups have learned to reduce their messages to sound bites, catchy phrases, to fit this new journalism. She also illustrates the sheer tenacity of these groups' political advocacy. Imagine if the reading profession had someone who, like major industry groups, could write and fax three hundred separate press releases to major news media every weekday for a year! That is precisely what the "think tanks" do.

Duffy and Hoffman (1999) suggest that "Current policy mandates ignore research that tells us improved reading is linked to teachers who use methods thoughtfully, not methods alone. As a result, these policies will fail" (p. 15). Or will they? Yes, they will likely fail to improve reading achievement, but will that failure then be touted as failure of the "faddish" teachers to follow the "proven" scripts and structured lesson plans?

Current policy development seems headed in the direction of less and less professional autonomy paired with more and

more accountability—the worst case scenario. No one feels particularly responsible when they simply do what they are told. There is no professional accountability without professional autonomy.

Who would benefit from a teacher-stupidification consensus? The most obvious potential beneficiaries are those who provide educational products or services for profit. Three segments of the for-profit education industry seem most likely to benefit: test and textbook publishers (or at least those who offer “proven programs”), for-profit education providers (Edison, Advantage, eK-12, Dreamcatchers, Sylvan, etc.), and companies that provide teacher training (Skylight, Compass, e-learning, Sylvan, Canter, etc.).

The test and textbook publishers, by and large the same corporations, would benefit from mandates to buy new curriculum materials and to test every child every year. The textbook mandates will, of course, be wrapped in language that requires these products be based on “scientific” research. My hunch is that Texas and California will not be required to dump all those unscientific decodable texts they just made publishers offer, because the mandates aren’t really about improved curriculum materials as much as they are about asserting external authority and ideological control over the educational process. In many cases, mandates illustrate that ideology trumps evidence in the political arena.

The for-profit schools might actually turn a profit, though none has thus far, if they could reduce the number of certified teachers they employ. Personnel costs typically represent 80 percent or more of the cost of educating children. Imagine the savings if you could just go to Kelly Services and hire a clerk to deliver scripted instructional packages! Even better, if you could deliver that scripted instruction over the Web and simply hire low-wage security guards to ensure that the children didn’t wander off. These non-teachers are not likely to get uppity and challenge the mandates. But then, not many teachers are resisting

Who would benefit from a teacher-stupidification consensus? The most obvious potential beneficiaries are those who provide educational products or services for profit.

openly, either (though the number who resist in more subtle ways seems substantial).

If the public can be convinced that a college degree is not really needed, and especially that teacher education is not just unnecessary but actually damaging to the development of good teachers, there might be a role for for-profit teacher-training ventures. We have already arrived at the point where a for-profit agency has become the nation's largest supplier of teacher certification and where professional development is being contracted to corporate providers (Wasson, 2002). But with just a bit more

Politicians and policy makers seem to see for-profit entities as being more amenable than college professors to following ideological mandates (Shaker & Heilman, 2002).

effort, we may be able to convince more politicians, just as Florida governor Jeb Bush seems to have been convinced, that for-profit corporations are better able than colleges and universities to provide

professional development, if only because they seem more interested in adhering to ideologically mandated content than do many college and university professors. This is an especially useful characteristic when state mandates ignore reliable research evidence. Politicians and policy makers seem to see for-profit entities as being more amenable than college professors to following ideological mandates (Shaker & Heilman, 2002). Professors might actually care about what the research says, but corporations worry more about earnings flow.

As I've argued in several recent papers, regardless of the politicians' spin, there is no clear link between reading research and policy making (Allington, 1999; Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1998, 1999). Instead, the link seems to be between policy making and public opinion polls. Public opinion can be shaped, and there is an ongoing effort to convince the public and policy makers that good teachers and good teacher preparation don't really matter very much. The success of this campaign will depend on whether the profession can counteract the distortions and misrepresentations of research that abound in the policy environment and the media.

CONCLUSION

Shulman (1983) offers the “nightmares” that policy makers and teachers have about schooling and teaching. Policy makers see inept adults who teach only what and who they want; teachers who prefer fads and frills to the hard work of developing basic skills; teachers whose low expectations lead them to ignore the potential of certain groups of children and whose limited expertise in content results in misteaching. Teachers see besieged professionals attempting to work responsibly and effectively under impossible conditions, including mindless, often conflicting, and ever-shifting mandates and directives issued by policy makers who are pursuing a particular political agenda. The policy maker’s nightmare scenario suggests a need to better control the largely incompetent, willful, and flighty teacher. In the teacher’s nightmare, that is just what has happened, and effective teaching has been made literally impossible because of mindless and ever-shifting mandates and directives (Hunter, 1998).

Recent educational policy making has eroded the autonomy and the level of individual professional responsibility that teachers must have in order to teach well and to respond appropriately to individual instructional needs. In most schools children come and go to not-so-special special programs, inexperienced paraprofessionals must be accommodated, subjects must fit into preordained schedules, while new methods and materials for teaching more rigorously and inflexibly are mandated and audit trail records are kept for accountability.

In such circumstances it is difficult for teachers—as it would be for any professional—to accept much individual professional responsibility for student outcomes. When you are told what to teach, how to teach, and when to teach, it is unlikely that you will see bad results as anything other than the responsibility of the system that mandated the instructional plan. When the struggling readers in your room move from program to program throughout the school day, spending only small blocks of time in your classroom, it is unlikely that the failure of those children to develop into proficient readers will be seen as anything other than a failure of the system. Sufficient autonomy is absolutely essential for teachers to accept individual professional responsibility

for student outcomes—autonomy in making decisions about how, what, and when children will be taught. If someone else tells you to follow their plan, any failure becomes a failure of their plan, not of yours.

Professionals must be accountable, but as Cunningham (2001) points out, there are no mal-outcomes lawsuits in other professions, just malpractice cases. One cannot sue a doctor, dentist, or lawyer over outcomes. But malpractice can be considered when there is evidence that a professional ignored best practices, as defined by the profession. The truly sorry situation in education is that many of the mandates that have been issued—intensive phonics, decodable texts, grade retention for low-achieving students, proven programs—fail to conform with the reliable research evidence that’s available. When teachers follow such mandates, they engage in what in other professions would be considered malpractice.

Perhaps changes are coming. Consider, for instance, the recent announcement that the California Teachers Association was seeking legislation that would allow it to negotiate curriculum and textbook issues. The union president, Wayne Johnson, notes that

Because we can bargain only over wages, hours, and working conditions, we are being held accountable in a system over which we have absolutely no control. As a teacher I have no control over curriculum, no control over textbooks, no control over supplies, materials I use. It’s all just handed to me. I’m told what to teach. I’m told how to teach. If that doesn’t work, I am held accountable. It’s an unfair system. (Weintraub, 2002, p. 2)

If reading instruction is to improve, teachers must feel responsible for student outcomes. Any reform plan that strips teachers of their professional autonomy in instructional decision making lessens the likelihood that teachers will accept professional responsibility for the failure of their instruction to produce positive results. Any plan that reduces teacher autonomy undermines teachers’ reflection about the instruction they offer and its effectiveness. Scripted instructional programs demand adherence

to the script, not reflection on how a script might be modified and improved.

U.S. schooling cannot be successful without autonomous, expert teachers. Policy makers here might learn from Finland, top-ranked internationally for student reading performance. As Ann-Sofie Selin, a Finnish educational authority, recently explained,

I want to highlight three things [about the Finnish system]: teacher education, freedom of curriculum, and no mandatory testing. Every teacher in Finland has a five-year-long university education and a master's degree. As an active teacher she has the freedom to develop curriculum to a great extent. And we have no standardized testing whatsoever in Finland during the nine-year basic school. (Reading Today, February, 2002, p. 6)

In other words, none of the core ingredients in current American education reform drive the process in the world's most successful educational system.

In this chapter I've attempted to provide some perspective on several policy-making efforts. I hope that this short review illustrates my concerns about the use of "evidence" to support educational policy making. What we have, unfortunately, is a record of, at best, the manufacturing of evidence, to borrow Berliner and Biddle's (1996) phrase. There is *no* reliable scientific evidence to support assertions that

- American reading achievement has declined
- 40 percent of fourth graders cannot read independently
- almost half of adults are functionally illiterate
- most teachers are unprepared to teach reading
- teachers need substantial knowledge of phonology
- teacher education is useless at best and damaging at worst
- current reading education uses a "one size fits all" approach
- teachers have limited intellectual capacity and low initiative

- so-called proven programs reliably raise reading achievement
- scripted curricula provide a route to effective instruction

At best we can believe that these assertions are based on a very limited understanding of the available research—on naivete. At worst, these assertions represent the manufacturing of evidence that's based in ideological boosterism.

The NRC and NRP Reports and Their Context

In 1998, the National Research Council, whose members are drawn from the membership of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine, released the report of its Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

This report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (PRD), while vigorously criticized (Gee, 1999), was an attempt to understand “what the research says” about beginning reading. As David Pearson (1999) pointed out, this report is just one of a series of modern reports on American reading instruction and what should be done to improve it. Pearson notes that the First-Grade Studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967), Chall's *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967/1987), the National Academy of Education's *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985), and Adams' (1990) congressionally mandated review of the research on beginning reading were part of a family tree of national reports on reading instruction. Each report attempted to summarize the research on beginning reading instruction, and each suggested that a greater emphasis on creating reading instructional settings and experiences that better reflected what “the research said” would lead to enhanced student outcomes.

These reports can be viewed as a sort of yin and yang dance around the role that explicit phonics instruction might play in early reading instruction. When the First-Grade Studies report, a large-scale comparison of different curricular approaches to teaching reading, concluded that the teacher mattered more than the curriculum materials, Chall followed in 1967 with an analy-

sis that came down clearly in favor of code-emphasis (phonics) programs in beginning reading instruction. Likewise, when *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (BNR) recommended something short of explicit phonics instruction, Chall updated her book (1987) and Congress funded Marilyn Adams' (1990) review of research on phonics in beginning reading. Both Chall and Adams proposed an initial code-emphasis (phonics) approach, but both also warned of the dangers of a too narrowly defined beginning reading curriculum. Both authors provided a fairly nuanced view of how beginning reading instruction might be crafted.

A decade passed and again there were calls for a new review of the research on beginning reading. Proponents of new research argued that new research would provide new insights into teaching beginning reading, and that the old research was being ignored by teachers and curriculum developers. It was never clear to me just what new insights this new research brought to the table. There was a fuss about phoneme awareness, of course, but the role phoneme awareness plays in learning to read had been long acknowledged by reading researchers (e.g., Adams, 1990; Clay, 1985; Juel, 1988). In fact, instructional activities fostering the growth of phoneme awareness and segmentation, such as "sound stretching," had become common practice in many primary classrooms and teachers were using analyses of children's early writing to map phonological development. It now seems odd that so much political mileage has been reaped from assertions about U.S. reading achievement and reading instruction that were simply untrue.

Nonetheless, the NRC was tapped to review the research on reading difficulties and propose a research-based action plan for addressing that issue. But even before the committee released its PRD report, legislative activity created a National Reading Panel to supplement the council's work. Catherine Snow (2001) has offered her perspective, as chair of the PRD committee, on why that legislation went forward. She notes that G. Reid Lyon of the NICHD said that the PRD report, as a consensus document, was too ambiguous. Duane Alexander, director of NICHD, said the PRD did not identify what research was trustworthy. According to Snow,

The direct instruction advocates anticipated inadequately strong recommendations concerning the importance of the alphabetic principle in instruction. These worries may have strengthened calls for the establishment, in a time period overlapping with the final meetings of the committee, of a federally mandated panel designed to review rigorously the research base on the effectiveness of different instructional techniques. (p. 240)

In other words, the NRC committee did not actually endorse explicit, systematic phonics as the “scientifically based” plan. So it was time to try another tactic. This time the researchers would be named by government agencies, not by the National Academy of Science.

Two years later, the National Reading Panel (2000), established by Congress, released its report *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. This report is now being widely cited (and distorted) in the quest to reshape beginning reading instruction, the quest to craft a national reading instructional methodology.

This volume begins with professional responses to the NRP report and its associated publications. The responses vary in their nature and tone. Each was selected for inclusion in this volume because it stimulated new questions, concerns, and reactions as I read it. Thus, the selection process was a somewhat personal response task. Following the responses to the NRP are papers that examine the bases and effects of recent policy on teaching reading. A *New York Times* (January 9, 2002) headline shouted, *Education Bill Urges New Emphasis on Phonics*, and the article described the “systematic, explicit instruction” that is now mandated.

I close this book by discussing the possibility that this whole misguided venture needs to be rethought. I argue that the No Child Left Behind Act (PL 107-110) is nothing like a new education reform plan. Instead, the law simply expands a thirty-year-old federal accountability mandate, which before targeted only high-poverty schools receiving federal Title 1 funds, to middle-class children. And I argue that what is needed is not more federalized testing and curriculum control, but almost the very opposite—an increase in local control and teacher autonomy, autonomy where professionals

take responsibility for providing effective and always-improving literacy instruction through close and expert on-going assessments of children's literacy development.

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