

# Reading first?

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## Abstract

This article explores whether the current attempt to prescribe teaching methods based on “scientific research” has brought us any closer to finding the magic bullet to teach reading effectively. First is a critique of the findings of the National Reading Panel. Those findings are compared to the results of the Interim Study Report examining the effects of Reading First curricula, which were guided by the recommendations of the National Reading Panel Report. The article then examines the premises that dominate much of what is currently accepted doctrine as to how children learn to read. This is contrasted with other theories of learning to read, and learning in general. These practices and policies are then examined from an equity lens. Finally are some recommendations regarding educational policy in terms of reading pedagogy and curriculum, and preparing teachers to teach literacy.

## Introduction

Hanauer (2009), in his article “The problem of method: A philosophical analysis of the Standardized Test of Literacy,” asks us to think about how standardized multiple choice tests implicitly define reading from a structuralist linguistic perspective - the meaning of text is an objective reality residing outside of the reader. The correct understanding and recall of the ability can therefore be measured objectively by such tests. In this article I examine how such a view of reading has influenced what are considered effective “best practices” for the teaching of reading. While this article looks at this issue in the context of policies currently being played out in the United States, I believe these tensions are played out in different ways around the world.

The teaching of reading has been controversial for as long as we have had formal compulsory schooling (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block & Morrow, 2001). Like many educational issues, almost everyone thinks they are an expert based on their memory of their school experience and learning to read. The controversy has tended to be between those who believed in a holistic approach to reading, what is often now referred to as whole language or constructivist approaches, and those who have argued for the need for a more skills based systematic approach, who tend toward behaviorist theories of learning (National Reading Panel, 2000). These days, at least in the U.S., those on the more behaviorist side of the debate focus on the need for systematic instruction of phonics and phonemic awareness. Those on the constructivist side argue that most of today’s classrooms overemphasize phonics and phonemic, and the meaning making process is what needs to be bolstered.

While this article examines the United States context in particular, this conflict is evident throughout the world in other English speaking countries such as New Zealand and England

(Openshaw, 2007). When I was at a conference in China a few years back, the tension between skill based, teacher directed paradigm, and some attempt to move toward student centered instruction was evident (2007, First International Forum on Teaching Reform, Shanghai, China). At another conference in Russia, the same tensions were mentioned (2007 Annual Teacher's Conference, "Eleventh Soloveychikovskie Reading," Moscow, Russia). In part, it is not just about strategies, but about who controls the curriculum and pedagogy used to teach and learn. These are issues that should concern all teachers and learners everywhere.

## **National Reading Panel**

There have often been dramatic changes in the accepted or dominant theories of learning to read that have been promoted in schools of education, or popularized in school reform (though it is unclear how much actual practice changes during these swings in theory (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Weick, 1976). In an attempt to resolve this ongoing conflict, the Bush administration commissioned a group of educational researchers and educators, known as the National Reading Panel (to be referred to as the Panel), to look at the research on reading to see if, by examining the best of the research, they could come to a clear conclusion as to the most effective methods to teach reading, thus resolving the debate (National Reading Panel, 2000). As has often reoccurred in education in the last 100 years, the idea is that science can find the one right answer to resolve this question, which all schools and classrooms can then use.

Early on the Panel decided to limit the scope of the research to certain areas: alphabets (phonemic awareness instruction and phonics instruction), fluency, and comprehension (vocabulary instruction and text comprehension instruction)<sup>15</sup>. This decision was the result of a debate that discussed several dozen possible topics. In other words, the Panel decided how to frame the question as a policy decision, thus excluding a priori other perspectives or ways of defining what it means to learn to read.

In 2000, the Panel released its findings in a report of over 400 pages making certain recommendations. According to the report, "Results of the meta-analysis showed that teaching children [phonemic awareness] helps them learn to read" (p.2-5), and that "Systematic phonics instruction makes a bigger contribution to children's growth in reading than alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction" (p. 2-89). The report came out clearly on the side of systematic approaches to the teaching of reading as opposed to more holistic approaches. "The demonstrated effectiveness of guided oral reading compared to the lack of demonstrated effectiveness of strategies encouraging independent silent reading suggests the importance of explicit compared to more implicit instructional approaches for improving reading fluency" (p.3-4).

Did this report put an end to the debate, now that a panel of experts had presented the results? Not at all. Very quickly, critiques of the report's recommendations and results came out. Even within the Panel there was some dissent regarding these findings. According to the Minority Report, "From the beginning, the Panel chose to conceptualize and review the field narrowly, in accordance with the philosophical orientation and the research interests of the majority of its members....The Panel quickly decided to examine research in three areas: alphabets, comprehension, and fluency, thereby excluding any inquiry into the fields of language and literature" (Yatvin, 2000, p.1). Such a decision was based not scientifically, but on the views of those selected to be on the panel. In part, it was a pragmatic decision as to where they believed they would find the most research. By limiting what areas they would look at, they necessarily

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<sup>15</sup> Computer technology and reading instruction were also examined, but the findings were inconclusive.

limited what they could find.

After the report, many articles came out criticizing the narrowness of the research examined, and claiming that the summary of findings and recommendations did not always follow directly from the evidence presented (Coles, 2003; Garan, 2001; Krashen, 2005; Stevens, 2003; Yatvin, Weaver & Garan, 2003). Many critics saw the limited definition of what could be studied, such as the exclusion of anything except quantitative experimental research with the use of control groups, as a major flaw (Garan, 2001; Krashen, 2005; Pearson, 2004; Stevens, 2003; Yatvin et al., 2003). The studies were virtually all short term, meaning they could not assess whether the gains made were sustained or had other long term effects. Others claimed that the actual data presented did not support the recommendations, especially those in the Executive Summary (Coles, 2003; Cummins, 2007; Yatvin et al., 2003). In particular is the loose use of the term "improves reading." Mostly what the report found was that teaching phonics and phonemic awareness increased scores of phonics and phonemic awareness on standardized tests for primary grade children just learning to read. Teaching fluency improved scores on fluency tests. Teaching comprehension increased scores on standardized tests of comprehension. These results were all based on standardized tests, which many argue provide biased and invalid results (Hanauer, 2009; Kohn, 2000; Meier, 1981).

Even one of the majority authors, while agreeing with the report itself, wrote a later response criticizing some of the interpretations of the report that emphasized the focus on phonics and other overly broad generalizations and misinterpretations (Shanahan, 2003). Shanahan also admitted that the task the committee was asked to undertake was not doable given time frame, resources and state of the current research.

What the committee basically accepted was the structuralist linguistics definition of reading that Hanauer (2009) refers to, where reading is thought of as decontextualized skill. This view of learning has been so embedded in the study of learning over the last hundred years that these researchers may not even realize there is another way of defining reading, much like the fish not knowing water (Smith, 1988). Where Hanauer critiques the way literacy gets assessed as an object separate from the learner, similarly the view of the committee assumed that one can think about how to teach reading without consideration of the context of the student being taught, either individually or in their historical/social context.

## **Reading First and the Impact Study Interim Report**

Once the Reading Panel produced its report, the Federal government attempted to use the results to influence reading instruction across the country, mainly through restricting the use of grant funding, known as "Reading First," to programs that are "scientifically based." The government allocated approximately one billion dollars a year from 2002 through 2007 to fund the purchase of authorized curriculum and professional development to prepare teachers to use the curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2008b). The government made these grants available to elementary schools that were not meeting the standardized test score goals in language arts set by the No Child Left Behind Act. Out of the findings and recommendations of the panel, many textbook publishers then created or adapted their reading curricula to meet what they saw as the recommendations of this Panel. For states to get the grant money, the adopted curriculum had to demonstrate that it adhered to the recommendations in the five areas. Since, to some extent, these texts were based on the findings of the panel, they are viewed as "scientifically based" and therefore eligible for use through these funds. Such "Reading First"

curricula dominate the reading programs in the majority of schools that serve poor and minority students in the area where I work along the central coast of California<sup>16</sup>.

As with most government grants, the government wants to know if it spent our money well. Therefore, the government commissioned a study to examine the effectiveness of these programs. The first report from this study has just recently been released (*U.S. Department of Education, 2008a*). Despite the publishers basing the reading programs in the Reading First schools on what was promoted as scientific evidence, the *Impact Study Interim Report* found that schools using these programs showed no better results in the area of reading comprehension than comparable schools not using Reading First programs. It documented that schools using the program *were* increasing their use of the recommended practices. These programs *did* appear to help at so called decoding skills. However, the use of recommended practices and gains in decoding skills did not appear to translate into improvements in actual reading - that is, making meaning of text. The key findings of the interim report were summarized as follows:

- On average, across the 18 participating sites, estimated impacts on student reading comprehension test scores were not statistically significant.
- On average, Reading First increased instructional time spent on the five essential components of reading instruction promoted by the program (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension).
- Average impacts on reading comprehension and classroom instruction did not change systematically over time as sites gained experience with Reading First (p. iv).

Interestingly, while Reading First schools spent about twelve more minutes per day on average on reading instruction in first and second grade than non- Reading First schools, in the *non-Reading First* schools the second graders spent almost ten more minutes per day engaged with print! That adds up to almost an hour a week.

## **National Reading Panel and the Interim Report Findings**

If the publishers based these programs on the use of “best practices” scientifically demonstrated through empirical research, the question becomes, then, why haven’t such programs shown effectiveness? What could explain this lack of improvement? For that, I argue one needs to look no further than the original report of the Panel. Despite the seeming contradiction between this finding and the Panel’s recommendations, those who actually read beyond the claims made in the executive summary and look at the actual findings of the Panel’s report will see that no contradiction actually exists. The fact is that the National Reading Panel did not provide any evidence that the recommended strategies of phonics and phonemic awareness would help in reading comprehension. The only “scientifically based evidence” the panel found was that a limited amount of systematic phonics and phonemic awareness instruction would raise scores on tests of phonics and phonemic awareness for “regular” beginner readers (Garan, 2001). Just as in the evidence from the programs used in the field, there was no evidence in the Reading Panel’s report that the recommended phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency techniques improved reading comprehension. The Reading Panel did not have research that met their criteria to say one way or another whether these improvements in scores on tests of phonics and

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<sup>16</sup> The main curriculum purchased with Reading First grants in California are Houghton Mifflin’s Reading series, and Open Court published by McGraw Hill. Both of these are highly scripted, in which the teacher is expected to read directly from the manual, and adhere strictly to the pacing guide.

phonemic awareness translated into understanding of what is read. Where they did make recommendations regarding reading comprehension, they actually suggested strategies such as comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, use of graphic and semantic organizers, analysis of story structure, question generation for inference and prediction, and summarization.

The assumption that advancement of skills in phonics and phonemic awareness would raise actual reading ability is based on one particular theory of reading, rather than on a solid foundation in empirical evidence. However, that theory is actually quite controversial among reading researchers and specialists (I will come back to alternate theories of how people learn to read in a following section). Moreover, the Reading Panel report found evidence for this limited effectiveness of the skills-based approach *only* for students who were not shown to have learning difficulties or to be second language learners (Gutierrez, Asato, Pacheco, Moll, Oson, Horng et al., 2002; Yatvin, et al., 2003). Again, the evidence was insufficient to say anything meaningful about these other groups. Yet, these scripted programs are often used for students of all types with the claim that they are founded in empirical evidence. In California, as well as many other parts of the country, teachers are often mandated to use these programs in schools serving overwhelmingly Latino students whose dominant language is Spanish—in the name of scientifically-based curriculum. These skills-based strategies are applied in these programs for a much larger proportion of the teaching day than the research supports (more than a minimal amount is overkill—it's like trying to pour more water into an already full glass). And these strategies are used at grades that has no research evidence for effectiveness (beyond beginner readers, specifically those in the primary grades). Students, whether they are already reading fluently for meaning or not, at all elementary grade levels, are spending hours every week on decoding and phonemic awareness skills when using these programs. According to the Interim Report, the teachers in the Reading First schools spent on average almost 25 minutes a day on such practices in first and second grade (the grades examined in the study).

Reading First curricula are designed as whole class techniques in which the assumption is all students should learn the same thing at the same time in the same way at the same pace, with maybe extra support given to the students who fit certain categories, such as second language learners or students with learning disabilities. This is in line with another false assumption of the very question being asked, to find “the most effective methods to teach reading.” This assumption is that there is a best way to teach all students. Yet this simplistic view of learning has no basis in empirical or theoretical research. Quite the contrary, different learners come to the table with their own learning styles (Chittenden, Salinger & Bussis, 2001; Riding & Rayner, 2000; Thomas, Chess & Birch, 1970), and intellectual strengths and weaknesses (Gardner, 1983). Furthermore, how and whether students learn to read will depend in part on their relationship to the school situation. Some students may take an oppositional attitude toward the school if they perceive it as challenging their identity (Foster, 2009; Kohl, 1994; Meier, 1968), and to the content of the materials they are asked to read (Wink, 2005).

## **Reading First in the Schools**

A friend of mine teaches kindergarten at one of the Reading First schools. The school is made up of over 90% Latino students. On the phone with her just the other day, she was telling me how teachers are constantly advised to examine the data on the students (another educational buzzword currently popular is “data-driven instruction”). She tells me that she is all for examining and basing instruction on data about her students. In fact, the school spends considerable staff development time examining the scores of the students so they know just where each student is. She can tell you exactly where each of her students measures up on all of the assessments which are carried out at the end of each six-week unit, as well as on the mandated standardized

tests given each year. Yet she is then told to keep all the students on the same page at the same time, and that she should not deviate from the script in the textbook. (See, we're not leaving them behind, they are on the same page as all the other students!) So, what good does it do her to have this data? This practice of sticking to a pacing guide ignores the research on the uselessness of teaching too far above students' level of understanding (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Low, Rossbach & Nelson, 2003; Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). If you move on when students don't get it, they certainly aren't going to get the next lesson which builds on knowledge from the previous lessons, especially in a sequential skills-based approach (Block, 1987; Gentile & Lalley, 2003)!

Her story of being mandated to use a one-size-fits-all approach is one I see and hear repeatedly from many of the student teachers and experienced teachers I work with as a professor of teacher education, particularly those working with low-income minority children. Recently I observed one of my student teachers working with her second graders in a school serving almost exclusively students from low-income Mexican-American backgrounds. I watched her give the lesson out of the mandated Reading First textbook. She faithfully followed the scripted curriculum, doing an excellent job of keeping the students' attention and engagement. They were happy to follow instructions and were pleased when they could share a right answer. She even incorporated group work, often encouraging tablemates to help each other. Yet, for me, it was an excruciating experience. Despite starting out by having an interesting children's story read to them sitting together on the rug, nowhere in the full hour and a half was there any place for students to express a connection of the story to their own experiences, their own lives. At no time were students asked questions to which there was not a "correct" answer. Students were not given the opportunity, in fact were discouraged from, constructing meaning other than that expected from the publisher. There was no room to "critically consider the text itself" (Caygill & Cahnbeerlain, 2004). This sends a message to students that school is about right answers. Indirectly they are learning that their lives, their "stories" have no place in the curriculum.

The story or "comprehension" part of the lesson was about 15 to 20 minutes. They spent the next hour and ten minutes on phonics, spelling and word recognition.

One of the worst problems of such programs is that they not only ignore the expertise that teachers bring to teaching their actual students - they try to prohibit it! These scripted curriculums tell teachers exactly what they are supposed to say, and in some schools teachers are not allowed to deviate from the script. Good teachers have always known that different children learn in different ways. Anyone who has taught knows that. Any parent with more than one child knows that. Good teaching is about figuring out that way for each student.

## **Reading Theories**

As described earlier, there are two dominant theories of reading. (In reality most theorists and teachers do not see themselves completely on one end or the other of this spectrum, but adhere to parts of each. However, for the sake of argument, I am going to present them as a dichotomy). I will then examine some limitations of these and other ways of framing the question and complexify this dichotomy.

### **Behaviorism and skills-based teaching.**

One theory asserts that "reading" is the decoding of printed symbols into their corresponding sounds. Those sounds are then converted to meaning based on our oral language vocabulary

and knowledge. Based on this theory, one teaches reading by first teaching one to decode the parts of speech, from letter sounds, to syllables, moving on to words and then sentences, paragraphs and longer and more complex text (Adams, 1990). This is also known as a “parts to whole” approach to learning. Adherents of this approach support emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics instruction in the early grades or for struggling readers. Comprehension strategies, especially those asking students to go beyond the literal text, are emphasized for those who are already fluent readers. As Hanauer (2009) points out, this perspective sees text as an objective reality to be first decoded in a mechanical function by the learner, then understood for the correct meaning.

### **Constructivism and whole language.**

A competing theory contends that fluent readers turn the printed words directly into meaning based on the context, and that while decoding them into the oral counterpart can be helpful, it is not necessary for reading. Many of the foremost reading researchers, theorists and specialists, who adhere more to this second paradigm of reading, have always contended that only a minimal amount of “skills-based” teaching is helpful, and that reading is most effectively learned through - reading, with support and help from those who already know how (Coles, 2000; Goodman, 1998; Krashen, 1999; Smith, 2004). This theory contends that reading is best learned the way humans learn language in the first place - the way humans learn most complex skills and knowledge - through engaging in the needed skill in meaningful contexts where there is a clear goal or purpose in mind (clear and meaningful to the learner!), and with the guidance and help of those who are more expert in the skill (Darling-Hammond et al., 2003). As children, we learn to talk, not by being drilled on sounds and parts of speech, but by listening to adults talk and having something we need to say. We look for the patterns in the language we hear, and develop our own “grammar” which over time becomes more sophisticated and more accurately reflects the actual grammar of the speech we hear (Chomsky, 1972). We do this in an attempt to make sense of what we are hearing. Our brains are designed to make meaning and to look for patterns as we navigate our world (Bransford et al., 2000). Making use of this sense-making aspect of how humans think and learn is what the second, more holistic theories of learning to read are based on. In the end, it is the making sense of print that is the purpose of reading. Approaches based on holistic and constructivist theories of learning to reading start with this assumption, that to get children to read they must always be engaged in this meaning making process. If the children do not see the purpose of what they are reading, do not see meaning in it, are not actively trying to make sense of it, then no meaningful learning will occur (Smith, 2004). Or worse, what these children may be learning is that reading does not make sense, that it is an unpleasant endeavor, and possibly that it is something that they are bad at (Smith, 1998). In contrast to the National Reading Panels’ findings, several other analyses of the research have found whole language techniques to be at least as effective as direct instruction approaches that focused on phonics and skill building (Coles, 2000; Krashen, 1999; McQuillan, 1998).

### **Learning styles.**

While the “reading wars” has been dominated by the above dichotomy, an alternative theory has been proposed: that different students approach learning to read differently, based on their preferred learning styles (Chittenden et al., 2001). According to this theory, based on a longitudinal qualitative study of several hundred emergent readers, students may approach reading based on their own learning style, and any attempt to push a particular strategy is likely to be ineffectual. This study found that, for instance, some children prefer more systematic approaches to learning to read. They prefer the safety of right and wrong answers and are uncomfortable with taking the risk of “guessing” at unknown words that is encouraged in whole language approaches to reading. Other children, despite having learned phonics skills, had

difficulty applying them in actual reading, yet were adept at figuring out the sense and meaning of the story from the context. This theory suggests that teachers need to take their cues on how to support a child's learning to read from careful observation of the child, and use approaches that support the child's natural tendencies.

## **Critical literacy**

Critical literacy theorists argue that reading, if it is to empower the student, is more than "breaking the code" as those in the more behaviorist side define reading, and more than making meaning from text, as constructivists tend to define it (Comber, 2003). They emphasize the social and political context and nature of learning (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002). Reading can be used to empower students, to help them understand their world, but can also be used to domesticate and indoctrinate. What is read, how it is read, and how children are taught to interact with text is not neutral, it reflects an ideology. Students are often taught to accept expository text, and especially textbooks, as conveyors of factual truth. Even in non-fiction text, they may be exposed only to, or primarily to, works that do not reflect their realities or social/cultural groups, thus negating the validity of their identities, at least within the educational setting.

Critical literacy advocates tend to be less concerned with the mechanics of how children are taught to read than they are with the content and context of that. They are more concerned with how children are helped to make sense of what they read. They may see the need to teach students to decode the text, as well as to construct meaning from it. However, these are prerequisites not ends in themselves (Comber, 2003).

In the critical literacy approach, text is placed in its political, social and historical context, and the reader is asked to reflect on the reading within this, and use text to "read the world" (Freire, 1970). From a critical literacy perspective, it is important to pay attention not just to how reading is taught, but also to what is being read. The content of texts selected from those outside the classroom from national publishing companies, selected through a political process, are likely to reinforce the stereotypes and ideologies of the status quo (Comber, 2003; Sleeter, 2005). In this approach, students need to be allowed to read from a multiplicity of perspectives, and then helped to critically analyze what they read.

## **Other influences**

Even beyond all the research on learning to read, an emphasis on such technical answers ignores the huge amount of research that has been done on the myriad of other influences on learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2003). The culture of the child, the culture of the school, the child's social and emotional states, the relationship between the child and the teacher, the child's past experiences with trying to learn to read, and with school learning in general, and the complex interactions of all of these and other factors, are likely to have at least as much an impact on how and whether the child learns as what particular strategy is used.

## **The Right Question?**

The real problem may lie in the fact that we are asking the wrong question. The National Reading Panel was asked to assess the effectiveness of strategies for teaching reading. Instead maybe they should have been asking, how do children learn to read? The question they were asked to tackle likely led to their focus on an experimental design (though many would argue even to study that, the strict experimental design is problematic for answering any question about effective classroom practice).

Many of the greatest educators for the past 100 years have been trying to develop theories to understand human learning, and using those theories to develop effective teaching practices. Many of these used the approach of learning through careful observation of children or learners in natural settings. Smith (1988) argues that “ethnography rather than experimental psychology is the right horse for education to back” (p.123). He reminds us “Unlike experimental psychologists, cultural anthropologists have long recognized that it is impossible to study a situation objectively if investigators intrude their own rules, desires, or frames of reference” (p.120). Marie Montessori (1964/1912), at the time that psychology was just becoming a science of learning, called for the methods of anthropology and for teachers to be trained as careful observers in the tradition of the natural sciences. It was psychologists such as Piaget who gave us the constructivist model of human learning, showing the limitations of behaviorist theories. He started on his quest while working for Binet, in the development of the IQ test. Binet’s experimental model led us to the IQ test, which has been used since to sort and misclassify students for the last 100 years (Gould, 1988). Piaget, on the other hand, was more interested in understanding the thought process behind the answers. His work, based primarily on close observation of children, led to one of the most important breakthroughs of the century in psychology: that learning and intellectual development are not a linear act of receiving more and more information, but rather humans actively attempt to construct meaning, developing hypotheses, and make developmental leaps as they do so. Vygotsky (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), one of the other cornerstones of modern understandings of human learning, also used natural observation, building on Piaget’s ideas and showing how our social and cultural environment mediate that construction of reality.

Educators in the classroom have used this “kid watching” approach to develop effective approaches to learning and learning to read. Montessori (1964/1912) started her work with teaching reading to “feeble minded” children, with amazing success, her students often outperforming “normal” students, and she then developed her world renowned approaches to teaching in general. Many other modern and contemporary educators have developed and shared effective techniques for teaching literacy by describing what they learned using such close observations, and what we would now call “teacher action research” (Armstrong, 1981; Ashton-Warner, 1963; Calkins, 1983; Paley, 2000). Deborah Meier (1995, 2002) developed her schools, nationally recognized for their effectiveness with low-income and minority students, based in part on her years of careful “kid watching.” These schools were found to be significantly more effective at getting poor minority students to succeed than the traditional neighborhood public schools (Bensman, 2000). Chittenden et al. (2001), in the work described earlier, used this methodology in a careful and systematic manner as an alternative to the experimental approach (and this was funded by the Educational testing service!). However, Chittenden et al, unlike the Panel, asked the question, how do children learn? The team purposefully did not focus on teaching methods, but rather focused on the child.

## **Reading and Equity**

We must also look at the effects of these policies through the lens of equity. Up until now, I have been discussing this topic mostly as if it affected all teachers and students equally. In fact, it does not. Reading First and scripted curriculums in which teachers are mandated to use particular approaches are much more prevalent in schools serving low-income students and students from minority backgrounds (Au, 2007; Cummins, 2001). These techniques, as described in the previous anecdotes, are more likely to be approaches in which students are not asked to think critically, creatively or bring in their personal backgrounds and knowledge, but in which correct recall of factual information and accuracy are emphasized (Cummins, 2007; Finn, 1999). Even under the shadow of No Child Left Behind and state standards, teachers in schools

serving middle and upper income students, often have wide latitude to choose teaching methods and curriculum. Even where they have a mandated text or curriculum, they are generally given more flexibility in the degree to which they adhere to it. Students in these classrooms are more likely to be given activities and assignments in which they are asked to express their own ideas, use their creativity, and to analyze and hypothesize about what they do read (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Finn, 1999). This differentiated curriculum leaves different groups of students prepared for different types of futures. The low-income minority students are not being prepared to engage in the kind of text analysis, and “reading between the lines,” that are required in college courses, or even in the higher tracks of high school classes, or the kinds of thinking that we expect of those who will play leadership positions in our society. In fact, many prominent educators who have worked successfully with low-income and minority students argue that it is only when such students can act on the world in their own interest, both as individuals and as members of a community, that we are likely to see qualitative differences in their success (Cummins, 2001; Meier, 1995; Pearl & Knight, 1999). To do this successfully means students need to critically examine the current structure of society and their place in it.

## **Policy Recommendations**

What should those who need to make decisions about the teaching of reading learn from this most recent research and attempt to solve the “reading wars”? First, we need to admit that the scientific evidence is still too basic to answer the question of how best to teach reading. In fact, it is probably the wrong question. There probably is no right way to teach anything that applies to all learners. Given that the research is still inconclusive as to which or what approach might be more effective on average, any attempt to mandate a particular approach should be seen as shortsighted. Even if the research showed any one approach to be generally more effective, it should be remembered that even then, it was only more effective for a certain portion of the students. Even the best approach fails for some students, and even the supposedly worst approach works for others. Instead of looking for a best strategy, we could look for how to effectively train and support teachers to choose the approach that is most effective with their particular group of students, and for each student as an individual. To mandate one approach is much like mandating a particular medicine to all patients based on what works for most, rather than what is most likely to work for that particular patient.

Many people claim that education should emulate the “scientific” methods of medicine. However, such an approach to finding the “one best” approach is actually not what medicine or most other fields do. Medical trials generally do not test treatments against one another, but test their effectiveness against a placebo. Then doctors and patients choose among a myriad of effective treatments depending on the individual situation. In education, it would be unethical to test one method against doing nothing (can you imagine saying, we are not going to give any reading instruction to this group!). Any teaching method is likely to help somewhat. Yet, with the implementation of many reading programs, in the name of “empirical research” teachers are not being allowed to use their professional judgment and expertise, their knowledge of their students.

## **Teacher Preparation**

If we now accept that maybe there is not one “right way” to teach reading, what do teachers need to know? How might we prepare them? Currently, from my experience, it appears that, at least in California, in preparing teachers to teach in ways that meet the expectations of schools districts, and to pass the standardized test on the teaching of reading (RICA), reading methods courses are being taught as if there is no controversy. Departments often teach these courses

as if we know the answer to how all students learn, and now we just need to train our candidates on the technical aspects of how to carry it out. That we would want to do so is understandable. It is much easier to see at the end of the course if they have learned those techniques, than if they have learned the much more complex skill of having both a set of strategies and the art of knowing how, when, and why to use different ones. It is also easier for principals, school districts and policy makers to monitor teachers if they can just look to see if they are using the “correct” methods, than to evaluate their use of professional judgment. Yet, the human brain is way beyond our current understanding due to its complexity. Preparing teachers as if they just needed to learn the right techniques does a disservice to our teacher candidates. They need to understand that there are competing theories about reading, what those theories are, and the basis of each of those theories. In this sense, the teaching of reading needs to be taught in its theoretical context, giving pre-service teachers an understanding of the premises and assumptions about learning based on the different theories. Providing teachers with a set of strategies does not give the prospective teacher a way to understand and evaluate teaching methods for themselves or figure out what to do when they do not work for all students. This would be much like teaching biological sciences without discussing the theory of evolution. Instead, teachers could be engaged in problem based learning, looking at different learners, examining the full context and hypothesizing about strategies based on what is known about the various complex and interdependent aspects of learning. Maybe what we need to do is to train teachers in the way the many effective educators have advocated (Meier, 1995; Montessori, 1964/1912): teach them to be careful observers of children. Then we help teachers understand possible theories to interpret what they see, leading to suggestions for how, when, and where to mediate that learning. Learning to read, like learning almost anything that is important and complex, has to do with a lot more than any particular technique.

## Conclusion

We are nowhere near the time in which science can answer the question as to the best way to teach reading. Teachers will probably always need to understand and be skilled in a variety of ways of supporting and teaching students. If we really want to "Leave No Child Behind," we have to stop tying teachers' hands with scripted one-size-fits-all programs. We must allow them to do what they are trained to do, and spend a career getting better at—figuring out how the actual students sitting in front of them learn, and adapt their teaching to the students, not the other way around! (Which is part of the argument for small class sizes and small schools, but that's another topic).

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