

PRESENTATION: TESOL 2005

No Child Left Behind: Implications for ELL Literacy Education and Research

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For my part of this presentation, I am going to focus on the Reading First component of the No Child Left Behind Act. I will begin with a brief summary of how Reading First came to be, after which I will offer some comments about the effects of Reading First on the literacy education of English Language Learners. These comments stem from personal experience, from the experiences of others, and from published pieces I have read and professional presentations I have attended.

A question investigated by reading researchers in the United States for many years, often with government support, has been whether certain methodologies and materials are most effective in beginning reading instruction, that is, in teaching young children to read (Allington, 2002). In the mid 1960s the United States Office of Education funded what came to be known as The First Grade Studies, a group of investigations of beginning reading methodologies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). This research concluded that there was no one best method or set of materials; the determining factor in children's reading achievement was the quality of the teacher. (More recently, other researchers, for example, Allington & Cunningham, 2002, have reached similar conclusions about the primary importance of expert reading teachers in children's reading achievement.) Since that time a number of other studies have been conducted, for example, Jeanne Chall's *Learning to read: The great debate* (1967/87), the National Academy of

Reading's *Becoming a nation of readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1980), Marilyn Adams' congressionally mandated review of beginning reading *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print* (1990) and the National Research Council's *Preventing reading difficulties in young children* (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). The latest of these reports is the 2000 National Reading Panel (NRP) study, titled *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. This report became the basis for the Reading First portion of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act known as No Child Left Behind.

The NRP report had its genesis in 1997 when the United States Congress asked the National Institute of Child Health and Development to appoint a panel to conduct a comprehensive investigation of reading research, once again focused on determining the most effective methods to teach young children to read. Research topics chosen for examination were the alphabetic principle (phonemic awareness and phonics), fluency, comprehension (vocabulary and text comprehension), technology and the education of reading teachers. To begin its work, the Panel developed a set of what it termed rigorous criteria by which to include or exclude research from consideration. The imposition of such rigid *a priori* criteria meant that, to quote the Panel, "...only a small fraction of the total reading research literature met the Panel's standards for use in the topic analyses." (Summary Report, p.5). The final volume of almost six hundred pages was divided into reports from subgroups on each of the chosen research topics, as well as a minority report from Joanne Yatvin, a former teacher and school principal. In addition, the panel

produced a thirty three page summary of its findings and a videotape used to present the NRP results to a variety of audiences. In each of these formats, the Panel has asserted that it has provided the public with “ an evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature...” which will contribute to “ ...a better scientific understanding of reading development and reading instruction. “(Allington, 2002, p.51)

The Summary Report from the NRP played an important role in the creation of the Reading First component of the No Child Behind legislation. The Department of Education website (www.Ed.gov) states that the purpose of Reading First is to ensure that all children in America learn to read well by the end of third grade by helping states and districts apply rigorous, scientifically based research on reading, and the proven instructional and assessment tools consistent with that research, to teach all children to read. Thus Reading First defines reading, and particularly beginning reading, as the National Reading Panel defines it. Reading First has identified five components of scientifically based reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency and comprehension. Any school that receives Reading First money must use these five components to teach reading to children “ explicitly and systematically” for a minimum of ninety minutes a day. States that received Reading First funding submitted applications to the Department of Education, and these applications had to use the Reading First definition of reading as the basis for their proposals. With the funding, states have had to: 1) provide training for teachers in scientifically based reading instruction; 2) monitor school district compliance with the methods and

assessments mandated by the legislation; 3) and monitor achievement testing in school districts (<http://www.ED.gov/programs/readingfirst/resources.html>)

With that quick, dirty and greatly oversimplified summary of Reading First within NCLB, let me turn to the question of what this legislation means for literacy education and research, with a special emphasis on the impact on English language learners. As a literacy educator, I will begin by noting a variety of concerns about the NRP Report raised from within the profession. Even before the work of the panel was published, concerns had been raised with regard to the composition of the Panel itself. Since publication, analyses and critiques written by well respected literacy scholars and researchers representing a wide range of perspectives and positions with regard to reading instruction (for example, JoBeth Allen (2003), Richard Allington (2002), James Cunningham (2001), David and Yvonne Freeman (2004), Elaine Garan (2002), Kenneth and Yetta Goodman (2005), Stephen Krashen (2001). David Pearson (2003), Michael Pressley (2001, 2003), Frank Smith (2002), Stephen Stahl (2002), and many others) have appeared in professional papers and conference presentations, journals, books and on electronic listservs.

These critiques have focused on a variety of topics, for example: the fact that the panel members were not representative of the mainstream of reading research; the narrow conceptualization of the field of reading research; the extremely narrow criteria set for acceptable research, which resulted in the dismissal of most of the research in the field of reading; the equating of reading education with experimental interventions; the assertions

made of simple cause and effect relationships; the lack of consistency across reading panel subgroups in their utilization of their own criteria for what counted as research and for how the research was analyzed; the inconsistencies between the conclusions of each subgroup and the brief summary and videotape versions of the report that have been distributed widely. There also have been substantive critiques of each subcommittee report (for example, Garan, 2001, 2002; Krashen, 2001) as well as examinations of how the conclusions of the various subgroups often have been distorted to make claims about certain instructional strategies and materials (for example, the NRP validated the use of invented spellings but some NRP spokespeople and Reading First training providers, such as Louisa Moats, have suggested the opposite). These critiques certainly have raised questions about the federal government's support for and mandate of this one size fits all approach to reading. Many have concluded that this is the triumph of politics and ideology over reasoned approaches to pedagogy (Allington, 2002).

For me personally, as a literacy educator and a literacy teacher educator, it has been disheartening, frustrating, and angering to see 30 to 40 years of scholarship dismissed as of little relevance or worth in considering classroom instruction, particularly for English language learners. When I came into education almost forty years ago, as a classroom teacher of non-English speaking migrant children, one commonly held view of reading was that reading was sounding out and learning to recognize words, that children needed to learn to pronounce words based on patterns of phonograms (remember the Miami Linguistic Readers and The cat sat on a mat?). The other view was that children needed to learn a variety of word recognition skills, and that they would learn and practice these

skills by reading texts controlled for vocabulary, sentence length and sentence complexity). (remember Look, Sally, look. See Sally run from the Scott Foresman basal reading series?) In both of these cases the focus was on children being able to recognize and pronounce the words. If you could recognize the words you could read.

Since the mid 1960s there has been an explosion of information about reading, including reading in a second language. Literacy scholars from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (for example, cognitive science, linguistics, including socio and psycholinguistics, psychology, anthropology, literary criticism, and so on) have helped us understand so many realities and complexities related to reading, including reading for English language learners. To name just a few with a reference or two for each: the importance of native language reading and writing in the development of second language reading and writing (see Hudelson, 1984, 1987; Lanauze & Snow, 1989); readers' use of multiple cueing systems and the miscues that they make as they work to construct meaning (see Goodman & Goodman, 1978; Rigg, 1986) learners' utilization of their background knowledge –their schema- as they read (see Carrell, 1987; Carrell, Devine & Eskey, 1987); effective readers' utilization of multiple strategies as they read (Schoenbach, R., Geenenleaf, C., Cziko, C., & Hurwitz, L, 2000); transactions readers make with texts that demonstrate that no two readers construct exactly the same meaning (Rosenblatt, 1938/1983); learners' transactions with literature (see Bird & Alvarez, 1987; Samway & Whang, 1996); patterns of language and literacy use in homes and communities, how these may be different from what schools expect, and how schools may utilize parental and community knowledge (Heath, 1983; Delgado-Gaitan &

Trueba, 1991; Moll, 1992); the reality that children begin to become readers and writers long before they enter school, that they begin to construct literacy as they live their daily lives, and that they often use invented forms of literacy on their way to reading and writing conventionally (see Y. Goodman, 1990, and Hudelson, 1995 for examples of these studies in multilingual contexts). Much of this scholarship has asked questions other than what is the best method to teach children to read, and much of it has used a variety of qualitative methodologies, methodologies not recognized by the NRP.

In my view, this research has challenged the view that reading is getting the words and presented views of reading as constructing meaning and reading as social practice.

Instructional implications and applications from these constructivist and sociocultural research findings have contributed to views of English language learners as students with rich social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and with significant intellectual resources who deserve rich and rigorous literacy experiences. In my experience, some of the most innovative reading practices have been taking place in classrooms of English language learners. With Reading First, we seem to be back to a traditional, commonsense view of reading as sounding out or recognizing the words. We have returned to a one size fits all view, with an emphasis on isolated skills teaching, especially phonics skills, and the extensive utilization of materials termed decodable texts. (One need only look at the reading materials accepted as meeting the Reading First criteria to see this view in action.) For me, this view of reading is particularly detrimental to the reading development of English language learners. And in theory, or in rhetoric, the NRP agrees with me.

The report of the Phonemic Analysis subgroup of the National Reading Panel specifically addresses English language learners and notes that the studies the group analyzed were **not** studies of ESL learners, which means that the conclusions reached about the teaching of phonics, according to this group, should **not** be generalized to English language learners (Garan, 2002). This subgroup report also discusses at length the problems teachers may experience working on phonemic awareness and sound-letter correspondences with learners whose native language is not English and who may not perceive or produce English sounds as the teacher or the phonemic awareness or phonics program does (Garan, 2002). The highly influential NRP summary report begins by noting (on page 3) that issues of second language learners were not addressed in this report. This suggests to me that educators **not** overgeneralize the findings about instruction for native English speakers having problems learning to read to English language learners. However, materials written for educators on the DOE website, for example *Put reading first: Research building blocks for teaching children to read* (Armbruster, Osborn & Lehr, 2001) and *Guidance for the Reading First Program*, omit any mention that English language learners were not included in the populations of the studies analyzed. There is nothing to indicate that English language learners might respond differently to instruction than native speakers of English. This omission is very unfortunate, to say the least, because it has meant that in many schools the special needs of English language learners have not been taken into account.

My experience with Arizona Reads, the iteration of Reading First in Arizona, is that it has resulted in a narrowing of instructional choices for teachers, including teachers of English language learners, in terms both of methods and materials. To give an example, in an elementary school district in central Phoenix in which about one half of the children are English language learners, the district has purchased a commercial reading program that meets the scientifically based criteria of Reading First/Arizona Reads. All schools in the district have been told that they are to use this program, and reading coaches have been assigned at each building to assist teachers in carrying out this mandate. For the last few years, a university colleague has worked in a dual language school in the district. This is a school where teachers have taken on progressive pedagogies such as reading and writing workshops, literature studies, and inquiry based content study, and where they have promoted literacy in English and Spanish. It is also one of the few schools that has achieved a level of performing (rather than underperforming or failing) on the annual rankings by the state, rankings based on yearly achievement test scores. Now these teachers have been faced with a district mandate with regard to how to teach reading.

Within this school, the primary teachers have participated for several years in a monthly study group. Early on that study group, in collaboration with my university colleague, created a working description of balanced literacy and what that meant for students developing biliteracy. Central to their articulation of balanced literacy has been practices such as shared and guided reading, read aloud and independent reading. This last year, that study group has met with the literacy coach and a university facilitator to revisit that description in light of the district mandate and to articulate once more an explanation of

what teachers are doing to develop children's literacy in two languages. The teachers, with the support of the principal and the literacy coach, have taken the stance that the commercial program may provide one source of materials for them, but that they are the professionals who know best what their children's instructional needs are. These needs include substantial amounts of time for read aloud and independent reading. But this school and these teachers are the exception and not the rule. The teachers tell horror stories of attending district training sessions where the focus is on following the scripted curricula, and where many educators report that they are doing just as they are told, and that they do not have time for read aloud or for independent reading.

The stories these teachers tell are ones being told across the state of Arizona and across the country. In the last year I have participated in a series of meetings sponsored by the National Commission on Writing in America's Families, Schools and Colleges. I have been at these hearings as a member of the Advisory Panel to the Commission representing TESOL. The Commission has held sessions in Washington, DC. , San Francisco, California, Lorman, Mississippi, Indianapolis, Indiana and Austin, Texas, in an effort to develop strategies to improve the teaching of writing in US elementary and secondary schools. Repeatedly, invited participants, themselves dedicated literacy teachers many of whom work with English language learners, have spoken about the negative impact of scripted reading programs on their teaching of both reading and writing. They have argued eloquently that this one size fits all model does not fit anyone. They have noted that testing now dominates the school calendar.

I have chosen to end my part of this presentation with the voice of one such teacher from Berkeley, California. In a response to an article by NRP member Timothy Shanahan in the February, 2005 *Phi Delta Kappan*, James Venable writes, “ Timothy Shanahan’s response (But Does It Matter?, Feb. Issue) to Elaine Garan’s and Stephen Krashen’s critiques of the National Reading Panel demonstrates nothing but pure arrogance and a total disconnect to the realities of what effect the panel has had on learning to read. As a classroom teacher, I can answer that it does matter. The panel’s report, especially the misguided Summary, has had a negative impact on reading instruction throughout the country. When independent reading is prohibited during the school day because of the misinterpretation of the report, it matters. When scripted commercial programs are seen as more reliable than teachers’ knowledge and expertise, it matters.

“Shanahan asks, “What would you do differently with phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and professional development” if the panel erred? Well, just for starters: We would teach these skills in a meaningful context, not in isolation. We would not be forced to drill and kill primary grade children with isolated phonemes. They would learn these letter sounds, as most adults learned them, from authentic encounters with songs, stories, and language...Teachers would not waste time giving fluency tests in which children are expected to read with speed for one minute on three separate passages in order to get a passing median score of “words correct per minute.” Instead teachers would hear a student reading throughout the week in a variety of genres and contexts and would know whether or where and when the child is able to “fluently attend to a text” (report card language).

“Students would not learn vocabulary words in isolation but as they encounter them within texts and in classroom dialogues. Reading comprehension would not be reserved for the fluent readers only. When state approved professional development providers tell teachers, “The research states to just get your K-1’s decoding. They can deal with comprehension later,” it’s time to register strong concern about the misinterpretation of the NRP report...Professional development would evolve out of the needs of the classroom, not out of the needs of state approved in-service providers to deliver a lock-stepped, narrow definition of reading as decoding words in order to stay in business. Mr. Shanahan must not have observed classrooms recently where struggling children robotically complete isolated, yet systematic, phonics practice sheets and never engage in reading during the school day. “ Maybe they are unscientific, but these comments reflect what is happening to too many children, including English language learners, in classrooms where literacy instruction is dictated by No Child Left Behind.

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