

# The voices of researchers: Conflict and consensus in reading research and policy

*By focusing on the considerable consensus about literacy rather than on differences, researchers can contribute to policy.*

**T**hat great social philosopher, Dilbert, tells the story of Tod, who makes a presentation on behalf of the research department one day. Tod distributes a handout and tells the audience that the research department has done a study to assess the value of their previous research. "Sadly," Tod reports, "all of our past work was either ignored or totally misinterpreted by idiots." Tod is unsparing: "Such as yourselves." So, Tod continues, the research department has decided that instead of doing more research, "we'll just lie." Now for the carrot: "Play along," Tod says, his eyes narrowing, "and we'll make sure the 'industry salaries' study goes your way." Tod looks at his watch: "Well, it's 2:00, and that's quitting time in the research department." Wally, the little bespectacled bald guy with tufts for hair, looks at Dilbert: "You're not my role model anymore. I've found another."

It is easy to understand the contempt with which the public sometimes regards researchers, particularly researchers who till the behavioral and social science fields. Social research often seems to produce trivia masquerading as deep insight. Or else researchers themselves seem to be manipulative and self-serving, as suggested by the famous saying that there are three kinds of lies: big ones, little ones, and statistics. How many times have we heard teachers and others comment cynically (if incorrectly) that you can find a study to prove either side of any issue? Former Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Depart-

ment of Education Christopher Cross called it Cross's Corollary: "For every study in education research, there are an equal or greater number of opposing studies." He was quoted in an article by Carl Kaestle entitled "The Awful Reputation of Educational Research" (1993).

There are many reasons for this awful reputation, but researchers themselves seem to take pleasure in needlessly undermining one another. I recently came across a *Baltimore Sun* article (Lally & Price, 1998) about reading that contained this exchange: Siegfried Engelmann of direct instruction fame called whole language proponents "brain dead," while Kenneth Goodman observed that phonics represents a "flat-earth view of the world." So much for civil discourse.

What started out as a "great debate" about how children learn to read at some point erupted into the "reading wars." The release of every new study or report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) or new legislative proposal signals a battle on the horizon. There is widespread disagreement, fueled by mutual antagonism, ideological fervor, and deep suspicion, over the best way or ways to help students become successful readers and writers. The accusations and recriminations sometimes fly fast and furious, partisans for each side often declaring that they are the true last best hope for children and teachers. Policy makers, the public, and even some educators might be forgiven for looking elsewhere for answers.

And it is this elsewhere that worries me. When the research seems to cancel itself out, you can be sure of one thing: People will use research—if they use it all—to support what they already believe. We are seeing precisely this in many places around the U.S. Policy makers and the public will instead rely on some version of common sense, personal experience, and prejudice. I am a big fan of common sense, but it's often not a good guide for determining policy. If we relied only on common sense we would still think the sun revolves around the earth. Personal experience is also a good thing but by definition is idiosyncratic and simply inadequate to form a knowledge base (even if combined with common sense). As for prejudice—it will always lurk. But researchers who are forever nullifying one another are simply providing more room for prejudice to take root and spread its influence.

Let me be clear about this: I do not wish to obscure or minimize the importance of real differences and issues in reading research and policy. My concern is with the zealous focus on differences that creates the impression of utter, unrepentant chaos in our field, chaos that contributes to the "awful reputation" of our research and that poorly serves students, teachers, and the public. In fact, I don't believe the field is nearly as chaotic as many believe or would like to portray. There is actually considerable agreement, for example, on the importance of phonological awareness, learning the systematic relationships

between letters and sounds, and meaningful and authentic literacy experiences. Whether there is an optimal "balance" and what that actually looks like for different learners is far from resolved. But we do have reasonable research-based consensus on some key ingredients of a healthy literacy diet.

Whose voices matter in our great conversation about how best to help children learn to read? Educators', parents', and students' voices matter; so too do the voices of the public and of policy makers and political leaders. Researchers' voices should count as well, since they—we—have an important contribution to make. But we must take care that research and researchers not become just background noise, an incoherent thicket filled with little more than sound and fury.

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#### References

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