NEPC
NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

Thursday, November 29, 2018

Newsletter

Conversation about the Reading Wars, Sparked by a New Documentary about Literacy Instruction: Q&A with Elizabeth Moje, Dean of the University of Michigan School of Education

.

They're back. Or maybe the "reading wars" never really went away. For decades, political skirmishes have raged between supporters of phonics instruction and proponents of whole language. Regardless of the recent history of this battle, education journalist Emily Hanford's recent American Public Media radio documentary, *Hard Words: Why aren't kids being taught to read?* has certainly set off a fresh round of public debate. Hanford's piece aims to make the case that millions of children are being set up to fail because educators are either unaware of or resistant to the need for well-executed phonics instruction. Her documentary, which she followed with this *New York Times* commentary, has inspired multiple responses, including:

- An open letter from Robert Pondiscio of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute saying that learning how to teach children to read was "not part of" the elementary certification program that he graduated from;
- An *Education Week* "Teacher Beat" blog describing comments from teachers with similar complaints;
- A *Washington Post* column from cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham, who called the reading wars a "waste of time";

- A blog from Furman literacy professor P.L. Thomas, critical of Hanford's work and urging the media to stop misrepresenting reading instruction;
- An interview with Hanford on Alexander Russo's Phi Delta Kappan blog, The Grade; and
- An interview with Hanford on EWA Radio, the podcast of the Education Writers Association

In order to shed light on issues raised by the documentary, the National Education Policy Center conducted the Q&A below with NEPC Fellow Elizabeth Birr Moje, Dean of the School of Education at the University of Michigan. She is also the George Herbert Mead Collegiate Professor of Education and the Arthur F. Thurnau Professor. Her areas of expertise include the intersections of the disciplinary literacies of school and the literacy practices of youth outside of school. In addition, she helped to develop a program that advances discipline-based literacy education.

The interview has been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: Hanford's piece criticizes balanced literacy as treating phonics "a bit like salt on a meal: a little here and there, but not too much, because it could be bad for you." How would you define balanced literacy? Is balanced literacy, as a practical matter, the same thing as whole language instruction, as implied in the documentary? When implemented with fidelity and as intended, does the balanced literacy approach assign too little importance to phonics? Is balanced literacy the prevailing approach to teaching reading in American schools?

A: *Balanced literacy is not the same as whole-language approaches to reading instruction, although it incorporates practices that could also be used in whole-language instruction. Balanced literacy, like whole language approaches, also includes phonics instruction. The concept of balanced literacy was put forward to remind teachers that no one dimension of the reading process should be privileged in teaching children to read. Rather than emphasizing only phonics instruction or only comprehension strategy instruction, the concept of balanced literacy was developed to ensure that children received instruction in all the different components of reading. My analysis suggests that, if done appropriately, balanced literacy does not assign too little importance to phonics instruction. Nor, however, does it assign sole importance to phonics instruction, especially not to the exclusion of comprehension or meaning making.*

The real question is not whether one approach is a "whole language" or a "phonics" approach. That kind of discourse re-creates "wars" over reading instruction. The bottom line is that reading is a complex, multidimensional cognitive process situated in and mediated by social and cultural practices. Reading for meaning requires an understanding of letter-sound relationships and the alphabetic principle. It also requires depth, breadth, and flexibility of word knowledge; fluency and automaticity; and the ability to recall and deploy "necessary knowledge" to make sense of texts across many different domains. Reading for meaning requires engagement and endurance, as well.

Reading instruction thus requires that teachers need to know how to create the conditions for children to learn all of these dimensions of reading. Learning to read will most certainly require some explicit instruction. And instruction should always be systematic at some level, because teaching depends on knowing what students know and can do and then determining what they need. Because teachers typically teach multiple students at one time, they need to approach instruction as a system. Most important, teachers need to know how to make reading for meaning a central concern, even when focused on teaching word-level skills. If children are not learning to read for meaning—even at the earliest stages of their reading development—then they may become good 'word callers,' but not necessarily good readers.

Reading instruction, then, needs to address all of those dimensions of the reading process. And the reading teacher has to do that work with 20-30 students at one time. That makes teaching reading different from the cognitive process of reading..Sometimes that important difference gets lost in translation.

Q.: The documentary focuses a great deal on the National Reading Panel report that was published in 2000, but there's no mention of the 1998 report from the National Research Council (NRC). For readers not steeped in this history, could you briefly explain the importance of these two reports and any major differences in their approaches, findings and recommendations? I have also read critiques of the NRP summary—as opposed to the full report—arguing that it is not accurate and complete, and that reliance on the summary could lead to the sorts of conclusions reached in this documentary. Is there any merit to such concerns?

A. *The National Reading Panel Report and the Preventing Reading Difficulties [NRC] report share many of the same conclusions, largely in regard to the component dimensions of the reading process and of learning to read (which are two different constructs). Both emphasize the importance of explicit word-level reading instruction in the early years of a child's life. Any differences between them are likely the result of differences in committee membership and in the studies consulted. The NRP tended to rely on a more constrained set of studies.*

As for critiques of the NRP, in particular, it is true that the sub-studies of the NRP did qualify findings, particularly around systematic phonics instruction, and that those qualifications did not find their way into the executive summary of the report. The result is a fair bit of difference between the executive summary and the actual sub-committee reports. Anyone who is interested in learning the science behind the claims made in the executive summary of the NRP should read the sub-studies carefully.

A number of published critiques of the NRP exist in the literature, including a Phi Delta Kappan article written by Steve Krashen in 2001 and an essay in the Reading Research Quarterly written by James Cunningham, also in 2001. Both provide useful insights on the methods of the NRP and on the claims made as a result of those methods.

Q: In your experience, are many education school faculty members who teach courses in early literacy instruction unaware of how to teach teachers to teach

phonics?

A: *In my experience, faculty members charged with teaching teachers how to teach reading know how to teach phonics. There are, however, quite different schools of thoughts on the best approaches to teach phonics, just as there are different kinds of phonics. In my experience, teaching phonics is part of the core literacy instruction curriculum for elementary school reading (and to some extent for secondary school reading as well). On the questions of how much phonics to teach and how to teach phonics, I turn to my University of Michigan colleague and primary grades literacy teacher educator, Dr. Nell K. Duke. Duke is co-author with Dr. Heidi Messmer of "Phonics Faux Pas: Avoiding Instructional Missteps in Teaching Letter-Sound Relationships," coming out soon in* American Educator. *The piece makes clear the critical need to teach phonics, but also makes clear that the teaching of phonics is always in the service of children making meaning with text.*

To be clear, it is only part of the curriculum because there are other critical components of reading and learning to read, including phonemic awareness (which is not the same as phonics, or the alphabetic principle), concepts of print, vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary flexibility, morphemic awareness, fluency, comprehension (including purpose setting, questioning, summarizing, synthesizing, self-monitoring, and reading for meaning), and reading engagement and persistence.

Q: The documentary states:

> **There is no debate at this point among scientists that reading is a skill that needs to be explicitly taught by showing children the ways that sounds and letters correspond. 'It's so accepted in the scientific world that if you just write another paper about these fundamental facts and submit it to a journal they won't accept it because it's considered settled science,' [consultant and researcher Louisa] Moats said.**

Is research on the most effective way to teach reading settled science, much like climate science findings on global warming?

A: *What I would consider clear science is what we know about the many dimensions of successful reading process;, i.e., what is involved in the reading process of an individual, such as the importance of phonemic awareness or the role of vocabulary in making meaning from text, etc. We know less about how to teach groups of children to read effectively, given the contextual demands of group instruction in classrooms. I want to be clear that we have a great deal of research on what to do, but not necessarily consensus on how to do it, due to the dramatic variation in contexts of teaching and learning and in student populations. We need more research on how to teach diverse groups of children to read, especially in challenging classroom or school conditions (e.g., large class sizes, high absenteeism, inadequate text and technology resources). Snow, Burns, & Griffin's (2006) book on the knowledge needed for the teaching of reading addresses one dimension of this dilemma; we need more on how to translate that knowledge into doing (i.e., teaching).*

Q: In her documentary, Hanford states that "decades of scientific research has revealed that reading doesn't come naturally. The human brain isn't wired to read. Kids must be explicitly taught how to connect sounds with letters — phonics." Is it the case that research suggests that reading does not come naturally and that the human brain is not wired to read? If so, is phonics instruction the means of overcoming this challenge? If not, what can reading research tell us about how children learn to read?

A: *Research suggests that reading is learned through both instruction and acquisition, with some contexts of acquisition being explicit and some dimensions of instruction being implicit. A mix of implicit modeling and explicit teaching serves most children well. Some children will need more explicit instruction in alphabetic principle, understanding graphophonic relationships, and in developing phonemic awareness; others will need less. Some will need to do a lot of word-level work; others will learn to recognize and understand word meanings with ease. Almost all students will need explicit comprehension instruction and practice making meaning with texts. The challenge of teaching reading to groups of students is that children need different kinds of instruction. They are at different places in their literacy development when they come to school. Moreover, learning to read only matters if one can use the reading to make meaning. As noted in a 2012 National Academy of Sciences report, Improving Adult Literacy Instruction, in which both Dr. Seidenberg and I were among the authors (Seidenberg is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who is quoted in the radio documentary as saying that "science lost" in the reading wars):*

> *Learning to read involves both explicit teaching and implicit learning or the need for extensive practice using new skills. Explicit teaching does not negate the vital importance of incidental and informal learning opportunities. Explicit and systematic reading instruction must be combined with extended experience with reading for varied purposes in order to promote learning and transfer of reading skills. . . . Learners . . . are more engaged when literacy instruction and practice are embedded in meaningful learning activities.*

[Later in this interview, we ask Dr. Moje specifically about this "science lost" quote from Dr. Seidenberg.]

Q: In Hanford's documentary, Louisa Moats, an educational consultant and researcher who is cited throughout the piece, is quoted as saying: "The gap between science-based ideas and practices and those most often used in our classrooms remains very wide and persistent." Are most American schools using an approach to reading instruction that is inconsistent with the cumulative body of research on reading instruction?

A: *No, I would not make the claim that "most" American schools intentionally (as implied in the word "use") engage in reading instruction that is inconsistent with available research on reading. For one thing, although I have studied many American schools and have worked in many others, I have not empirically studied "most" American schools and therefore would resist claim-making based on my individual perspective. I also know of*

few studies that actually ask teachers why they do what they do in terms of reading instruction and very few studies in which researchers are asked to consider at what point in a teacher's practice their scientifically based claims about reading would be inserted. I don't think that researchers always consider all the different ways that their research findings could make their way into practice at any given moment. I often watch teachers teach and think, "If only they would do X . . ." I wonder what those teachers would say if they watched a university-based researcher teach. I wonder how often we violate our own mandates about the research on how people learn.

What's more, education policy is very local, so it happens at the state level. In some states, it happens at district level. In the state of Michigan, for example, we have over 550 local school boards that make decisions about local curricula. So it's hard to say with any certainty how the majority of schools are approaching reading instruction.

All that said, I would say that a dominant approach seems to be balanced literacy instruction with the "balance" being some combination of instruction to build phonemic awareness, the teaching of vocabulary, and comprehension instruction. In general, I think that most teachers are aware of the "Big 5," that is, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies. I think that teachers are generally aware of the need to teach across these dimensions, but I would not say that the teaching is always adequate to the task of teaching children to read. My own analysis is that the challenges in teaching reading have more to do with the fact that it is hard to teach many different people with many different backgrounds and experiences a really complex process all at the same time!

When I do see instruction that I would assess as not aligned with best practice, I assume it to be about how the instruction was enacted, rather than an intentional design on the part of the teacher. What we know from reading research with single subjects in laboratory studies does not always translate smoothly or in an unaltered way to teaching reading to large groups of students in real-world contexts. [This is discussed further in a response below.] *I assume any inconsistencies that I see to be a mixture of a lack of knowledge about the latest research on how to teach reading and the lack of skill on the part of both researchers and teachers in translating concepts from the research into practice in real-world settings. We know, for example, that learning from text-based discussions works best when teachers engage students in explaining their answers by pressing the student reader to articulate text-based inferences. Although teachers may recognize that pressing for understanding is an important pedagogical move, teachers routinely fail to press. When asked why, they cite explanations such as "not wanting to de-motivate students," "fear of the discussion going off track," and "struggling to respond appropriately in the moment to students' comments." None of these explanations demonstrates resistance to or lack of knowledge of the research. Instead, it illustrates that even when teachers are aware of what they should do, they find it difficult to do or they make decisions that the practice does not meet their students' needs. It is important for researchers to fully understand the contexts into which basic research findings need to be translated before we make claims about what, how, and why teachers are engaging in practice and before we make corresponding claims about what, how, and why teacher educators are engaging in practice.*

Q: In your estimate, are most (early) elementary teachers/ administrators unaware of the cumulative research on teaching children to read?

A: *Again, I can only speculate because I have not empirically studied "most" early elementary teachers or their administrators. However, my speculation is that they are not unaware of some of more widely cited sources of research on how children read and learn to read. That, however, is not the same as being able to translate that research into one's own practice, especially in classrooms or groups of children whose skills and practices vary.*

Q: In your experience, are practitioners actively resisting the use of methods of reading instruction based on the cumulative body of research?

A: *In my experience, practitioners are eager to learn the most effective and evidence-based methods for teaching reading. How the methods get translated into real classrooms with sometimes large groups of real children, however, may produce methods that look different from what the researchers and teacher educators would consider best practice. That doesn't mean that the teachers are bad or unaware; it means that teaching reading to groups of children is difficult work, and the difficulty of that work is not clear in controlled laboratory studies on the cognitive process of reading.*

Q: Hanford states: "Most teachers nationwide are not being taught reading science in their teacher preparation programs because many deans and faculty in colleges of education either don't know the science or dismiss it." In your experience, are many deans in colleges of education unaware of the cumulative body of research on how to teach reading? In your experience, do schools of education teach prospective elementary teachers how to teach reading?

Most of my fellow deans are familiar with the general trends and perspectives on the teaching of reading, but, as one might expect, rely heavily on faculty experts in various programs to design and maintain individual program integrity. In other words, deans of schools and colleges of education are not necessarily literacy scholars, nor are deans designing every detail of the curriculum in university teacher education programs. I happen to be a dean who is also a literacy scholar, so I do know the cumulative body of research. I know of no dean who actively dismisses findings about the reading process of about the teaching of reading.

In my experience, schools of education teach prospective elementary teachers how to teach reading, including emphasizing the teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness. That has been the case in every school or college of education of which I have been a member over the course of my career (four). Indeed, my own School of Education provides high-quality literacy instruction in all the dimensions of the reading process and in the sociocultural dimensions that shape how and why people engage in literate practice in different ways. My School of Education literacy colleagues also teach teachers <u>how</u> to teach reading, not just how reading occurs in a single individual. Our students practice what they learn in two years of sustained experience in elementary school classrooms and report feeling well prepared to teach a range of skills.

Q: Hanford mentions a 2016 National Council on Teacher Quality report that found that just 39 percent of 820 undergraduate elementary programs reviewed "provide instruction in all five essential components of early reading instruction." How would you assess the methodology of that report?

A: *The NCTQ report is based on a reading of syllabi submitted for review from teacher education institutions. Two points are important here: (1) An analysis of syllabi only does not produce a robust study of what happens or what is valued in teacher education programs; and (2) Many institutions choose not to participate in the NCTQ study because of the study's weaknesses. Those institutions are then given a poor rating in the NCTQ study, but there is no basis whatsoever for the ratings because no information was submitted. This practice calls NCTQ's methodology into question. Just as researchers of other phenomena must include decision principles for imputing missing data, the NCTQ researchers should make the extremely limited, and at times nonexistent, database on which their evaluations are based. I know of no other evaluation study that would be accepted with the limited data used by NCTQ. Indeed, to my knowledge the NCTQ results have not been subjected to any robust peer-review.*

Q: In her documentary, Hanford attributes the following statement to Mark Seidenberg, a professor of psychology and cognitive neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin-Madison: "the reading wars are over, and science lost." She continues:

> **Seidenberg says the scientific research has had relatively little impact on what happens in classrooms because the science isn't very highly valued in schools of education. "Prospective teachers aren't exposed to it or they're led to believe that it's only one of several perspectives," he said. "In a class on reading, prospective teachers will be exposed to a menu in which they have 10 or 12 different approaches to reading, and they're encouraged to pick the one that will fit their personal teaching style best."**

In your experience, is scientific research valued in schools of education?

A: *My first response is to ask on what evidentiary basis Dr. Seidenberg makes his claim about what happens in schools of education. I have not seen a peer-reviewed study published by Seidenberg (or anyone else) in which he reports evidence from an observational study of what happens in "most" teacher education programs in schools of education. Nor have I seen an interview-based study in which he (or anyone else) analyzes what faculty members in schools of education value in the teaching of reading. Until I see some evidence, I remain skeptical that he or anyone else can make such a broad claims.*

Q: Are prospective teachers encouraged to select from multiple approaches to reading? If so, why? If not, what approach are they typically taught?

A: *No, it is not the type of approach that is used in my school of education. We do introduce to our students many different instructional programs, because those are the programs*

they may encounter in the field. But the component parts of the reading process and the related instructional practices for helping children learn those components are taught from the existing research base. We include attention to all the dimensions of the reading process I have described in previous responses.

Q: Hanford's documentary points (positively) to a program written by Moats called "Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling" or LETRS. What can that research tell us about this approach?

A: *I was not able to locate any peer-reviewed research on the impact of LETRS on teacher learning or on child literacy outcomes. To be fair, however, curricular materials can be evidence-based even if they have not been tested. In other words, I assume that the developers drew from what they believe to be the best available research on how to teach reading. Providing evidence of the effects of using such a program would be a useful next step.*

Q: The documentary singles out Mississippi as a state that emphasizes scientifically based approaches to reading instruction. Indeed, Mississippi has made gains on the Grade 4 National Assessment of Educational Progress reading exam over time. To what extent, if any, can those gains be attributed to the 2003 state requirement that every teacher prep program offer two courses in early literacy that "cover what was in the National Reading Panel report?" To what extent is the state of Mississippi a model for other states to follow when it comes to preparing teachers on early reading instruction?

A: *I'm not able to comment on the validity of a causal claim such as this without evidence. In particular, it's impossible to link the effects of such a requirement without information about what else is happening in the state, let alone without information about the cohorts of children, other dimensions of teacher education, other curriculum changes, changes to the structure of the schools, and much more. A more valid set of claims might be produced from a comparative study of what states require in teacher education and the outcomes of children in those states. Massachusetts, for example, has the highest NAEP scores of any state and does not, to my knowledge, require teacher education programs to teach the NRP claims per se. They do, however, have a robust teacher professional development program post-certification, which allows teachers not only to keep current with new knowledge about reading instruction but also to improve their practice, including their ability to translate research findings into everyday practices in real classrooms with real students.*

Q: What are the pros and cons of laws, like Mississippi's, that require children to be held back in Grade 3 if they are not reading at grade level?

A: *According to the available research from a wide range of fields, there are no pros; only cons. In brief, retention after first grade is linked to increased absenteeism, dropout rates, and incarceration. Retention is also correlated to lower achievement and low earnings later in life. The only studies that claim any positive effects of retention include confounding variables such as strong early prevention programs. What's more, the effects of retention in those programs have not been studied over time. For more information, please see the white paper my colleagues (Drs. Nell Duke and Annemarie Palincsar) and I prepared in*

response to the State of Michigan third-grade retention proposal that passed last year.

Q: Are the reading wars back?

A: *I'm not sure they ever went away. There will always be people who are going to focus on one portion of what it means to teach and learn to read—one dimension of the evidence. The reality is that we need to think about all aspects of reading instruction.*

From my perspective, casting the challenges we face as a nation to educate thoughtful, engaged readers (and writers) as "wars" misses the crucial point: We need to do a better job of ensuring that all children learn to read with proficiency and power. And we need to ensure that teachers are well prepared to teach children to read (among other essential skills). That requires not a battle over who is right or wrong about reading and reading instruction, but instead the recognition that teaching reading is really difficult, and every person in this country should care so much about children learning to read that they realize we need more and better opportunities to teach teachers. Instead of criticizing what teachers and teacher educators are doing, all those who care about this issue need to work together to improve teaching and learning opportunities for both teachers and children.

NEPC Resources on Literacy Education

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: http://nepc.colorado.edu