

Critical Issues

Literacy and Educational Policy: Part Three

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This installment of JLR's Critical Issues section is the final part of a three-part series on literacy and educational policy. We are especially pleased to publish the following responses, by three highly qualified policymakers, to the views expressed in Part 1 of this series (see Volume 28, Number 2). In Part 1, Judith Green with Carol Dixon, David Pearson, and Sharon Quint commented respectively on the ideas they believed to be crucial for policymakers to know about literacy from their perspectives as literacy researchers. At the same time, we published Donna Alvermann's reaction to the views of the three researchers, also from her perspective as a literacy researcher.

As substantiated by their brief biographies at the beginning of this issue, Emerson J. Elliott, Gary K. Hart, and Marshall S. Smith are imminently qualified to write a response to the researchers' views from the perspective of those who are intimately involved with educational policy at the highest levels. We are especially gratified that these busy public officials consented to share their views in a forum of interest primarily to literacy researchers. We believe their willingness to do so bodes well for the future of a constructive dialogue between the literacy research and educational policy communities.

Combined with Patrick Shannon's consideration of literacy and poverty in Part 2 of this series (see Volume 28, Number 3), we hope that this series has stimulated more attention about issues related to literacy research and educational policy. We encourage readers to ponder the perspectives and ideas presented in this series and to consider adding their own insights by submitting letters to the editor, which will be considered for future publication.

Literacy: From Policy to Practice

Emerson J. Elliott

FORMER US COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION STATISTICS,
OFFICE OF EDUCATION RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENT,
US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Policymakers expect that researchers will serve them as a resource. Researchers are frequently the source of new ideas; they develop understanding of how things relate and work, and they can be a source of solutions to problems. Most frequently, however, they are invited to meet with a legislative committee or officials in a government planning and policy office. The focus of these conversations tends to be pragmatic and broad-brush, because policymakers search for actions the public can see and grasp – actions that can have a demonstrable effect before the next election. Only a few policymakers I have known and worked with over a long career in Washington would have been willing to engage in a debate that was not aimed at such practical considerations. Perhaps that will change in response to growing evidence that some ways government has functioned in the past are not working.

The *Journal of Literacy Research* has turned the usual relationship of researchers to policymakers on its head. Instead of waiting for the government to call, the editors have solicited a dialogue around literacy issues defined by researchers active in the field. I am willing to try this game – perhaps made easier because I am no longer in any federal government position. But first, bear with me as I pass along some contextual background about literacy as it is perceived in the Washington policy community and perhaps in the individual states, as well.

Literacy Is a Policy Priority

Judith Green and Carol Dixon (1996) urge that all participants in the debate on literacy “view and understand . . . the position each takes on the issue . . .” (p. 290). That might be a tough sell for policymakers. Bismarck said that “Politics is the doctrine of the possible, the attainable,” and Henry Adams, less kindly, observed that “Practical politics consists in ignoring facts.” Defining the possible requires finding a way to attract enough votes, and not infrequently that requires ignoring complexity and making goals or purposes ambiguous. The more explicit the goal, the narrower the area of agreement and the less likely the “possible” can be achieved.

The context for policymakers’ understanding of literacy as a priority can be found in two now well-known sources: statistical measures of literacy and Na-

tional Education Goals. These are such important elements in the national discussion of literacy that I want to describe them at some length. The statistical data largely describe what policymakers know and understand about literacy, and the National Education Goals are a statement of position of intent. Both have been created with substantial input from the research community.

Americans have a fascination with numbers, and government statistical agencies, which frequently must devise definitions of concepts that will be measured, have a major role in shaping what Americans think by repeatedly publishing numbers about the phenomena they have defined – whether unemployment, air miles traveled, vaccinations administered, or levels of literacy. One of the statistical definitions that has evolved considerably over the years is literacy. First measured in the US Census of 1790 simply as the ability to sign one's name, by 1840, the census enumerator inquired whether the respondent could read or write; for much of the 20th Century, the definition was the number of years of schooling completed (often 5 years). By the 1970s, national surveys attempted to go beyond school-related reading tasks to develop a competency-based approach and include a broader range of materials adults were likely to encounter in their daily lives.

In the 1980s, the Young Adult Literacy Survey of 21 to 25 year olds was conducted by the Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This became the basis for two sharp changes in assessments of literacy. First, the survey assessed three dimensions of literacy – *prose comprehension*, which evaluated the ability to understand and use text from editorials, news stories, poems, and the like; *document literacy*, which measured ability to locate and use information from such sources as job applications, payroll forms, bus schedules, maps, tables, and indexes; and *quantitative literacy*, which assessed ability to apply arithmetic operations such as those encountered in balancing a check book, calculating a tip, completing an order form, or determining the amount of interest on a loan. The second major change in the new literacy assessment was that, instead of reporting a single number of literate or illiterate Americans, the new data and scoring made it possible to describe the proportion of the population who were able to perform various tasks or who could function at various levels of difficulty. Thus, it was a far more useful diagnostic tool for understanding the abilities of Americans to function in their daily lives and in the workplace.

Equally significant changes were occurring over this same period of time in the way the NAEP assessed reading ability of 4th, 8th, and 12th graders. A new reading framework, which focused on performance, was constructed for the 1992 NAEP assessment. Its structure had, first, a *purpose* dimension represented by reading for literary experience, reading for information, and reading to perform a task; second, it had a dimension describing *types of interactions* between the reader and the text, represented by forming an initial understanding, developing an interpretation, personal reflection and response, and demonstrating a critical stance. The assessment created around this framework was comprised of extended and short constructed questions to supplement the previously

predominant multiple-choice format and made use of complete and authentic texts found in real-life situations. The scoring was based on student comprehension rather than comparison of students' responses with each other, and multiple texts were provided so that performance in linking and integrating ideas across texts could be evaluated.

These literacy measurement activities overlapped the 1989 Charlottesville summit of President Bush and state governors which led to framing the National Education Goals in 1990, and enacting the goals into law by 1994. Two of the goals bear directly on literacy:

all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English ... and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation's modern economy.

every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. (Goals 2000, 1990)

The National Education Goals Panel, the joint state and federal panel created to monitor progress toward the goals, called on researchers, program advocates, and others for advice. The data from the NAEP and the National Adult Literacy Survey are the primary measures for those two goals.

Research shows the importance of a student's existing knowledge in establishing a context for new student learning, and as Green and Dixon remind us, the literacy one needs depends on the situation. The research findings can also be applied to policymakers as learners in our dialogue on literacy policy issues. The national goals and literacy surveys surround policymakers' current perceptions of literacy and, consequently, their interest and ability to relate to these articles. Although David Pearson (1996) makes initial reference to some of the data resulting from the recent surveys, there are otherwise no references to those contextual indicators in these research articles. (I could quibble as well that a full recital of the data would include some less optimistic statistics as well as the generally upbeat references cited by Pearson. In fact, no research and policy dialogue would be necessary if his data were the whole story!) This lack of context for policy demonstrates how far we need to go in establishing a basis for dialogue. First, start where the policymakers are if you want to take them where you are.

The Issue Is Implementation

If literacy is already on the policy agenda, then what next? The crisis of government now is not one of priorities or downsizing. It is one of implementation.

What can government do effectively? How can it accomplish its purposes? This is an area where the dialogue is particularly important, because researchers deal with questions that can lead to greater understanding and often to reconceptualized and effective strategies. But don't expect a smooth road. Policymakers will still resist complexity, are partial to direct services, and generally prefer to avoid investments in capacity building and infrastructure.

Green and Dixon ask for consideration of "who counts as a policymaker." Sharon Quint's (1996) article describes a significant role for greater access in local-level dialogues, which was instrumental in the Benjamin Franklin Day School project. Pearson notes – not with approval, I judge – the intrusion of policymakers into decisions not just of how much support should be provided for literacy, but also how instruction should be implemented or what sort of assessments should be conducted. His idea is the textbook distinction that "policymakers would have a primary voice in determining the goals (the ends) of education, leaving matters of professional practice (the means) to the individual and collective prerogative of teachers" (Pearson, 1996, p. 306). But it often doesn't happen that way.

The idea in these articles seems, clearly enough, that more people need to be at the table when decisions are made. But what decisions? The intrusions Pearson describes often result from policymaker frustration with a failure of the education system, of schools, or of teachers to accomplish something the public had expected. Should teachers be at the decision table? The country has ambiguous perceptions of that. On the one hand, my child's teachers (and school) are OK; on the other hand, American teachers (and schools) are not doing well enough. We want teachers to know the subject they teach, and we expect them to have command of every instructional technique essential to that subject, so every child can be assured of learning at a high level. Still, we withhold the independence, professional support, and recognition that are associated with professional educator roles in higher education and in other nations, preferring instead to build layers of supervision and prescribe the goals and standards for learning, the textbooks and tests, and sometimes even the instructional methods. So it may not be surprising that policymakers frequently leave teachers out of the dialogue. And, I should note, researchers have been known to contribute to that omission as well!

Despite all this, policymakers as a lot are sure in their own minds that they don't know how to achieve effective classroom instruction and for that reason will tend to avoid most prescriptions for classroom activity. A more complete way to pose the underlying question is, "Who is a policymaker *for what purpose?*" From the points made by all authors, they appear to be troubled more that teachers or parents will be left out when decisions about appropriate classroom practice are made somewhere else. So the issue is one policymakers would tend to perceive as "implementation" rather than the more usual "policy" decisions on resource, allocation, or government priorities.

The pragmatic bent of policymakers makes them search for simple

solutions to persistently disappointing literacy performance for large parts of society, falling disproportionately on some racial or ethnic groups and some income groups. Pearson (1996) argues that “There are no magical potions” (p. 304). He prescribes “a substantial investment in teacher knowledge and professional development” as “our best hope” (p. 304). Then he goes on to observe “What remains to be seen is whether we have the will to support, with adequate resources, challenging curricula, and engaging materials, the schools, teachers, and students who will be held to account by those standards” (p. 307). Green and Dixon describe a situated definition of what counts as literacy in a context of use, that is, the solution would depend on what is needed in a specific case. They also include a Peter Drucker quote making this point about “knowledge workers” who will “require a good deal of formal education and the ability to acquire and to apply theoretical and analytical knowledge ... they require a habit of continuous learning” (Green & Dixon, 1996, p. 296). Quint (1996) broadens the focus even more: “we need to redefine the expected roles and responsibilities assumed by families, neighborhoods, and schools if we are to find progressive solutions to major problems of schooling and literacy learning” (p. 311). Not incidentally, every policy-sensitive person will admire the powerful images she creates through her direct quotations; a policymaker would die for a speech writer who could produce such compelling statements. Quint makes her case for a human face on literacy, describes what was done at Benjamin Franklin Day School to build cooperative and supportive links with the community, and notes actions of the teachers to make their efforts more effective. Moreover, she makes a point that an organized school effort, with strong leadership, can make a difference. At this point, I fall into the conservative half of her two-sided trap, walking around “worrying about what will and won’t work” (Quint, 1996, p. 317). Quint doesn’t tell us what change there was in literacy among the students or give us confidence the success at the Benjamin Franklin Day School could be transported elsewhere unless perhaps Carole Williams was cloned.

This is an excellent place to focus the dialogue, because policymakers and researchers most need each other in this implementation area. Of course, as Quint tells us, the problems of literacy can’t be solved as if they were in a separate compartment of peoples’ lives unconnected with home, family, and community. But who can be responsible, and how can they be supported to make these connections on a large scale? And how can you help even a policymaker who wants to (and most do not even try) breach the boundaries of legislative committee jurisdictions or executive departments? Is the message that it can only happen locally? If so, is there anything policymakers can do to encourage such actions locally even if they can’t be achieved at other levels?

Pearson’s call for professional development is most likely to meet a skeptical response. There is a strongly held perception among both educators and policymakers that huge investments now made in professional development are wasted. Still, there is growing recognition that professional development is critical when it is targeted to prepare teachers to teach the new and more rigorous

curriculum policymakers seek. Green and Dixon's request that a broader array of perspectives be represented at the decision table has particular relevance here, because the usually missing voices are those of Americans who have direct responsibility to make something happen.

So I think policymakers will be frustrated in their search for effective strategies in these articles, at least if the time frame is short and if the dialogue the Journal seeks fails to happen. Yet concern for effective strategies is growing in public bodies just as it is in corporations and other organizations in society. In the federal government, the pressures of deficit budgets, changes in priorities, and thousands of program evaluations that have found accomplishments disappointing are now met with challenges to "reform" government operations. The Goals 2000 legislation and the most recent federal elementary and secondary school amendments were viewed by their drafters as measures that would create a more appropriate balance between policy direction and local implementation. The policy debate encompasses a wide spectrum. On the one hand are these "systemic reform" approaches that set goals, evaluate through assessments, and attempt to build a strengthened professional teaching force. Then there are arrangements under which school districts purchase services from private vendors. Finally, at the other extreme, are measures that shift decision-making to parents through vouchers or other choice systems. What keeps these approaches alive is the search for more effective public policies – ones that will have results. Implementation is at the center of concern in making government leaner and more effective. This is where the debate needs to turn. In Donna Alvermann's (1996) terms, policymakers do not "ultimately hold the key to finding equitable solutions" *alone*. They need help.

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A Policymaker's Response

Gary K. Hart

DIRECTOR, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION REFORM

I am delighted to participate in this dialogue sponsored by the *Journal of Literacy Research* between researchers and policymakers, because literacy issues are currently one of the most important and visible educational matters being debated in my home state of California. In addition, having never been asked to participate in such a written commentary in my more than 20 years of serving in a state public-policy capacity, I find this a refreshing and unique opportunity to join the debate between two important educational constituencies. I hope this dialogue will prompt similar exchanges in the future.

I should state at the outset my own bias on literacy research, which colors my reaction to all the articles to which I am responding. Although there is a prodigious amount of scholarship on reading and related subjects, it is difficult for policymakers to digest and understand even small portions of it. And from a lay person's perspective, some of the research seems far afield from what can help us teach our children to develop appropriate literacy skills. Perhaps most importantly, from a political standpoint, the public is perplexed that after 12 or more years of schooling so many students seem to have trouble reading. I sense the public's frustration level is growing, and I must confess to sharing it. Putting the issue in its starkest terms, we might ask: Why so much reading research and so little reading progress?

This may not be a fair question, but I think it is on many people's minds. Of course, I imagine even tougher questions and concerns could be directed at the political and policy community, and if this dialogue continues, I presume literacy scholars will put them forward without hesitation. However, my assignment is to respond to the articles at hand, and I propose to do so on a case-by-case basis. I am often asked by researchers how they can best inform policymakers about their scholarship, and I hope the following blow-by-blow response is helpful in that regard.

Let me begin with David Pearson's (1996) article, which seemed the most relevant to the issues I have grappled with as a policymaker. I first want to note that Pearson's essay was written in a clear and jargon-free manner, which is no mean accomplishment given the turgid and arcane style that seems to characterize so many of the scholarly articles that cross my desk. I think it goes without saying that if we are serious about dialogue, we must pay close attention to issues of clarity and remember who the audience is – thank you, David, for remembering!

Pearson comments on many important issues; let me just react to three key points which he puts forward. The first concerns the appropriate role of different “players” in determining educational policy. Too often, I believe, a false distinction is created between politicians and teachers/researchers and their effect on policy – the stereotype being that only those who hold the “purse strings” are viewed by themselves and others as policymakers and that those who know best what is going on (i.e., teachers and researchers) are relegated to their classrooms, libraries, and laboratories. (Green & Dixon, 1996, in the concluding section of their article subscribe to this view.) Pearson correctly notes the complexity of formulating educational policy using the illustration of standards setting, which is a hot topic today in almost every state and many school districts in the country. He points out that teachers and the research community are major policy players when it comes to the issue of standards setting. I believe the role of educational researchers will grow – not diminish – as these standards are developed and a better appreciation of the complexities involved in setting and assessing standards are understood. We do not have a national educational curriculum, nor do we have a national (or for that matter a state or local) educational “czar.” America’s educational system – for better or worse – is quite decentralized compared to other industrialized nations. Professional organizations can and do play a critical role in defining educational outcomes and goals. Indeed, one of the reasons California’s state performance-based assessment system (California Learning Assessment System [CLAS]) ran into so many problems is that, some observers felt, it was too heavily influenced by classroom teachers and academics. Many asserted that the test development process failed to engage the broader public.

The essential point is that there are no clear lines of authority in educational policymaking – it is a complex (some would say messy) process. It is – and ought to be – a public process and there are many “publics” who participate. Oftentimes, when researchers complain about being excluded, it is, in my view, an excuse for lack of their own initiative and resourcefulness. Put another way, the question needs to be asked, are there appropriate incentives for scholars in research universities to participate in this decision-making process, which is admittedly time-consuming and may not generate the type of scholarship that is rewarded within the academic research community? Conversely, if the process is meant to be inclusive – and by definition that is what a public education system is – then it is the responsibility of our elected officials to create mechanisms that insure opportunities for participation. Any specific suggestions from researchers about how we can better insure such participation would be greatly welcome.

I also was taken by Pearson’s persuasive case for greater investment in educational research and professional staff development. It does seem ironic that the private sector, so often associated with making widgets of one kind or another, seems to value (downsizing and outsourcing practices notwithstanding) research and development and staff training more than our public education enterprise, which is so dependent on the skills and attitudes of its employees.

My own sense is that two factors have diminished political support for such activities. The first is a widely held belief that teaching is an art, not a science, and that any reasonably educated person who likes kids can be a decent teacher. Although there may be some truth for this bias as it relates to teaching middle-class students, our persistent failure to reach poor and disadvantaged children suggests that effective teaching is really a very complex undertaking. The second reason we have difficulty in gaining more support for staff development is that we have not paid much attention to documenting the effectiveness of such activities, particularly as they affect student performance. Until staff development activities are better linked to important organizational objectives, particularly those related to student achievement, I am not optimistic that we will see significant increases in staff development funding by state and local agencies. In this regard, it seems to me that the research community could provide a great public service by placing a higher priority on determining what kinds of staff development activities related to literacy issues would make a difference. I worry that Professor Pearson, in his desire to appropriately discourage “magic potions,” comes close to suggesting that we really don’t have much to suggest with regard to what works most effectively in assisting students attain literacy. If this is indeed how policymakers would interpret his message, it is not surprising that there is a lack of enthusiasm for spending scarce resources on more staff development.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn’t respond to Pearson’s (1996) suggestion that the literacy crisis is a crisis “manufactured to benefit particular interests – often to support those with an ax to grind, a product to sell, or a partisan view to champion” (p. 302). Although the National Assessment of Educational Progress results may indicate that things are not getting worse, they clearly indicate that a very substantial portion of young people (40% of fourth graders) read below a “basic” level (i.e., unable to demonstrate an understanding of the overall meaning of what they read). The fact that California ranks at the bottom of the 50 states in fourth-grade reading scores (and those scores have declined in just 2 years from 52% reading below the basic level in 1992 to 56% in 1994) has created a crisis mentality in California that seems entirely justified and has not been “manufactured” just to serve particular ideological and economic interests and their own narrow agendas.

The general public is worried, and I hope our distinguished colleagues in the educational research community have not been engaged in literacy research and wars for such a long time that some form of battle fatigue has set in that makes them not willing to respond to legitimate public concerns. As Green and Dixon (1996) emphasize in their article, the future will demand a greater reliance on “knowledge workers.” Given these structural changes occurring in our economy, we should find little comfort in the fact that our mediocre literacy scores are not getting any worse.

In contrast to Dr. Pearson’s more global view of the educational policy world, Sharon Quint (1996), in essence, presents a case study of a Seattle school

that has made itself into a caring and educational community in the face of some enormous socioeconomic challenges. Dr. Quint presents a passionate appeal for the professional staffs in impoverished schools to end their isolation and reach out to the communities from which their students come. She emphasizes that social and emotional problems confronting poor students and their families are as deserving of teachers' attention as are traditional academic activities. Dr. Quint goes on to suggest that a "blaming the victim" mentality is too prevalent; she argues that it is not poor children and their families who are responsible for their plight but institutional racism and bureaucratic insensitivities.

Politically, I found myself agreeing with Sharon Quint. Given the neglect of our inner cities and the increasing number of impoverished children in our society, the sense of hopelessness which exists in so many communities will not be solved until families are made whole and neighborhoods transformed. However, from an educational standpoint, I found myself uneasy with Dr. Quint's advocacy, if for no other reason than she fails to share any cautionary notes with her prescriptions for a healthier school ecology.

For example, it has been my experience that school teachers are justifiably wary of becoming social workers, and principals understandably worry about their schools becoming primarily social agencies. We have asked teachers to assume more and more responsibilities as family and neighborhood structures disintegrate. Sometimes the result has been teachers who end up stretched too thin, unable to do anything very well. The school's central mission of providing basic academic skills is then compromised, which results in a further lack of public confidence in our schools. I wish that Dr. Quint had spoken about the need for balancing these competing educational and social goals; they are obviously connected, but achieving a good balance is a daunting task, especially if funds are (as they almost always are) inadequate.

I also felt uneasy at times about her strong indictment of "the system." Yes, there are apologists for the status quo who only blame the victims, and Dr. Quint gives an important counter-perspective. But her indictment of all 16,000 school districts in the country seems excessive and her solution, to mobilize community resources and "debureaucratize" school systems, seems a candidate for David Pearson's "magic potion" syndrome. Her answer for improving literacy in inner-city schools seems to be to avoid being judgmental and to respect racial and cultural identities and differences, and the problem will be solved. I am not so optimistic.

I found the Green and Dixon (1996) article the most challenging and difficult to understand. Although I am sure this is in part because of the ambitious conceptual focus of their article, it did seem to me to be an essay principally for a high-powered scholarly audience and quite difficult for "policy folks" to follow. I found the numerous references to scholarly publications (over a dozen citations on one page alone!) and references to concepts such as "the social construction of knowledge" difficult to follow. If we are serious about these kinds of dialogues

and want them to succeed, participants must attempt to speak a common language. (As an editorial aside, I hope that Green & Dixon [1996] are mistaken when they state “there is no such thing as plain English that everyone can access” [p. 293]. If not, I am afraid this experiment in dialogue between the research and policy communities will be very short-lived.)

Green and Dixon emphasize the importance of more clearly defining what we mean by literacy, which is valuable and wise advice to the various policymaking communities. They quote Stephen Toulmin and Peter Drucker, who suggest that the knowledge we will need in the future, including our understanding of literacy, is different than the knowledge we have acquired and felt comfortable with in the past. Clearly, we must frame literacy and other knowledge requirements in terms of the 21st century and not focus on merely maintaining a status quo that may soon be irrelevant. What I believe would be most helpful in this regard is specific identification of literacy skills or standards that are no longer important but continue to be given high value by influential players in the educational policy arena. Conversely, identification by Green and Dixon of elements of literacy that ought to be considered for the future would help us be more mindful of the new paradigms we ought to be considering. It seems to me that researchers and policymakers must carefully define their separate perspectives on literacy issues and then engage in discussions from that common ground. However, the press of the public’s education business – from developing student performance standards to resolving collective bargaining disputes; from determining appropriate AIDS awareness policies in middle schools to passing bond measures – makes it difficult to find the time to have the thoughtful discussions the authors suggest.

Let me turn full-circle and conclude my remarks where I began, with a reference to California. Whole language versus phonics and the efficacy of Reading Recovery are no longer obscure topics only of concern to reading specialists and elementary school practitioners. The popular media, school boards, state legislators, and of course, parents concerned about their children’s educational welfare have all entered the fray. At the other end of the educational spectrum, controversies about the number of remedial or developmental students within the California State University (CSU) system lacking adequate English verbal skills have been debated at length recently by the CSU Board of Trustees. The current Federal District Court litigation on the failure of many prospective teachers to pass what is, in essence, a literacy examination (the California Basic Educational Skills Test) has generated additional widespread public attention and concern about the literacy attainment levels of some of our more highly educated citizens.

Many people are nervous where all of this will end up – more cheap shots at teachers and the public schools and more blaming the victims are obvious targets. However, the public’s concerns are genuine, and there seems to be more interest in literacy issues that at any time in the last 20 years that I can recall. We are clearly at a critical juncture, and I would suggest a golden opportunity is present-

ing itself for all of us – researchers and policymakers alike – to join forces and influence one of the most important educational policy debates to present itself in quite some time. I hope the literacy research community will become fully engaged in this debate – you have much expertise and experience to offer.

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Perspectives on Literacy: A Response

Marshall S. Smith

ACTING DEPUTY SECRETARY
US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Joanne E. Cianci

Jessica Levin

OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY
US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The United States faces great challenges – externally, to be competitive in an economy that will be even more dominated by high-skill, knowledge-intensive jobs, and internally, by the need to maintain a strong democracy in an increasingly complex and diverse society. Essential to meeting these challenges of economic success and social unity is the literacy ability and problem-solving capacity of *all* of its citizens. The general belief that many Americans currently lack these indispensable skills is fueling concerns that, as a nation, we face a literacy crisis.

Although we will not argue for any one way to resolve, or even define, the literacy problem, we do believe that whatever intervention taken must be guided by the twin goals of quality and equality. Raising the overall literacy standard in America must go hand-in-hand with aggressively tackling the persistent gap between the reading levels of different groups of children. Moreover, although the responsibility for improving literacy lies mainly with families, schools, and communities, state and federal policy and resources can play an important supporting role in enabling the nation and all children to meet our society's rising demands for literacy.

In their articles, David Pearson (1996), Sharon Quint (1996), and Judith Green and Carol Dixon (1996) raise several provocative issues about literacy and the potential role of policy. In this article, we will address three of those issues – the nature both of literacy and the literacy problem, in-school interventions that can enhance literacy levels, and the importance of out-of-school literacy interventions.

The Nature of Literacy and the Literacy Problem

As literacy moves to the forefront of discussions about American education, there is a growing debate about whether the United States actually faces a literacy

crisis, and if so, how we can overcome it.¹ Unfortunately, this debate will neither be easily nor effectively resolved until there is at least some agreement on a broad definition of our future literacy needs. As Green and Dixon (1996) rightly point out, different definitions of literacy lead to strikingly different views on how literate a society we are, and to equally different strategies for tackling the literacy problem.

This point is vividly illustrated through a comparison of two recent reports addressing the reading performance of US children. According to a reading literacy study of 32 countries done in 1991 by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), US students seem to be doing better than current rhetoric suggests. Fourth graders in the United States ranked second only to Finland in overall reading; ninth graders placed ninth out of 32 countries.² Meanwhile, one of the most frequently cited measures of domestic reading proficiency, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), presents a different and far less sanguine picture of literacy in the United States. The 1994 NAEP reading scores showed roughly only one-third of US students reading at the proficient level – specifically 30% of fourth graders, 30% of eighth graders, and 36% of 12th graders.³ Across the three grades, only 3% to 7% reached the advanced level (signifying superior performance).

Why do IEA and NAEP findings appear so inconsistent with each other? A close examination of both tests suggests the apparent discrepancy actually stems from markedly different definitions of literacy, different points of comparison, and different expectations for how students will demonstrate their reading proficiency and comprehension (see Campbell et al., 1996).

In comparison to the IEA, the NAEP has a broader and more comprehensive definition of reading literacy. A recent study published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1996) points out that the IEA test mainly asked students to recognize details and make simple inferences and literal interpretations. The NAEP, however, also required students to identify themes, detect the author's point of view, make larger inferences, express opinions, support their opinions with citations from the text, and write summaries of reading selections on the test (Campbell et al., 1996). In fact, although a student's ability to develop

1. Among those arguing that the education crisis is more “manufactured” than real are Berliner and Biddle (1995). David Pearson (1996) also suggests that the United States is doing much better in terms of literacy achievement than much of the discussion suggests.
2. A study published by the National Center for Education Statistics reports the findings from the IEA Reading Literacy Study (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1996).
3. The proficient level “represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter” (Campbell, Donahue, Reese, & Phillips, 1996, p. 6). For example, fourth graders who scored at or above the proficient level could understand and interpret text that may not be familiar, support their interpretations with evidence from the text, generalize across text, identify relevant information, understand subtleties of the story, and relate the text to their own personal or background experiences.

an interpretation is the focus of 90% of the IEA exam, this category accounts for only 17% of the NAEP (Campbell et al., 1996). In addition, although IEA reporting is based on international comparisons of student performance – with the United States ranking highly because its students outperformed students in other countries – the NAEP compares actual performance with desired standards of performance as identified by US education experts.

The skills assessed by the NAEP arguably better reflect the literacy skills we deem essential for the 21st century – what students will need to know to participate successfully in the emerging high-skill, knowledge-intensive workplace and to take part responsibly in our increasingly diverse society. This includes the ability to interpret language and symbols, apply knowledge to novel situations, solve complex problems, and continuously acquire new knowledge and skills. Therefore, although the United States appears to be doing well internationally, from the vantage point of performance on more comprehensive and higher level literacy skills, students lack the full range of skills they will need to be “literate” in the next century.

It is not only the overall performance of US students that raises concerns, but also the serious and persisting inequities between different subgroups of US students.⁴ These inequities appear on both the IEA and NAEP and are based on socioeconomic status, race, parental involvement, and more. For example, although the gap in achievement between White and minority students on the NAEP narrowed between the early 1970s through most of the 1980s, the United States has not made more recent progress in closing the gap (US Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service, 1996a; see also, O’Day & Smith, 1993). An unpublished reanalysis of NAEP trends in reading also showed that already by fourth grade there is a large gap in reading proficiency between students in high- and low-poverty schools; moreover, this gap widened from 1984 to 1992 (US Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service, 1996a; see also, O’Day & Smith, 1993).

The extent of the performance gap coupled with the overall level of literacy performance indicates that, as a nation, we must do more than we are currently doing in the area of literacy. Addressing both quality and equality requires interventions both within school and far beyond – interventions we examine below.

In-School Interventions

In thinking about within-school interventions that can address the dual concerns of quality and equality, we believe that an important place to start is defining challenging standards for what all students should know and be able to do.

4. Pearson’s (1996) article emphasizes the unequal performance of different groups of students and its ramifications.

The underlying premise of standards is that *all* children can learn challenging content and complex problem-solving skills if they are expected to and given the opportunity to perform at high levels (see O'Day & Smith, 1993; Smith & O'Day, 1991; us Department of Education, 1993). Once defined, standards can provide the critical goals and targets around which the rest of the education system can be aligned (see O'Day & Smith, 1993; Smith & O'Day, 1991; us Department of Education, 1993).

In their articles, both Pearson (1996) and Quint (1996) appear to raise questions about the benefits of standards. According to Pearson (1996), for the students historically denied challenging curriculum, standards can become “either a liberating opportunity or a cruel hoax” (p. 307) depending on the availability of curricular opportunities and engaging and challenging professional development programs.⁵ Donna Alvermann (1996) speculates that Quint also may see any attempt to focus on mandated accountability standards as just one more way for society to “blame the victim.”

We recognize that implementing high-quality standards may be difficult, particularly in the short run, in places where there are insufficient resources and opportunities (see O'Day & Smith, 1993; Smith, 1994). We continue to believe, however, that children who are disadvantaged have the most to gain from the existence of high standards, as well as a strong results-based accountability system – in part, because standards can focus attention on the absence of necessary resources.⁶ Therefore, rather than renouncing standards, we believe that as a nation we must invest in providing the kinds of experiences in schools and classrooms – including the instruction, curriculum, materials, and student supports – that will enable all children to achieve those standards.

Professional development clearly must be one of the major priorities for those investments. Pearson appropriately affirms the paramount role of professional development in improving literacy. Every teacher, he explains, needs the skills and knowledge to be able to draw from a range of materials and teaching interventions depending on the needs of the student and the situation: “These will be teachers who understand language, literacy, and learning well enough to adapt teaching and learning environments, materials, and methods to particular situations, groups, and individuals” (Pearson, 1996, p. 304).⁷

In addition to this instructional role, many teachers may be in the position to make the school environment more supportive to the learning of every child.

5. Pearson (1996) uses the term “opportunity to learn” to describe the curricular opportunities that must exist before accountability can promote opportunity.
6. For example, standards-driven school reform, focused on all students, may create a clarity of expectations that provides a powerful argument for directing the needed resources to the least advantaged students and areas. Standards also can support far more effective and coherent teacher training, concentrating on enabling teachers to teach the content we deem important for all children to learn. Moreover, it is important to recognize that poor children bear the brunt of low standards and watered-down curriculum. (Smith, 1994; see also O'Day & Smith, 1993).
7. New kinds of professional development become all the more essential when one considers that many teachers now typically take one course in reading methodology in education school and teach only one method of reading instruction (Matson, 1996).

Quint (1996), detailing the unmet health, personal, and other needs students bring with them to school, strongly urges teachers to create an “ecology of schooling that supports the prerequisites for healthy development, relevant learning, and literacy” (p. 311).

Whether to adopt these within-school strategies or different ones ultimately must be the decision of local policymakers, teachers, communities, and families, not the federal government. This reflects our view that education program decision-making and implementation generally should be the province of those closest to schools and children. This does not mean the federal government has no role in improving literacy, only that the role must be supportive not prescriptive.

Federal policy can play this role most effectively through support for reform, research, and special attention to the most needy students. For example, through both the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and Title II of the Improving America’s School Act, federal policy is making available professional development funds to districts and schools, focused on raising the achievement of all students to challenging state and local standards. The Clinton Administration also is supporting literacy interventions, both directly and indirectly, by promoting state and local efforts to develop challenging content standards, providing funding for technology and adult education, supporting additional lifelong learning opportunities, and making available research on literacy acquisition and effective literacy programs. As the demands of literacy become more complex, and lifelong learning more important, federal funding and guidance may be even more essential in the future.

Out-of-School Strategies

Equal literacy opportunities cannot be ensured through classroom experiences alone; children need access to enriching experiences far beyond the school doors and even before they enter school for the first time. The concept of shared literacy responsibilities is central to the approach of Quint (1996), who calls for a redefinition of the “expected roles and responsibilities assumed by families, neighborhoods, and schools if we are to find progressive solutions to major problems of schooling and literacy learning” (p. 311).

In examining the importance of a rich verbal environment on early literacy development, we are particularly interested in the findings of some of the more recent research on brain development and learning. These findings suggest that there are crucial periods in a young child’s life when stimulation – through touch, speech, and images – has the greatest and most lasting influence on language and reading ability, and that these periods may be far earlier in a child’s life than has been previously recognized (e.g., Begley, 1996; Shatz, 1992). According to the research, vision, learning, memory, hearing, and other essential properties of the mind are all molded during early development, with the greatest

effects occurring in fetal development and the first few years after birth and with a dramatic falloff after age 12 (e.g., Kotulak, 1993; Shatz, 1992). Although the importance of early childhood experiences and parental involvement has been intuitively recognized for years,⁸ this research on the brain and learning reinforces the serious need for interventions in both areas.

Again federal policy can play an important supportive role. Regarding the evidence of the importance of early intervention, Head Start and other early childhood programs for at-risk youth were among the first federal policy responses and continue to be priorities. In addition, an ongoing priority of us Education Secretary Richard Riley is bolstering the awareness of the importance of parental involvement in a child's learning. For example, the us Department of Education is currently working with communities on a nationwide Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, to encourage families and communities to become more involved in their children's schools. This partnership is comprised of more than 600 national, regional, and local organizations that represent families, community groups, schools, religious communities, and employers. As part of this initiative, the Department has launched a Read*Write*Now! campaign intended to enhance students' reading skills and to provide children with positive literacy experiences and role models.⁹ Although federal policy cannot and should not ensure that every parent becomes involved in their child's efforts to read, it can support new avenues for community and parental involvement.

As research on early brain development continues, communities and families, educators and policymakers will gain an even greater understanding about how very early, out-of-school interventions support the growth of children's capacity for learning and literacy development.

Conclusion

Throughout his administration, President Clinton has underscored that the strength of our nation – our economy, our work force, our democracy, and our

8. The recent IEA study reaffirms the critical importance of parental support for their child's literacy success. For example, fourth-grade average reading scores were 46 points below the national average where principals judged parental involvement to be low, but 28 points above the national average where parental involvement was high – a difference of 74 points. Even when other factors such as parents' education were taken into account, the phenomenon remained (NCES, 1996; see also Darling & Hayes, 1996; White, 1987).
9. The summer "falloff" phenomenon – where the typical child's monthly growth in academic skills decreases during the summer months – illustrates the impact of environment and parental involvement in children's literacy development. Although this fall off may not be surprising, it may contribute significantly to inequities in achievement. Not only do disadvantaged students experience a steeper fall off than their peers, but the cumulative effect is a widening achievement gap between these students and their more advantaged peers over time, despite positive effects of instruction during the school year (us Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service, 1996b).

society – depends on the capacity of all of our people. Literacy is integral to that capacity.

Although David Pearson, Sharon Quint, and Judith Green and Carol Dixon each highlight their own perspective on literacy, they agree that the framework for understanding literacy is increasingly complex. They also share the belief that our nation's children, and many of its adults, are not performing at the level that they should given the complex nature of our ever-changing society. Strong literacy and educational achievement has become more important in recent decades and will become a necessity as our nation continues to move toward the 21st century workplace.

We believe that a literate citizenry is not only an economic and social imperative, but also a moral imperative. Every current and future citizen must have the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for responsible citizenship, productive employment, and personal fulfillment. As a nation, there should be no greater priority.

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