



Interview with Timothy Shanahan, a Member of the National Reading Panel

Timothy Shanahan is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Previously, he was director of reading for the Chicago Public Schools. He is author/editor of more than 300 publications on literacy education. Professor Shanahan served as a member of the National Reading Panel, and he chaired two follow-up panels for the U.S. government: the National Early Literacy Panel and the National Literacy Panel for Language Minority Children and Youth. He helped write the Common Core State Standards, and he is a former primary grade teacher. His blog, www.shanahanonliteracy.com is a widely read source on the teaching of reading.

Q: *Why did the U.S. Congress require that a National Reading Panel (NRP) be formed?*

A: In the 1980-1990s, the so-called “Reading Wars” emerged. These were arguments between “whole language” proponents and supporters of explicit instruction. Saying it that way may be surprising since many think those arguments were about phonics. And, they were, but they were also about spelling instruction, the use of textbooks, and pretty much any kind of intentional planful teaching. Those debates grew heated and even nasty at times, and they often turned on research claims. Anyone promoting any approach to reading instruction was asserting that the “research” supported their views. Public trust in education began to wane and at that point, Congress asked that a scientific panel make a determination of what the science had to say (something done in other fields, but never before in education).

Q: *How were you (and the other panelists) selected?*

A: In the fall of 1997, a call for nominations was made by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Those agencies themselves could nominate and individuals could put their own names forward, too. I had no idea at the time how I got there, but later found out that the Literacy

Research Association, International Literacy Association, and the USDOE had recommended me. The nominations included 299 individuals from which Secretary of Education Richard Riley and the head of NICHD, Duane Alexander, ultimately made the selection. Fifteen people were appointed, and one resigned immediately after the first meeting.

Q: *Basically, what were the recommendations of the National Reading Panel?*

A: By law, the National Reading Panel could not make any recommendations. The Panel made “determinations of fact” for the United States of America. Specifically, we were to determine what research had to say about teaching reading; that is, what kinds of instruction lead to improved reading achievement. After a review of approximately 500 studies, the Panel decided that research showed that explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension strategies, and vocabulary improved learning for students (K-12), as did professional development for teachers. There was not adequate research to determine whether the various schemes for encouraging students to read independently or the use of technology improved reading achievement.

Q: *Was this part of George W. Bush’s education initiatives, No Child Left Behind and Reading First?*

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A: No. At the time of the National Reading Panel, the president was Bill Clinton. He signed the enabling legislation into law (1997), his appointees selected the panelists and oversaw the Panel's work (1998-2000), and the report was delivered to Congress in April 2000. George W. Bush was governor of Texas then, and he became president six months after the Panel was disbanded. When President Bush took office, he proposed education legislation, including Reading First requirements that had their basis in the findings of the NRP.

Q: *Doesn't the failure of Reading First show that NRP got it wrong?*

A: Reading First (RF) was a \$5 billion federal program aimed at improving reading achievement (K-3). Most of the money (75%) went to Title I school districts low in reading. With these funds, districts had to provide professional development for teachers, purchase core reading programs, monitor student learning through assessments, and provide interventions for struggling readers – and all of these efforts had to focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension strategies, the essential components identified by the NRP.

The federal government evaluated RF—comparing the reading gains of RF schools with similar schools that hadn't received the funding. I was a consultant on that evaluation. The study found some small learning benefits (a first-grade phonics advantage one year), but at the end there were no learning differences in reading comprehension between the schools.

That is often interpreted to mean that NRP got it wrong. But the truth is more complicated. Remember, 75% of the money went to RF schools. What about the other \$1.25 billion? That was used to instigate everyone else to do what the RF schools were doing. Title I schools, for instance, were required to

provide research-based instruction. The states and many local districts did the same thing, shifting local funding towards initiatives that matched RF. There is evidence that reading achievement in some states and even in some of the districts that had participated in the national comparison had thrived in terms of reading achievement. But by the final evaluation, it wasn't instructional differences that were being weighed, but differences in funding streams, since all of the schools were trying to teach the same things using the same instructional strategies.

Q: *But that doesn't support Reading First or the National Reading Panel, right?*

A: No, it neither supports nor refutes the approaches taken in RF. But given the magnitude and scope of those efforts, something can be learned from looking at fourth-grade performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) during that period. According to NAEP those were years of reading improvement for the nation for fourth graders (the students who would have been affected by those initiatives); since that instructional emphasis has been relaxed, reading scores have languished.

Q: *What other arguments have you heard against the National Reading Panel?*

A: The arguments against NRP have changed over time. Initially, there were concerns that the report didn't reflect our actual findings; that NICHD had emphasized instruction at odds with the science. This claim was largely the result of a single ambiguous sentence in NICHD's summary of the report, a summary the panelists—including me—had approved. Read one way, that sentence suggested phonics to be more effective than we had concluded (phonics instruction was beneficial in grades K-2, and to a more limited extent with older remedial students; the ambiguous sentence could be misconstrued as a claim that phonics should be taught at all grade levels).

We were also smacked because we had supposedly been unfair to qualitative research studies, since we only reviewed research that evaluated experimental evaluations of the effectiveness of instruction. However, given Congress's questions, qualitative research would have been inappropriate, since, by design, it can't answer those kinds of questions. Qualitative research describes phenomena and hypothesizes correlations among phenomena, but it isn't able to make causal determinations. Our choice was a sound epistemological



Photo taken at first meeting of the panel in April 1998.

Front row: Gwenette Ferguson, Donald L. Langenberg, Norma Garza
Second row: Dale Willows, Sally E. Shaywitz, Gloria Correro, Robert Glaser
Third row: Linnea Ehri, Joanna Williams, Timothy Shanahan, Michael L. Kamil, Joanne Yatvin, S. J. Samuels
Missing: Cora Bagley Marrett, Thomas Trabasso

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decision rather than an issue of exclusion or unfairness.

There were also concerns about the dearth of teachers on the Panel, and it was thought that we couldn't determine the "readiness" of these practices for use in the classroom (one of

Congress's questions). By law, the Panel included a teacher, a principal, and a parent; additionally, several of the scientists (me included) had been elementary school teachers (I taught first and third grade and was a Title I reading teacher). But our job wasn't to figure the best ways to teach; no, we were to determine what research could tell us about that. That required research evaluation skills, not teaching chops. Even the issue of readiness for adoption in schools was a consideration of whether the instruction in the research studies had depended upon unusual amounts of resources or unattainable conditions, not whether we, ourselves, could envision using these in classrooms.

We were also accused at times of having conflicts of interest; making decisions about instruction that would promote products that would be to our financial benefit. In fact, the

panelists went through rigorous financial review to ensure that there were no conflicts of interest (and we could spend five years in prison if we perjured ourselves in this matter). Ironically, those making such accusations tended to do so in “for profit” publications.

Q: *What criticisms do you hear now?*

A: These days the complaints tend to be that it is an old report, so it doesn't count anymore. It doesn't work that way. The age of a research finding doesn't determine its value. Unlike with a carton of milk, there's no expiration date. A research finding can be vacated by changing circumstances; we found phonemic awareness instruction to be beneficial in kindergarten and Grade 1. But if universal pre-K instruction became available, that change of educational experience could render that finding obsolete in the future. Or, more recent—and perhaps more rigorous studies—could contradict the earlier conclusions. However, neither of those things has happened. There have been educational changes (e.g., Common Core State Standards, school closures due to the pandemic), but none that would alter how children learn to read; and more recent research has confirmed, supported, and extended the NRP findings, it has not contradicted them. That's why the NRP report continues to be so frequently cited in the scientific literature.

It is also often claimed that NRP has been refuted. What that means is that the report was criticized. That is certainly true. But it is also true that those criticisms have been answered repeatedly and, apparently, satisfactorily given the continued wide acceptance of the NRP findings in the scientific community.

Q: *Did the Panel have enough time and resources to do the work?*

A: Originally, Congress assumed that we could do this work in about six months and that states would be able to use our report when they applied for Reading Excellence Act funding (a reading improvement program that began in 1998 while President Bill Clinton was in office). Congress neither recognized the complexity of learning to read, nor were they aware of how extensive the research literature is on reading. The Panel provided a research plan that indicated the topics to be reviewed and the intended research review procedures, and as a result, Congress extended our deadline by a full year and provided individual panelists with the financial support needed to complete the work. Resources were not a problem.

Q: *Joanne Yatvin wrote a minority report and later became a critic of the Panel. What are your memories of working with her and of her concerns?*

We often compare education and medicine when speaking about issues of research. One big difference between the two professions is that medical practitioners receive extensive research training. In education, that's rarely the case.

A: I hadn't known Joanne prior to the Panel. She was a school principal in Wisconsin. It was evident that she was unhappy throughout our deliberations. Some panelists were sensitive to this, but they weren't able to assuage her concerns. The approach the Panel took—identifying 8 key topics and having subcommittees pursue them—was troubling to her. She volunteered for the alphabetic committee that looked at phonemic awareness and phonics research but quickly discovered that she lacked the technical skills that would allow her to read those research studies.

She was also chagrined that we hadn't selected whole language as a topic. She felt so strongly that we gave her permission to take that on herself. I designed a literature search for her (as I had done for some of the other committees) and she was able to conduct the searches and obtain the articles. But she was heartbroken to find no direct empirical support for the teaching practices she wanted to promote. Soon after she dropped that pursuit, but in retrospect, I think we should have required that those efforts be documented in the report. Soon after, she decided she couldn't support any of the analyses since it was impossible to read all 100,000 articles, research studies, and other documents on reading that were listed in the various search platforms at that time.

Q: *What will it take for scientific findings to be understood, accepted, and adopted into practice?*

A: We often compare education and medicine when speaking about issues of research. One big difference between the two professions is that medical practitioners receive extensive

research training. In education, that's rarely the case. I think that if teachers and principals knew more about research—its logic, how it's conducted, what its benefits and limitations are—we'd be in a better position to have reports like this one translated into practice. Right now, as was true 20 years ago, many educators think all research is equal (without knowing the types of questions that can be answered by different

kinds of study, or about the quality differences that exist across studies); they also think you can prove anything with research (not knowing how scientists resolve conflicting results). There need to be serious efforts, particularly by the leading research universities and by agencies like the National Science Foundation, to promote the scientific training of educators at all levels. ■

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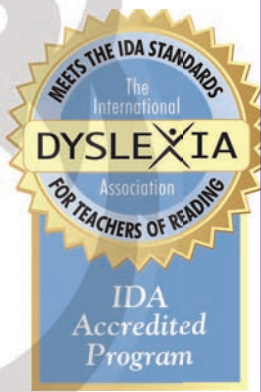
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