

**SOLVING PROBLEMS IN LITERACY:
LEARNERS, TEACHERS,
AND RESEARCHERS**

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BECOMING A NATION OF READERS: REACTIONS FROM THE MEDIA

As an educator you undoubtedly have read the report of the National Academy of Education's Commission on Reading that was issued on May 1, 1985. And yet later that same week you may have opened your local newspaper and read the following headline "20 years of educational malpractice."¹ What might have been your reaction? Certainly you might not have thought that the article accompanying this headline could have been referring to the report that you just read. Headlines like the one noted above were read by the general public who then had a very different impression from us about reading and reading instruction.

Given that the recommendations in *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) will need the concerted efforts of many groups before they can be fully implemented, I became concerned that the general public does not know what we know. It was this concern about how the report would be interpreted to the public by our newspapers and magazines that led me to examine the reactions of the media.

Before describing the method used to examine the reactions of the media to *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (BNR), a brief history of how a report of this type actually becomes a reality seems appropriate.

HISTORY OF THE REPORT

This report was produced under the auspices of the National Academy of Education's Commission of Education and Public Policy and the National Institute of Education. A Commission on Reading was appointed and its members were given the tasks of summarizing what we know about reading and drawing implications from the research for reading instruction. As one of the commissioners, I found the process as exciting as seeing the product. The opportunity to shape a mutually acceptable report with a group of professionals from diverse fields was a rare opportunity and I'd like to share that experience with you.

The commission, chaired by Richard C. Anderson, consisted of professionals with expertise on various aspects of reading and teaching. The critical point I want to make at the outset is that a diverse group of people including cognitive psychologists, teacher educators, and practitioners, whose backgrounds and experiences varied widely, were able to reach consensus on a number of recommendations that they believed would lead to improved instructional practices and improved literacy. While not all of the members of the commission agreed with the same degree of emphasis on each aspect of the report, the document does reflect their general agreement on reading policies and practices.

¹Headlines cited in this paper accompanied articles, editorials, and syndicated columns in newspapers across the country. Specific sources can be obtained by writing to the author.

The commission members and a full-time research associate were appointed in the fall of 1983. Prior to the initial meeting of the commission, held in late February 1984, each of us received background material outlining the task. We were asked to be prepared to express our views on issues that the report should consider and present comments on a specific aspect of reading. My topic was comprehension in beginning reading instruction. In addition, all of us were asked to identify work related to other topics of concern. Following each presentation, there was a period of open discussion and a summary by the chair of the commission. The final part of this four-day meeting was devoted to a discussion of critical issues which would form the basis of the final report. Needless to say, each of the topics generated considerable, and on occasion, heated discussion. At the end of this meeting, however, there was agreement by the commission members on a definition of reading and the major topics to be included in the report.

The major activities during 1984 were the collection of an information base in each of the areas that the report would cover, and the writing of a preliminary draft. Meetings with some of the 35 external consultants and making revisions were on-going activities. During this period both consultants and members of the commission reacted to draft materials prepared primarily by the chair and the research associate. In October, the commissioners received a draft of the report to react to at the full commission meeting scheduled for early November. The reactions of the commissioners at the November meeting were divided and in some areas necessitated major revisions. An altered structure for the report emerged, and the Chair and Research Associate spent the next several months rewriting some sections with continuing reactions from members of the commission. At the end of February the report was complete. We had a deadline of March 6, 1985, to respond with our formal vote. The report was approved by all the commission members and subsequently endorsed by the NAE's Commission on Education and Public Policy. The only remaining step was the release of the report. This occurred on May 1, 1985, at which time Secretary of Education Bennett received the report at the National Press Club in Washington, DC.

With this brief background on the process involved in preparing *BNR*, I will now briefly describe the method used to analyze the media's reaction, present the findings, and draw some conclusions.

METHOD

Since my primary concern was how the public was being informed about *BNR*, I decided to examine those sources of information that are read by the general public and to review professional publications only to compare what we read with what the public reads. Data were gathered from newspapers, general circulation magazines, and professional journals and newsletters. The major source of newspaper material was a press clipping service provided by New York University and supplemented by the University of Illinois News Bureau. The major professional organizations (IRA, APA, and AERA) were contacted. In addition, a personal letter was sent to each of the 50 IRA State Council Presidents and IRA State Coordinators. Naturally, friends and colleagues sent additional material—most of it duplicating the material already received. There were a few new items, however. It is important to note that the materials I analyzed were not

a random sample and therefore may not be representative of the total domain. While some trends can be seen, any generalizations must be made with caution.

Collection of material began on May 1, 1985, the date the report was issued, and ended on November 15, 1985. The material was grouped into the following general categories: (a) newspapers including news articles from wire services and local reporters, editorials, and syndicated columns, (b) general circulation magazines, (c) educational publications including professional newsletters and teacher magazines, and (d) government releases.

To examine what information the public was receiving about *BNR*, I decided to limit the quantitative analysis to newspaper articles, editorials, and syndicated columns. I have included a qualitative analysis of other reactions to the report as well as a summary of material that appeared in publications directed primarily to the professional educator.

I analyzed each article (wire service or local reporter), editorial, and syndicated column by examining the headline and then reading the first two or three paragraphs. Each editorial was read in its entirety by three independent readers to note any major themes. This latter analysis proved unproductive due to the diversity of the editorials. The topics given primary importance by the writers were noted and then tallied into seven predetermined categories. The categories had been developed from a preliminary examination of the materials with the expectation that I would use all 17 of the report's recommendations as categories. The use of the 17 categories appeared unnecessary, however, as several of the recommendations could be grouped into one category and some of the 17 recommendations were not emphasized. The seven categories which emerged were (a) Parents, (b) Teachers, (c) Parents and Teachers, (d) Textbooks, (e) Television, (f) Phonics, and (g) General Reforms.

You may note that the category "Television" was not listed in *BNR*'s recommendations although the topic was briefly discussed in the report. Under the category "General Reforms," I placed articles that seemed to encompass many of the 17 recommendations with no particular stress on any.

In addition to examining the major focus of each article, I decided to classify the articles as either non-evaluative or evaluative. If an article was classified as evaluative, it was further categorized as to whether *BNR* was viewed positively or negatively, particularly as determined from the headline. I did this analysis with the aid of a colleague for verification. Articles classified as non-evaluative tended to be straightforward reports of the content accompanied by headlines that did not seem to bias the reader in one direction or another. For example, the headline of an article classified as non-evaluative read "The real reading on illiteracy." Articles classified as evaluative tended (particularly in the headline) to lead the reader in either a negative or positive direction. An example of a headline that viewed the report positively is "Report gives good advice for helping children," while an example of a headline that viewed the report negatively is "20 years of reading malpractice." This analysis proved to be particularly interesting as I will describe below.

RESULTS

This section of the paper focuses on my analysis of newspaper articles, editorials, and columns which are read by the public and briefly describes the

content of some articles that appeared in general circulation magazines with substantial readership. In addition, I will briefly describe the content in the major educational publications and note some official government publications.

Newspaper Articles

An examination of the newspaper clippings revealed that most of the articles were taken from the major wire services with some articles written by independent local writers. Table 1 indicates the focus of these articles in terms of the seven designated categories.

It appears that the content in more than half ($n = 26$) of the wire services articles were classified under "General reforms." This of course reflects the fact that of the 47 wire services articles, 25 were from one service. Among those articles that did emphasize one aspect of the report, "Teachers," "Textbooks," and "Television" were noted most frequently. None of the wire services articles focused on parents. In contrast, local writers focused on "Parents," "Teaching," and "Parents and Teachers." None of the local reporters wrote a general article that included many of the recommendations.

One additional article that was not categorized as wire service or local writer appeared in *USA Today* which has a circulation of 1.4 million. The headline reads "Helping Johnny to read: Latest lessons for teachers." The focus of the article is that Johnny needs more help from parents and teachers and fewer time-consuming ineffective workbook activities if he is going to read better.

It would seem from these limited data that local writers are geared to their particular audiences while the wire services write for a more general audience. Further, most newspapers run one article with no follow-up story. This, however, was not true in Chicago where the *Chicago Tribune* published five articles, all during the first week in May 1985, and two follow-up articles in September. What the relationship is between the number of articles in this paper and the fact that Richard Anderson of the University of Illinois chaired the commission and/or the controversy over *Mastery Learning* in the Chicago school system can only be hypothesized.

TABLE 1
Major Emphases of News Articles Covering
Becoming a Nation of Readers

Major Emphasis	Wire Services News Articles $n = 46$ (circ.: 1,454,992)		Local News Writer Articles $n = 13$ (circ.: 3,880,198)	
	No. of Papers	Total Circulation	No. of Papers	Total Circulation
Parents	0	0	4	1,552,214
Teachers	7	1,172,585	4	1,798,145
Parents and Teachers	1	112,738	2	104,583
Textbooks	7	359,412	2	425,256
Television	5	355,904	1	—*
Phonics	0	0	0	0
General Reforms	26	3,741,968	0	0

*Distribution figures not available.

Editorials and Syndicated Columns

In addition to news articles, I analyzed 26 editorials and two nationally syndicated columns as representative of what the public reads. Although I examined 26 editorials, 12 of them were identical in content with different headlines. This appears to be a function of a syndicated editorial service to which newspapers subscribe annually and receive daily and/or Sunday editorials on topics of current interest. *Television* was the focus of 15 editorials while *Parents* and *Teaching* were emphasized four and five times, respectively. It is of some interest to note that one editorial, which was reprinted in at least 12 newspapers that I am aware of, was originally published in the *Aurora Beacon-News* (IL). The first paragraph of this editorial states.

If you can read this editorial and understand what it says, go to the head of the class—you're already doing better than 40 percent of the nation's 33 million schoolchildren and the 23 million adult Americans the government estimates are "functionally" illiterate, meaning they can read and write, but fail to comprehend much. (May 16, 1985)²

Some of the headlines which accompany this editorial are "Reading: Escape to anywhere," "Cause for alarm," "Reading/Guaranteeing a bright future," and "Read this? Go to the head of the class." It would seem that while editors are willing to duplicate the work of another editor or use canned editorials they reserve the right to compose their own headlines which may in fact predispose their readers to construct varying meanings for the identical text. It is also important to note that their definition of functionally illiterate is inaccurate.

The two syndicated columnists whose work I examined were Joan Beck and Ann Landers. The most interesting point about the Beck column is that it was reprinted in 12 newspapers that I know of, and many of them used different headlines. The following list illustrates the headlines that accompanied the Beck column:

1. The real reading on illiteracy
2. Reading report points out old solutions ignored by teachers
3. School systems, book publishers deprive readers
4. 20 years of educational malpractice
5. "New knowledge about reading" really isn't new
6. Reading ills provoke talk, little action
7. New education report right on the numbers
8. Report gives good advice for helping children read
9. A "Nation of Readers?" Success is within our reach

The opening paragraph of the column in which the above headlines were featured reads as follows:

Hand-wringing, woe-are-the-schools reports on education are as common as dandelions in a suburban lawn. And they are just about as useful. Most of the studies have already gone to seed on commissioners' shelves, their messages blown away on winds of indifference.

The newest—the report by the National Academy of Education Commission on Reading called "Becoming a Nation of Readers"—deserves better. Instead of

²Excerpts from newspaper articles have not been fully referenced due to space limitations.

tediously lamenting reading failures and inadequacies, it proceeds briskly to solutions. And its remedies are specific, benign and right on target. (*Chicago Tribune*, May 6, 1985)

An important question for us to consider is What influence does the headline have on our comprehension of the article. Just think about the difference in the perspective you might bring to an article with the headline "20 years of reading malpractice" in comparison with "Education report merits attention." What I think is important in this example is that, while the content of the column was exactly the same, the use of different headlines may have given some readers a perspective different from the one intended by the writer.

Table 2 summarizes the major content noted in the column by Beck and in the editorials.

As can be seen in this analysis of the headlines for the Beck column, two emphasized "Teaching," two emphasized both "Teaching" and "Textbooks" and eight focused on "General Reforms." In contrast, 15 of the editorials emphasized "Television," which, as previously noted, was not one of the 17 recommendations. Other than "Television," "Teaching" and "Parents" received the greatest focus in the editorials.

I know that many of you are familiar with the Ann Landers column and may have read the two letters, one from Senator Zorinsky and one from President Herron of the National College of Education, which were published on October 23, 1985, in response to a parent's letter. Both writers seem to present their views of reading or at least two different viewpoints on the use of phonics instruction. Most important for me is the contrast between the tone of the two writers and their advice to parents. Contrast Senator Zorinsky's statement "... parents should demand an end to this education malpractice" against President Herron's statement "Parents can help ..." with several important and specific suggestions to parents. It almost seems as if the senator may have read the Beck

TABLE 2
Major Emphases of Editorials and a Syndicated Column Covering
Becoming a Nation of Readers

Major Emphasis	Syndicated Column*		Editorials	
	No. of Papers	Total Circulation	No. of Papers	Total Circulation
Parents	0	0	4	321,489
Teachers	2	632,181	5	75,463
Parents and Teachers	0	0	1	13,915
Textbooks	0	0	1	210,712
Teachers and Textbooks	2	267,133	0	0
Television	0	0	15	70,017**
Phonics	0	0	1	649,891
General Reforms	8	1,519,161	0	0

*Based on headlines for the same column.

**Incomplete distribution figure.

column headlined "20 years of educational malpractice." The Ann Landers column is syndicated in over 1,000 newspapers with a total circulation of approximately 85 million, so you can imagine the impact these two letters may have had on the public.

Surprisingly, at least from my provincial New York perspective, my local newspaper, *The New York Times*, did not publish either a news article or an editorial. They did publish two essays on June 3, 1985 (over a month after the report was issued), and a letter to the editor in response to one of the essays on June 12, 1985. Under the banner headline "So that life does not remain a closed book," it published a piece by Rudolf Flesch entitled "Why so much illiteracy?" and a piece by Diane Ravitch entitled "How to teach reading." The Flesch essay is a rehash of what he has been saying for 30 years (systematic phonics is the way to teach reading) except that he concludes with the statement that the report *Becoming a Nation of Readers* agrees with him. The Ravitch essay is a fairly accurate summary of the major points in the report except that she states that the commission says that "... children should begin with phonics." While the report states "... that phonics instruction is one of the essential ingredients" (p. 36), phonics instruction is placed within the context of extensive oral language, early writing, and reading for meaning even at the earliest stages of learning to read. The Ravitch quote taken out of context could sound like support for Flesch although I do not believe that was the intention of the writer.

The response to Flesch was written by Dr. Tina Jacobowitz, whom many of you know as an NRC member, and whom I know as an NYU graduate. Her letter, I believe, clarifies the phonics issue and for me embodies the intent of the report:

Making connections between sounds and symbols is not reading, just as knowing grammar is not reading; both are strategies that proficient readers use in their attempt to make sense of texts Yes, we should teach phonics, but only within meaningful, thinking contexts and only as one of several aids that may be used to comprehend what we read. (June 12, 1985)

Subjective Analysis of News Articles

As to the second analysis in which I categorized news articles as being non-evaluative or evaluative (positive or negative) based on the headlines, I found that within the wire services only 12 of the 46 articles showed some bias in their headline. Of these 12 headlines, 11 tended to bias the reader in a negative direction not intended by the report and only one was positively biased. The headline of the article classified as positive reads "A nation of readers can be a reality." Examples of headlines classified as negative are "Where is Dr. Seuss—Basal reading programs called dull," and "Maybe Johnny can't read because primers bore him."

In contrast, among the local writers there was a more even distribution between headlines that tended to be non-evaluative or evaluative. Out of 13 headlines, eight were classified as non-evaluative and five were classified as evaluative. Of these five, two were classified as positive and three were classified as negative.

In reference to the syndicated column by Beck which was published in at least 12 newspapers, all but one of the headlines gave the reader a negative or positive perspective. Seven of the headlines were classified as negative and four were classified as positive.

General Circulation Magazines/Newsletters

How else does the general public learn about reading? General circulation magazines and newsletters are certainly sources of public information. For example, *Reader's Digest* had a paid circulation of 17,884,817, as of June 30, 1985, and a readership estimated at six times the actual circulation. In the November 1985 issue an article appeared entitled "Why Children Aren't Reading" and highlighted with "According to Rudolf Flesch, best-selling author on reading reform, we continue to deny our kids access to a teaching method that's as simple as ABC." This article is an editorial review by Edward Ziegler and devotes five pages to only one of the 17 recommendations in the report, the one referring to phonics. The review presents a narrow, incomplete view of reading instruction. For the most part, it summarizes Flesch's books and endorses his work but by using selective quotes from *BNR*. I believe that Richard Anderson's response to Ziegler gives us the other side of the picture and places the editorial in its true light—a limited excerpt of the many recommendations contained in *Becoming a Nation of Readers*. Allow me to quote a short excerpt from Anderson's letter to Ziegler.

Though it is not my own preferred tack, I quite understand the value of an exposé in mobilizing people to action. If you wish to arouse anger against the "reading establishment," there is plenty to be angry about. Lack of sufficiently well-designed phonics instruction is a problem, but in my judgement not the worst one. How about the outrageously shoddy textbooks American children are expected to learn from?

How about the depressing waste of time of as many as 70% of the activities that occupy children during reading lessons. (Personal communication, October 24, 1985)

So what is the public left with? Unfortunately, only Ziegler and the 17 people who received a copy of Anderson's letter have seen the other side of the coin. Will the *Reader's Digest* publish additional articles on reading as suggested by Anderson? We'll see. However, I am inclined to doubt it because at the end of the article the following note appeared in italics: "*For more information about teaching reading by the phonics method, send \$1 to the Reading Reform Foundation.*" This was followed by its address.

Another example of what the public is reading can be noted in a recent newsletter, *The Reading Reformer* (August/September 1985). This issue reviews *BNR* and reproduces selected excerpts of other writers. Again, a narrow view of reading is presented but this is not surprising as this newsletter is published by the Reading Reform Foundation.

Other publications with large circulations are the magazines known as "The Five Sisters"—*Redbook*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Family Circle*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Woman's Day*. Telephone calls to each of the editorial departments revealed that only one of the five, *Woman's Day*, had published anything about *Becoming a Nation of Readers*. In the November 1985 issue, a brief half-page highlight appeared. It was directed to parents and listed some very specific activities taken from the *BNR* recommendations that parents can do to help their children read better. The editors at the other four magazines' editorial departments indicated that they had no plans to publish anything related to reading and it seemed that they had never even heard of the report.

A more positive example comes from the newsletter *Parenting Advisor* (September/October 1985) which was found on the bulletin board of a pediatrician's office. The content, shown in a poster, gives concrete suggestions to parents for improving their children's reading taken from *BNR*.

Educational Publications

While they were not a primary focus of this paper, I do want to note some reactions from the educational community. For the most part, the publications of professional organizations such as IRA, APA, Phi Delta Kappa, and the Association of California School Administrators presented a more balanced view of the report and tended to include most, if not all, of the seventeen recommendations in *BNR*. Similarly, newsletters and magazines including *Education Week*, *Instructor*, *Learning*, and *American Educator* presented a detailed and accurate summary of the report. However, these publications are directed primarily toward educators—classroom teachers, reading specialists, administrators, and teacher educators. For the most part, the general public does not read what we read, and that seems to me to be a major problem in implementing change.

Government Statements

In general, there has been little official response from the Department of Education beyond the original press release on May 1, 1985, and a summary of the major recommendations in the June 1985 NIE Newsletter. However, Secretary of Education William Bennett was interviewed by *USA Today* and his comments were published on May 13, 1985. In response to the question "I hear you're unhappy that the report on reading, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, didn't get more attention when it came out two weeks ago?," Secretary Bennett responded, "My sense is that it's more important than the attention it's received because it synthesizes all the research about reading, which is the most fundamental skill. If we did for everybody what we do for some in the teaching of reading, we could go a long way toward getting rid of this problem of illiteracy." In response to the crucial questions "What will you do with this report and how do you plan to spread the message?," he responded, "I want to talk about it a lot because it's good news. We've had a lot of reports slamming this, slamming that. This is something that is do-able. We can teach this. And if we do it for all the way we do it for some, we can go a long way toward eliminating illiteracy . . . I am going to talk to a lot of people about it. And we are sending this report out to teachers, to administrators, to PTA groups with information on how they can best make use of it." Although the report itself has not been distributed by the federal government, they did publish a pamphlet directed to parents and are in the process of issuing a pamphlet addressed to teachers on the implications of *BNR*. Both of these are hopeful signs that the recommendations of the report will be widely circulated.

CONCLUSION

I do have some conclusions and questions based on the data that I examined. It appears that most people across the country are getting their information from a limited number of sources. News wire services, syndicated columnists, and

general circulation magazines provide most of the information read by the public. Further, for the most part, the public reads a single story and publishers may change our perception for reading the same information through their use of different headlines. Whether this is because our newspaper reporters/headline writers (often different people) are so incompetent that they are unable to select the central idea from a report and compose an appropriate headline, or whether the reporters/headline writers, on whom people depend for information, are so blinded by political motivation and/or what will sell newspapers that they are indifferent to the content of the report and tend to distort that content in the headline, I will leave as open questions.

Certainly I don't think the federal government has fulfilled Secretary Bennett's promise to focus on the report because the problem of illiteracy in our nation is such an important one. Clearly, more support is needed from this level both to inform the general public and to expand the knowledge of the professional community.

Finally, I must express my surprise and disappointment in the lack of response to *Becoming a Nation of Readers*. When I decided to put together this material for my presidential address, I had visions of extensive data flowing in and all but overwhelming me. I believed that *BNR* would have such an impact. Seven months after the report was made public, there has been no public outcry. There has been a paucity of coverage; what coverage there has been has often been distorted; and there has been no real public controversy engendered. Are we to believe that *Becoming a Nation of Readers* has successfully been brought to the public eye and ear? For us as educators, our most important audience is a concerned, interested, and informed public. Therefore, I think we are left with a major question: What can we as educators do to ensure that the public is receiving accurate and up-to-date information? A beginning answer is that both educators and researchers have a responsibility to disseminate what we know about reading and the teaching of reading to as broad an audience as possible. We in the profession often tend to talk to each other, leaving the public in the hands of non-educators, some of whom have a particular position that they wish to foster. Perhaps as a starting point we need to commit some of our energies to speaking to parents at school meetings, responding through letters to the editor of our local newspaper and to government officials at both the local and national levels, and writing articles for newspapers and general circulation magazines. If it is true, as stated in the report, that "The knowledge is now available to make worthwhile improvements in reading throughout the United States," then it will take the combined efforts of an informed public and professional educators to make the needed changes.

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