

“O Brave New World”

by Joanne Yatvin, PhD

NEAR THE END OF THE TENURE OF THE NATIONAL READING PANEL (NRP) IN 1999, I DECIDED TO WRITE A MINORITY REPORT AS AN AMENDMENT TO THE MAJORITY REPORT.

For me, the problem was not that I disagreed with any of the research results or recommendations in the various sections of the report, but that the total report covered too few of the important factors involved in teaching children to read, and that its very structure was predicated on a particular philosophical model of the reading process that was far from being universally accepted by reading researchers or teachers of reading.

The charge Congress had given us was to investigate “the most common instructional approaches in the United States to teach children to read and determine the validity of the scientific underpinnings for each of these methodological approaches.” In my opinion the panel had not even attempted to investigate the wide range of teaching strategies currently practiced, but instead had sought scientific support for those few that the group as a whole favored right from the beginning and a couple of other topics that were pet projects of strong-minded

individual members. Topics that did not fit with the philosophy or interests of the panel were never investigated.

I submitted a dissenting report because I anticipated that the flawed majority report would have a powerful and deleterious effect on the teaching of reading in America’s schools. Since the panel’s report was so long (500 plus pages) and complex, it was not likely to be carefully read by outside reading experts or read at all by policy makers, or the public. Instead, they would rely on a 33 page summary booklet, produced by a public relations

exerted a powerful influence on the teaching of reading. Its philosophy and recommendations have become the basis of the Reading First initiative in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB was passed by Congress in 2001 and hailed by President Bush as the solution to the problem of low achieving students in public schools. As I feared, the misinterpretations of careless readers and the partisan misrepresentations of the summary booklet were also written into the law or adopted by the US Department of Education (DOE) in their administration of it.

of Reading.” The NRP Report never recommended such limitations. In the majority report, the panel plainly stated that there were many well-researched practices that were not covered because the panel did not have time to investigate them, and that the omission of such topics was “not to be interpreted as determinations of unimportance or ineffectiveness.” In addition, the panel never used the term “five essentials,” since it recognized that there might well be other components of reading instruction equally as important as the ones it identified.

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firm, which was not only inaccurate in many of its particulars but also designed to persuade readers rather than inform them. I hoped that a minority report would attract the attention of a few persistent and discerning readers and let them know that the majority report was not, as its subtitle and publicity implied, a thorough review of all the scientific literature on reading.

In the four years since its publication, the NRP Report and its summary booklet have

The reality that has ensued is that states hoping to receive federal dollars for their Title I schools must submit proposals that are strictly limited in their choices of teaching practices and materials. For example, states must use what NCLB calls “research-based methods,” which means only those strategies labeled effective by the NRP. States must also name as their core teaching programs only materials that contain what NCLB calls the “Five Essentials

What, then, does the National Reading Panel Report actually say? Stated very briefly, the panel studied nine topics, using altogether 438 pieces of research. Those topics were: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, independent silent reading, vocabulary, text comprehension, teacher preparation to teach comprehension, teacher education, and computer technology. The side panel attached to this article lists the panel’s findings for each of these topics.

But effective teachers do much more than teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. They work from a larger and more comprehensive theoretical model of learning to read than the NRP findings represent.

As I stated earlier, I have no problem with accepting the panel's findings as described or with teachers incorporating them into their teaching. They appear moderate, sensible and in line with what I have seen effective teachers do over many years. But effective teachers do much more than teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. They work from a larger and more comprehensive theoretical model of learning to read than the NRP findings represent. To make clear what that model entails, which I shall call the "Integrated Model," I will describe three models of reading, each of which is currently accepted by a significant number of reading teachers and researchers.

Decoding Model Children begin learning to read with formal instruction at around age five. Although children may have learned the alphabet and how to recognize a few words at home, these informal learnings are not considered part of real reading. Teachers give direct instruction in the letters of the alphabet and their sounds, alone and in combination with other letters. Once children can blend sounds into words with reasonable speed and smooth-

ness, they are taught to apply those skills to sentences and then to longer texts.

Initially, the texts presented are designed to make decoding easier, by using only words that follow the pronunciation and blending rules that have been taught. But after decoding fluency is attained, no attempt is made to control the vocabulary in the texts children are given. As a result, children may be successfully decoding material they do not fully comprehend, but this is not a matter of great concern. Teachers assume that children will learn new words, their meanings, and general and specific background knowledge as they grow older, read more, and study content area subjects.

Skills Model Children begin the reading process at about age four by learning to hear separate sounds in words. Although some children come to school already possessing this ability, others do not, so formal instruction in recognizing like sounds, blending sounds into words, and deleting sounds from words is given before instruction in matching sounds to letters. Next phonics is taught, either through the direct instruction approach described in the first model or by drawing analogies

between words or word parts of known and unfamiliar words. For example, a child who can decode "ball" and "sting" should also be able to decode call, fall, and stalling. After practicing identifying words in isolation, children begin to apply phonics skills to sentences and longer texts. Next, teachers work on improving children's facility to read rapidly and smoothly with proper conversational tone (fluency), then move on to vocabulary development and comprehension.

Controlled vocabulary texts are often used in grade 1, but rarely beyond. Teachers introduce new vocabulary words and their meanings directly before children read the texts that embody them.

In grade 2 or 3 teachers begin to emphasize literal comprehension over the previously taught technical reading skills, usually by asking children questions or having them summarize what they have read. Although it is impossible to completely sepa-

rate and sequence the learning of the skills described, teachers using this model do emphasize the introduction, practice and mastery of individual skills in the order described above. Their primary approach to teaching all these skills is direct instruction.

Integrated Model Teachers who accept this model believe that children begin learning to read in infancy by being read to and observing family members reading. Their first learnings about reading are its purposes: to obtain information and find pleasure. At the same time, they learn the mechanical procedures for reading a book, newspaper, etc. by observing (e.g. front to back, top to bottom of a page). Between the ages of one year and two, most children who have been read to regularly begin to imitate the mechanical aspects of reading with books that have been read to them, remembering some of the story lines and even a few



specific words, while they make up the rest. They also begin to try out writing by scribbling with chalk or crayons and then reading back what they have scribbled. Children three or four years old can usually recognize certain letters or important words, such as their own names, pronounce them on sight, and write them imperfectly. Before they enter school, children who have been read to regularly have acquired a good-sized spo-

Direct instruction is a part of this model, too. Teachers do not expect children to figure out the entire complex system of written language all by themselves. More often, however, teachers do what Richard Allington calls “opportunistic teaching,” which means direct instruction about problems that come up as children are reading real texts. An example might be a question a child asks about why the word “run” adds another “n” when it becomes “running.”

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ken vocabulary of book words and know tacitly the structure, formal language, and a few of the devices commonly used in stories (e.g. three tasks, three siblings, magical interference in the lives of human beings).

Normally, none of this learning is imparted through direct instruction. At times, children may ask parents to tell them what a word is, and parents comply, but mostly children are learning by imitating and figuring things out for themselves. By the time they begin receiving formal reading instruction in school, they are aided in decoding by all their previously acquired knowledge and skills. Moreover, since they understand the purposes of written language, they fully expect written material in school to be informative and/or pleasurable. From the beginning of their experiences with formal reading instruction, they read to satisfy those expectations, rather than just to pronounce words or recite sentences correctly.

At the same time, teachers using integrated instruction rely heavily on modeling how they solve problems in reading. One such problem is what to do when you come to a word you don't know the meaning of. Teachers demonstrate that they first read ahead to see if the context itself defines the word. If not, they check words written on charts around the room, ask a peer, or consult a dictionary. Teachers have children practice the problem solving strategies they have demonstrated with guidance and supervision until they can manage them on their own.

The Controversy

Whichever model of learning to read we accept as the true one, I think we would all agree that mature and astute readers use all the skills and knowledge mentioned in the integrated model, plus a few others for specialized reading tasks. For example, when we read news articles or familiar material, we often skim to see

if there is anything new or particularly interesting. When we read editorials or other persuasive essays, we assume a critical stance to see if we can catch illogic, exaggerations, or untruths. When we read fiction we look for believability in characters and events, and respond emotionally to the rhythms of the language used.

The question, then, is do children integrate their skills in early reading experiences or do they use one skill at a time, adding new ones as they become adept with the old ones? As a long time teacher of children, adolescents, non-native English speakers, and novice teachers, (and as the parent of four children), I strongly believe that children integrate what they know about written language and can do it right from their first reading experiences. Some compliant and insecure children may be persuaded by misguided adults to put their knowledge aside and “sound out” lines of print word by word, but the independent ones, no matter what they have been told, use everything they have learned to “make sense of print;” in other words, they truly read.

Why, then, do we have a significant number of children in our schools (both public and private) who do not read well? (Notice that I do not say, “cannot read at all.” In my long experience I have encountered only a handful of such non-readers, and their problems were clearly neurological, physiological, psychological, or some combination of all three.) Well, first of all the “horror stories” that the media has served to us are exaggerated. It is not true that forty percent of elementary school students cannot read. While the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a test given to a random sample of American students since 1971,

reports that forty percent of fourth graders score below the “basic” level on the test, it does not tell us that “basic” means being able to read fourth grade material with literal comprehension. Actually, thirty-two percent of these low scorers are readers; they are just not up to what the NAEP considers grade level. It is also not true that students' reading skills have declined in recent years. The reading scores at all grade levels on the NAEP have not changed substantially since the test was first given forty years ago. In fact, there has been a slight upward trend in scores in the past fifteen years.

Still, the below basic numbers cannot be ignored. These represent children who do not read as well as they should for their age and grade, and the public has a right to know why not. Despite the public's right, however, it may not like the answer. The vast majority of these under-achievers in reading are poor children, and because of poverty they have been deprived of some or all of the benefits society provides for their more affluent peers: good nutrition, regular health care, safe neighborhoods, well-equipped schools, teacher continuity, adequately stocked and convenient libraries, stable home lives, and hope for the future. Something else important is also missing in the lives of many poor children: the pre-school learning described earlier under the Integrated Model. Important and persuasive research studies, especially those done by Dolores Durkin and Betty Hart and Todd Risley, show that many poor children are not read to, do not see adults reading, and do not have anywhere near the number of early experiences with oral language that middle and upper class children have. The Hart and Risley studies, for

Summary Findings of the National Reading Panel

1. Children who receive 5 to 18 hours of instruction in phonemic awareness before they begin formal reading instruction are more successful at learning to read than those who do not.
2. Systematic phonics instruction in kindergarten and grade 1 helps children learn to read.
3. Having children read aloud the same passages repeatedly with feedback or guidance from adults or peers improves fluency.
4. The studies of independent silent reading did not demonstrate any significant improvement in reading achievement; however, there were too few studies for the panel to determine that this is an ineffective practice.
5. Both direct and indirect instruction in vocabulary, along with repeated practice of the same words in reading and writing contexts, improves reading comprehension.
6. Seven of the sixteen strategies commonly used to improve reading comprehension proved effective. They are: cooperative learning, self-monitoring of understanding, graphic organizers, semantic organizers, question answering, question generating, and summarizing text.
7. Teachers can be taught to improve their teaching of comprehension strategies.
8. Teacher in-service training positively affects student achievement. No conclusions could be drawn about the effectiveness of pre-service education.
9. Although using computer technology in reading instruction appears promising, there are too few studies at present to draw any conclusions.

example, indicate that children of low income families exchange an average of 15 million words with their primary caregiver in the years before they enter school, while children of middle income families average 45 million words,

and those of high income families, 70 million words. How can anyone believe that these discrepancies in oral language experience do not make a difference when children face formal reading instruction in school?

Is poor teaching also a factor? Yes, although it is impossible to document through research just how much there is and where it is occurring. We have only anecdotal evidence to go on, and that suggests that poor teachers are more likely to be found in urban schools where teaching conditions are undesirable or in rural areas where teacher pay is too low to attract highly qualified teachers. Good teachers usually have choices about where they work, and they tend to choose suburban schools where the salary and benefits are good, the classes are small, materials and supplies are plentiful, and the school buildings are well maintained. Since much descriptive research on good and poor teaching suggests that good teachers—not particular teaching methods, programs, nor materials—are what breeds success for children's learning, we should be taking strong, positive action to bring good teachers into high poverty schools.

Coming back, finally, to the NRP Report and the NCLB Act, I hope you can now see why I am so disappointed in both. Embroiled in ideology and politics, each failed to get to the heart of the matter of teaching children to read. The NRP, in refusing to look past its members' preference for the Skills Model of reading, ignored the effects of all children's early experiences with oral language, written language, and literature. In investigating only a handful of stock elements of instruction, the panel discounted the importance of having a purpose for reading, of associating with adults who read, of using meaningful teaching materials, of using writing as a complement to reading, and of having richly stocked and accessible libraries. In addition to disregarding all the same factors,

NCLB went farther in the wrong direction by de-legitimizing the majority of research done in the past fifty years, strictly limiting the instructional materials Title I schools could buy, disrespecting the abilities of teachers, and selecting shame and punishment as the primary tools for motivating schools to improve their teaching of reading. "O brave new world that has such people in it."



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Joanne served as a member of the National Reading Panel and past president of the Portland Reading Council. At present, she is a cohort leader in the Continuing Teacher Licensure Program at Portland State University. In November 2004 she assumed the vice-presidency of the National Council of Teachers of English.