What Research REALLY Says about Teaching and Learning to Read

Edited by
Stephen B. Kucer

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INTRODUCTION

From the Beginning: Power for the Teacher

YETTA M. GOODMAN
University of Arizona

What Research Really *Says about Teaching and Learning to Read* reflects the focus among language and literacy scholars concerned with informing classroom teachers with knowledge and research about the teaching of reading. The English language arts curriculum in school settings is now at a time in American education where the power of the teacher is being eroded by forces that place great trust in tests and statistical manipulation rather than in the power of a caring and thoughtful professional. Lack of respect for classroom teachers is not historically unusual in the United States, however; yet recent research makes it abundantly clear that the teacher in the classroom is most responsible for the academic achievement of the students (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). More than ever before, support for teachers is necessary to help them continue their development of professional knowledge, and to expand on their classroom experiences to understand their role in the teaching and learning of language.

The concern to inform English language arts professionals lies in the origins of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Hook (1979) makes the case that NCTE began as a gathering of "protesters against curricular rigidity imposed by colleges on the American high school" (p. 3). Hook also makes the case that the founders were organizers and builders. The founders, teachers, and teacher educators were responding to the imposition of mandates and tests on the English curriculum of

American high schools. Elementary school teachers also joined the protest that same year.

The content of this volume expands on the mission of NCTE members to respond to uninformed impositions by those outside of the classroom, and to build an organization of teachers and teacher educators who would inform their profession by providing background knowledge, theory, and research that can be adapted to their own settings. Through the authors in this book, members of the Commission on Reading, NCTE sustains its mission to support classroom teachers in continuing to develop the expertise they need to be successful in developing curricula in their classrooms that provide language-learning opportunities for all their students. The authors also provide guidelines and specific aids for classroom teachers to use as resources and references to develop a safe learning environment in which students have opportunities to use language, including reading and writing, as a tool for exploring the world.

Since my own entry into teaching, I have been imbued with the notion that curriculum is most effective for learners when the teacher is centrally involved in negotiating the curriculum with students. John Dewey (1938) makes clear that a curriculum embodies all the experiences of the teacher and students as they come together to learn.

In the 1950s, as I was learning to become a teacher, we discussed ideas and explored opportunities for teachers to develop their own curricula in negotiation with their students. I valued the language-experience approach to the teaching of reading, which stressed building on children's relevant and personally meaningful experiences in and out of the classroom to write their own reading materials and to expand on their learning. I used adaptations of language experience with my self-contained eighth graders, to engage them in writing a cantata based on the history of our new intermediate school in the city of Redondo Beach, California; and we published a literacy magazine based on their writings. We adapted Taba's (1962) concepts about curriculum inquiry, and built habitats to compare the students' immigrant communities to the communities in which their parents had grown up in Mexico, Japan, China, and European countries. There was

so much the students had to read and write in order to answer their many, and often changing, questions about their world.

When I went into teaching, I knew I would integrate speaking, listening, reading, and writing with my science and social studies programs. I knew that children enjoyed learning best when the experiences were interesting and relevant to their lives, and when they had choice in the materials they read and wrote. I knew that classrooms could be organized in ways similar to social-group work settings, in which children could collaborate, solve problems, discuss, argue, and take leadership roles in organizing their classrooms with my expertise and help. My interactions with students were based on trust that kids are always learning, and on an understanding that the classroom community in which we were learning together was of utmost importance to our development as a community of teachers and learners. My students were capable of working in small groups and on their own, as I worked with them to provide safe spaces and opportunities in which they were learning to read and write while they were learning about their world. When I started teaching in 1952, the term *progressive education* was rarely used. It was the McCarthy period in American education, but the experiences that many of my colleagues and I were putting into practice in the classrooms were rooted in the theories, philosophies, and concepts of progressive education, with the focus of using oral and written language as a tool to learn across the curriculum.

My professional involvement in language arts education in the 1980s included my NCTE presidency (1979–1980) at the same time that Dorothy Strickland was president of the International Reading Association (IRA). Charlotte Huck, who had been president of NCTE four years earlier (1975–1976), proposed a series of conferences for teachers and teacher educators to showcase the research being done worldwide in reading, writing, and oral language that was especially relevant to elementary language arts. Dr. Huck believed that if the knowledge were easily accessible to teachers and teacher educators, it would have significant impact on language arts curricula. Although Dr. Huck was not able to obtain funds to support the project, when Dorothy Strickland and I became presidents, we enthusiastically picked

up on the idea and worked together to develop a series of conferences. Huck, Strickland, and I wrote a proposal accepted by both the IRA and NCTE executive boards, and for more than five years, eighteen national and regional conferences were held in cities across the United States, as well as one in Dublin, Ireland, at the World Reading Congress. The conferences were called *Oral and Written Language Development Research: Impact on the Schools* (Goodman, Haussler, & Strickland, 1980; Jaggar & Smith-Burke, 1985). In their presidential years, Sheila Fitzgerald and Bea Cullinan extended the conferences to focus on classroom application and strategies for improving language and literacy instruction. The conferences were organized so that "a new theoretical and integrated base for the teaching of the language arts including reading would be the result and that its impact on the elementary school would be great" (Goodman, Haussler, & Strickland, 1980, p. 2).

The names of the people who spoke at these impact conferences include prominent researchers and language theorists who continue to influence the English language arts to this day. Language arts teachers, teacher educators, and researchers were introduced to and worked together with Vera John Steiner, Joan Tough, Don Graves, Charles Read, Frank Smith, Emilia Ferriero, Gordon Wells, and many more. Michael Halliday introduced his idea about children learning language, learning through language, and learning about language. Marie Clay fascinated us with the description of a teacher education program that had teachers observing a reader with a teacher behind a two-way mirror, followed by intensive discussion about their observations.

The conferences included scholars from many nations and involved elementary classroom teachers as presenters, planners, and leaders. The walls of the conference rooms showcased children's work. Presenters read children's books to the adult audiences. Garth Boomer, a prominent Australian English educator, got down from the traditional speaker's platform and moved chairs into circles to establish an environment for the purpose of serious talk among professionals.

Winners of the NCTE David H. Russell Research Award also influenced the knowledge base on language arts education. Louise Rosenblatt received her award in 1980 for her concept of trans-

action in reading. As elementary teachers expanded their use of trade books in classrooms, Rosenblatt's concepts of efferent and aesthetic stances during reading helped them think about ways to engage their students in responding thoughtfully and personally to literature. Nanci Atwell received the research award for her work on writing, helping teachers think about ways to engage middle school students in their own writing; and Vivian Paley received the award for using talk and dramatic play with very young children.

Through the support of Rosemary Winklejohann, NCTE developed opportunities for individual and groups of teachers to bring their teacher-developed language arts programs to a panel of experts for suggestions and evaluation.

The Commission on Reading added support for teachers' knowledge as they developed many projects, and advised NCTE in ways that supported the belief that teachers continuously develop their teaching of reading as they build their knowledge and experience to invigorate rich language environments and opportunities in their classrooms. Much of the focus of the work of the Commission is to assure that teacher-developed language arts programs are at the heart of teachers' work. Pamphlets, checklists, and commercial reading and language arts programs are helpful to teachers, but only if teachers use such materials as tools to inform their own decisions about curriculum development. The teacher is the decision maker in the classroom.

What Research Really *Says about Teaching and Learning to Read* emerged from deliberations by recent members of the Commission on Reading, who believe that teachers are decision makers about their curricula. The matrixes and documents developed by the Commission were written to highlight the knowledge about the teaching and learning of reading that would support teachers in organizing their classroom environment. The documents were developed over a period of time so they could be presented to teachers, teacher educators, and reading researchers for reflection and response. In this way, the documents were put into practice based on the experience and knowledge of a range of professionals in the field. The importance of the documents is that they are meant to guide and engage teachers to consider their own knowledge about their students and their own beliefs

about the teaching and learning of reading. The documents are meant to engage teachers in exploring the usefulness of the documents, and to encourage teachers to adapt the information gathered to their own settings. The documents reflect the idea that teachers are searching for multiple ways to be reflective about their literacy teaching.

Reading First and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have been written as mandates for the teaching of reading in the classroom. The research used to support the reading provisions ignores a wide range of reading theories and diversity of research, and establishes a one-size-fits-all procedure for the teaching of reading. The *Decision-Making Matrix*, the accompanying documents, and the articles in this volume are written to provide a more complete view of the theories, knowledge, and practices available in the English language arts community about reading teaching and learning. The authors represent in their work a diversity of research results, using individual readers and readers in classroom settings to provide profiles of readers engaged in language arts learning and teaching.

What Research Really *Says about Teaching and Learning to Read* is organized into four sections to highlight the documents and the discussions that have taken place in their development. In Part I, Patrick Shannon provides a critique of the Commission's focus over the years on "resisting the collective consciousness of the corporate scientific and state forces within the English language arts," and Ruth Rigby provides a history of the Commission documents. Both chapters establish the Commission's belief that knowledgeable and experienced teachers are central to the teaching and learning of language arts in the classroom.

Part II provides chapters that highlight the reading research that led to the development of the guidelines in the matrix and the documents. Here, the nature of reading is embedded in relation to curriculum building on what is known about the linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural diversity of readers in our schools. Various authors explore the nature of learning that results in language inventions and the development of reading proficiency in children of many ages and different language and cultural communities, as well as learners with a wide range of reading proficiencies, including English as a Second Language (ESL) readers

and readers with various school-imposed labels. The authors discuss readers' inventions about language and concepts as the children learn the relationships between context, subject matter, content of the classroom, and literacy engagements.

Part III is organized to focus specifically on the documents themselves: to share possibilities for their uses in professional development, to expand on teachers' adaptations to their own settings, and to provide support in language across the curriculum development. The documents expand beyond the narrow view of research that drives much of governmental mandates on teachers and developing readers.

The final section presents the documents themselves, which are embedded in the rich context of knowledge and research in the previous chapters. Teachers, curriculum developers in schools, reading coaches, and a range of literacy professionals can use the documents to inform their decision-making process, to support the development of classrooms rich in opportunities for students of all ages to use reading and writing to learn about their world.

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This groundbreaking collection examines "official" views of the teaching and learning of reading—those endorsed by the National Reading Panel, No Child Left Behind, and Reading First initiatives—and challenges the assumptions on which the views are based.

Together, the contributors offer an alternate vision to currently accepted ideas and practices in reading education. *What Research* Really *Says about Teaching and Learning to Read* provides historical context for the current reading debates and then examines forms of resistance to existing policies. The contributors, with support of NCTE's Commission on Reading, synthesize a broad range of research concerning the nature of reading, how it is learned, and its development across the grades. They examine specific curricular and instructional strategies for reading development in children and adolescents. They also offer a powerful decision-making matrix to help evaluate reading curricula as well as a research-based collection of best practices.

Recognizing that classrooms are becoming more ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse, this pioneering book addresses the needs of multilingual students and of readers who struggle under current national reading policies. The contributors highlight the transformative power of professional development and celebrate success stories in the era of No Child Left Behind and Reading First.

NCTE National Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096
Phone: 800-369-6283 or 217-328-3870
www.ncte.org

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