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Reflections on Literacy Research: The Decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s*

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In one of my first doctoral classes in the early 1970s, I was given an assignment to read a paper, "Research That Should Have Made a Difference." The paper was authored by Harry Singer, an acclaimed literacy researcher and one of the early leaders of the National Reading Conference (NRC). I found this paper to be a thought-provoking piece, and as a beginning doctoral student, I was impressed with the way Singer identified and described reading research that he believed should have made a difference, but had not had any discernible impact on practice. He also went one additional step and identified research that had made a difference, but should not have. I remember thinking at the time whether others in the reading field would agree with his conclusions about influential research.

With this in mind, I decided to survey NRC members about the research they believed was most influential during the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. There were several reasons why I thought this information might be of value to NRC and the field of literacy. First, several noted scholars have identified influential literacy research, beginning with Russell in 1961, Singer in 1970 and 1976, and more recently, Shanahan and Neuman in 1997. Although these scholars addressed issues related to influential research, they were based on the authors' reflections and reviews of the research, and therefore did not necessarily represent the ideas and opinions of others in the field. Second, NRC will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in December 2001. Under the recent leadership of Trika Smith-Burke and Norman Stahl, the National Reading Conference has embarked on a historical project to compile databases of oral histories and reminiscences of early NRC scholars and leaders. Our past matters. Part of the maturity of any organization is a realization of the importance of the history of the institution.

According to Moore, Monaghan, and Hartman (1997), "history is not only then, but now, and the quality of historical work done in the future is contingent on the paper trail we leave today" (p. 98). The survey research reported here was designed to explore the perceptions of NRC members about the most influential literacy research of the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and to identify the work of influential scholars and research trends that have influenced the way literacy is taught.

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Historical Background

Four major pieces were identified in our literature that focused on evaluating the impact reading research has made upon instructional practice:

Russell, D. H. (1961). Reading research that makes a difference. *Elementary English*, 38, 74-78.

Singer, H. (1970). Research that should have made a difference. *Elementary English*, 47, 27-34.

Singer, H. (1976). Research in reading that should make a difference in classroom instruction. In S. J. Samuels (Ed.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (pp. 57-71). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Shanahan, T., & Neuman, S. (1997). Conversations: Literacy research that makes a difference. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 32, 202-210.

In 1961 Russell chronicled 10 studies published in books and journals that, in his opinion, significantly influenced the reading curriculum. The studies he identified were published from 1917 to 1956. He referred to these studies as the "Ten Best." Singer, in articles published in 1970 and 1976, built upon Russell's work. In 1970 he identified 5 additional studies that, in his opinion, should have made a difference, but had not. Later, he extended his list to include 2 studies that had made a difference, but that should not have. These 2 studies were the Morphet and Washburn (1931) research that reported a mental age of 6.5 years as necessary for learning to read, and the Cattell (1886) study that suggested configuration was an important clue for word identification.

In 1997, Shanahan and Neuman proposed their list of literacy studies that have made a difference. They identified 13 empirical studies published since 1961 that they believe have had an influence on classroom practice. They pointed to important work done by various people in an area, but selected and highlighted one work as representative. They refer to their list as "a thoughtful 13." Shanahan and Neuman identified common characteristics of the 13 influential studies that they identified: the studies addressed important issues, the studies were theory driven, each study was rhetorically powerful and elegantly executed, and the researchers boldly speculated on broad issues of literacy learning, teaching, and instruction. Clearly, these four papers (Russell, 1961; Singer, 1970, 1976; Shanahan & Neuman, 1997) were designed to inform the field and to stimulate discussion.

In trying to identify the literacy research from the past three decades that had most influenced practice, my work differed from that of Russell, Singer, and Shanahan and Neuman in several ways. Whereas Russell and Singer focused on reading research, like Shanahan and Neuman, I used the broader term "literacy" in order to be as inclusive as possible, particularly with respect to research in areas such as language and spelling. I also used a broader definition of what "counts" as research to include different methodologies and publication outlets. For example, research journals publish most of the current research reports related to literacy, however, books, book chapters, and conference yearbooks also provide a common forum for publishing research, syntheses of research, and theories and models of literacy (Otto, 1992).

Survey of the Membership

Development of the Survey Instrument

A survey instrument was designed to gather information from NRC members about the literacy research of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that, in their opinion, had most influenced practice. A panel of NRC members (Donna Alvermann, James Cunningham, Patricia Cunningham, Susan Neuman, Lesley Morrow, Michael McKenna, Ray Reutzel, and Taffy Raphael) provided feedback about the design of the instrument and the appropriateness of the survey questions. Revisions were made based on their feedback, resulting in a broader emphasis on scholarship and inclusion of diverse methodologies and publication outlets.

The survey asked respondents to answer the following question: What literacy research (using a broad definition of scholarship, including theory, literature reviews, and research methodologies) published in the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s do you believe has most influenced literacy practices? Respondents were asked to provide as much information as possible about the published scholarship. The survey informed respondents that complete information was not necessary ("do not feel you must provide complete information for each entry or information for all three decades"). Respondents were asked not to cite their own research. A space was provided for comments about the significance of the research cited so that respondents could share their views about "why" or "how" the work influenced practice.

Respondents were asked to provide the following information: primary area of interest (early childhood, elementary, middle school, high school, college/adult); number of years in the reading field and number of years as an NRC member (1-4 years, 5-12 years, 13-20 years, 20+ years). Finally, respondents were asked to sign the survey if they were willing to give permission to be quoted by name, otherwise their responses would be anonymous. In a letter that accompanied the survey, I promised to donate \$1 to NRC for every completed survey returned by the deadline.

Survey Respondents

The current membership list of NRC was used to randomly select 350 members to receive the questionnaire. Of the 350 surveys mailed to NRC members, 119 were returned and 115 were used for analysis, resulting in a return rate of 34%. Four surveys were returned with notes explaining why the individual did not respond (one indicated that the research they were most familiar with did not have direct implications for practice, two indicated that they were "too new" to the field to complete the survey, and one was returned with no explanation).

Those who completed the survey represented a broad cross-section of NRC's membership. The primary areas of interest of the respondents were as follows: early childhood 18%, elementary 42%, middle school 14%, high school 11%, and college/adult 12%. The demographic data from survey reveals that the majority of the respondents (60%) indicated that their primary area of interests are early

childhood and elementary. Table 1 displays respondent information regarding the number of years in the reading field and the number of years as an NRC member.

Survey Results

In describing the results of the survey, I will present the findings from each decade and draw from the comments of the survey respondents to provide insights about “why” and “how” the cited literacy research was influential. Individual literacy researchers who were most frequently cited will be highlighted along with the major publications cited by the respondents as being most influential.

Literacy Research That Has Influenced Practice—1970s

The analysis of the data for the 1970s clearly revealed that the work of Dolores Durkin (1978/79) on reading comprehension instruction was identified as the most influential. The next most influential work was that of Kenneth Goodman (1970, 1976) in the area of psycholinguistics. Also frequently mentioned was the work of Marie Clay (1973; 1972, 1979), Louise Rosenblatt (1978), and Frank Smith (1971).

Dolores Durkin and Reading Comprehension Instruction

A clear finding from the survey about research of the 1970s was the dominant influence of the work of Dolores Durkin on classroom observations of reading comprehension instruction. Almost without exception, respondents reported the title and citation for her 1978/79 publication in *Reading Research Quarterly*. The following comments from NRC members describe both the influence and impact of this work on the field of literacy as well as classroom practice:

“Her work showed that teachers were testing rather than teaching comprehension and laid the groundwork for the wealth of research on strategic comprehension.” (Carol Santa)

Table 1

Percentage of Respondents Reporting Years in the Reading Field and Years as an NRC Member

Number of Years	In Reading Field	As NRC Member
1–4	3%	31%
5–12	17%	31%
13–20	27%	27%
20+	50%	8%

“This important classroom study opened our eyes to the reality that we weren’t teaching comprehension, just testing . . . we’ve come a long way in teaching strategic understanding of text.” (Barbara Moss)

“This study was the catalyst that ignited the decade of analyzing assessment and evaluation issues in the 1980s.” (Cathy Collins Block)

“This work showed how reading instruction often fails to provide comprehension strategies to students. Certainly one of a handful of studies that led to the research in the 1980s looking at the effects of cognitive strategy instruction.” (Cecil Smith)

Kenneth Goodman and Psycholinguistics

Kenneth Goodman’s early work on reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game was the second most frequently mentioned influential research of the 1970s. Although his paper, “Reading as a Psycholinguistic Guessing Game,” was first published in the late 1960s in the *Journal of the Reading Specialist*, it was the publication of a version of this paper in *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading* that brought Goodman’s work to the attention of a wide audience of literacy researchers. Survey respondents noted this work frequently. Respondents commented on the implications of this work for assessment and instruction:

“Goodman’s work paved the way not only for a very different kind of assessment paradigm in the form of miscue analysis, but also for the types of instructional accommodations and interventions that miscue analysis suggested would be necessary to help children make the best use of the cueing systems inherent in written language.” (Bill Henk)

“As a reading teacher Goodman’s work helped me orchestrate strategies around the one simple idea that the mind moves down onto the page rather than the page moving up into the mind.” (Jamie Myers)

Marie Clay, Louise Rosenblatt, and Frank Smith

Whereas the survey respondents clearly identified the work of Durkin and Goodman as most influential, the respondents also identified a cluster of influential scholars in the 1970s that deserve mention (presented here in alphabetical order).

Marie Clay’s work on early literacy development was frequently cited and two of her publications were specifically identified as influential: *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior* (1973) and *The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties* (1972, 1979):

“*Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior* opened our eyes to how children learn to read and write. It was a new view of how to do research in real classrooms. A seminal work.” (Margaret Griffin)

“The work of Marie Clay, supported and enhanced by many other researchers, has had a strong influence on the instructional practices of early childhood educators in preschools and the primary grades.” (Patricia Koskinen)

The reader response work of Louise Rosenblatt was identified as influential in the 1970s and her book, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literacy Work* was her most frequently cited publication:

"Rosenblatt's work empowered individual interpretation, questioned textual authority, and opened the door to new practices that valued students' and teachers' meaning-making in relation to text." (Roberta Hammet)

"Her work has shaped the ways hundreds of us think about reading. What a relief after New Criticism!" (Patricia Bloem)

"This seminal work has been a basis for numerous researchers as they have explored reading, writing, discussion, classroom context, curriculum, and culturally relevant instruction." (Janelle Mathis)

Rounding out this cluster of most influential scholars was the work of Frank Smith. Smith's work in the area of psycholinguistics (*Understanding Reading*, 1971) was often cited by respondents as being influential in the 1970s:

"Smith synthesized a large body of research on the psychology of reading and helped me move into new ways of understanding young readers...away from my behaviorist, phonics only, training. It allowed me to think about teaching from the top down, about children as something other than empty vessels, and eventually transformed my teaching." (Diane Beals)

Literacy Research That Has Influenced Practice—1980s

The survey respondents identified Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) ethnographic study of the families of the Carolina Piedmont as the clear and definitive influential work of the 1980s. The next most influential research was that of Donald Graves (1983) on process writing. In addition, respondents identified the work of Kenneth and Yetta Goodman and Marie Clay as influential during the 1980s.

Shirley Brice Heath and Sociopsycholinguistics

Overwhelmingly survey respondents cited Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways With Words* as the most influential work of the 1980s. This ethnography of communication, based on Heath's 10 years of research in the Carolina Piedmont, compared "Roadville," a white working-class community steeped for four generations in the life of the textile mill, and "Trackton," a black working-class community a few miles away whose older generation grew up farming the land but later worked in the mill. Her close look at the home habits of these two groups indicated that a major difference lies in the amount of narrative or ongoing commentary in which mainstream parents immersed their young children. In tracing the language development of the children, Heath documented how cultural differences between the communities were reflected in the different uses of language:

"Heath's *Ways with Words* was by far the most important scholarly work of the 80s. She helped us to see the contributions that an anthropological perspective could make on our understanding of and teaching of literacy." (Patricia Anders)

"While I knew the white middle class way of doing literacy with children was not the only way, I couldn't see how to think about this issue. Heath clarified so much . . . made me think about the fit between home and school . . . about the pressures for all students to conform to a middle class model of literacy. She opened the door to the work done by Kathryn Au and Luis Moll and to all kinds of new understandings." (Anonymous)

Donald Graves and Process Writing

Donald Graves's early work on process writing was the second most frequently mentioned influential research of the 1980s. His research on writing as a process began with his dissertation in 1973 on elementary children's knowledge of and behaviors during writing. His work continued into the 1980s and respondents cited many of his publications, but his book, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* was noted most often:

"Graves' work transformed classroom practice throughout the country. This book became the bible of process writing in many university classrooms and schoolrooms. Graves' genius was his ability to operationalize theories of writing which were constructivist and translate them in ways that transformed classroom writing practice." (Brenda Shearer)

"This work led to revolutions in elementary classrooms in teaching writing and in bringing reading and writing instruction together." (Jill Fitzgerald)

Marie Clay and Kenneth and Yetta Goodman

In addition to the work of Heath and Graves, survey respondents also recognized the work of Marie Clay and Kenneth and Yetta Goodman as being influential in the 1980s.

Clay's work in the area of Reading Recovery was recognized as influential. Several publications by Clay were mentioned by the respondents, however, none was dominant:

"She changed the way we assess and teach beginning readers. Her influence is seen in the acceptance of observation as an assessment tool. Also, she influenced the shift from the medical model to continuous, naturalistic assessment." (Anonymous)

Kenneth and Yetta Goodman's work in the areas of psycholinguistics, miscue analysis, kidwatching, and whole language were also identified as influential in the 1980s. A number of publications were cited, however, none was dominant.

"Although this work was done in the late 60s and 70s, like a good wine, it had to wait until the right time to reach its full maturity. It did so in the 80s and was foundational to the widespread influence of whole language and emergent literary perspectives." (David Reinking)

"Nationwide whole language changed teacher instructional practices. This work moved us away from teacher-centered classrooms to child-centered classrooms. Teachers no longer felt 'compelled' to follow a 'manual' Both teachers and students were given more ownership in the process of teaching and learning to read." (Christine McKeon)

Literacy Research That Has Influenced Practice—1990s

For the decade of the 1990s, the respondents were in clear agreement that Marilyn Adams's (1990) *Beginning to Read* was the most influential work. The next most frequently mentioned influential scholar was Marie Clay and her work with Reading Recovery.

Marilyn Adams and Beginning Reading

Marilyn Adams's review and synthesis of the research on beginning reading was overwhelmingly the most frequently mentioned influential work of the 1990s. In the introduction to *Beginning to Read*, Adams states: "Before you pick this book up, you should understand fully that the topic at issue is that of reading words. Before you put this book down, however, you should understand fully that the ability to read words, quickly, accurately, and effortlessly, is critical to skillful reading comprehension—in the obvious ways and in a number of more subtle ones. Skillful reading is a whole complex system of skills and knowledge. If the processes involved in individual word recognition do not operate properly, nothing else in the system can either."

Adams's book provided an extensive review of the research on beginning reading, and a comprehensive treatment of the behaviors associated with beginning and expert reading. Adams's work begins with a key assumption—that word recognition is at the base of the language-processing system. She crafted a convincing argument for developing reading instructional programs that help beginning readers see the relationships among orthographic, semantic, syntactical, and phonological patterns in print. Whereas the comments of many survey respondents pointed to the balanced approach of Adam's book, many also pointed to the way the book was interpreted:

"A very large review of the literature and the first of many 90s reports emphasizing the role of phonics in learning to read . . . heavily influenced our view of reading and how it should be taught." (John Readence)

"It was an amazing, comprehensive synthesis that has been used for both good and ill." (Cathy Roller)

"This book-length review of the literature is probably the original impetus for the current emphasis on phonemic (phonological) awareness." (Lois Dreyer)

"Adams' and the work of others on phonemic awareness pointed attention to this issue, but perhaps more important, fueled an amazing policy-level controversy." (Nancy Padak)

Marie Clay and Reading Recovery

Marie Clay's work related to Reading Recovery was the second most frequently identified research cited by the survey respondents. A number of publications related to Reading Recovery were cited. Clay's research and the Reading Recovery program focus on the importance of observing individual children at work reading and writing, in order to capture evidence of reading progress. Her

work is credited with making direct observation more acceptable as a method for data collection, particularly in the years of early childhood education:

"Reading Recovery has had a direct affect on instruction in the many schools where it has been implemented. It has also had an indirect affect on our perspective about remediating struggling readers. It is also consistent with the tenor of the times politically . . . and remarkable in the sense that it has remained, for the most part, above the fray—inside and outside the field. An instructional practice that has components to which a diverse range of researchers, policy makers, and teachers can relate." (David Reinking)

"Clay brought a highly successful balance back to literacy instruction." (Anonymous)

"Clay's work changed our paradigm concerning early literacy. She showed us that 'waiting' was not enough—that teaching concepts of print could enhance, rather than hinder, literacy development." (Cathy Collins Block)

Final Thoughts and Future Directions

The results of this survey provide some insights about the literacy scholarship that NRC members believe has most influenced practice during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. This research is offered as one effort to explore and help define NRC as a research community. The results of the survey related to the 1970s has the virtue of being more distant from the present than the results related to the 1980s and 1990s, and may be more reliable in that the work cited has stood the test of time. It should be acknowledged that the survey results related to the 1980s, and particularly the 1990s, may suffer from the up-too-close view and, therefore, may be somewhat distorted or myopic. The survey results do, however, provide a picture of what NRC members, at this point in time, view as the dominant and most influential scholarly works that have influenced literacy practice across the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

The results of the survey reveal that the NRC respondents identified the following scholarship as "most influencing practice": Durkin's comprehension work of the 1970s, Heath's socio-cultural ethnographic research of the 1980s, and Adam's synthesis of research on beginning reading in the 1990s. The work of Marie Clay related to Reading Recovery was noted as being influential across all three decades, indicating the high level of recognition of the impact of her work on early intervention. The work of Kenneth Goodman was identified as being influential in both the decade of the 1970s and the 1980s indicating the impact of his research in the areas of psycholinguistics, miscue analysis, and whole language. Clearly, the work of these influential scholars form a major part of the heritage and history of literacy research and practice.

It is noteworthy that there is agreement about the work of several of these influential scholars across the analysis conducted by Shanahan and Neuman (1997) and the results of this study. The Shanahan and Neuman analysis considered empirical research conducted between 1960 and 1995, whereas the current study focused on scholarship, broadly defined, during the decades of the 1970s,

1980s, and 1990s. Both the Shanahan and Neuman article and the NRC survey respondents highlight the influence of the work of Marie Clay, Donald Graves, Delores Durkin, and Kenneth Goodman. Broadening the definition of scholarship to include qualitative research and research syntheses allowed respondents to the NRC survey to recognize the important contributions that the work of Heath and Adams have made to instructional literacy practices.

What do the survey results reveal about definitions of research and literacy within the NRC community? It appears that as a field our conceptualizations of research have broadened. Pressley and Allington (1999) have emphasized the importance of a variety of conceptualizations and methodologies that can complement one another to produce a broader picture than would result from evaluating any one theory or using any one method. Respondents to the NRC survey identified both qualitative and quantitative research as being highly influential, including empirical studies, case studies, ethnographies, and research syntheses. The results of the survey suggest that NRC members appear to favor neither conceptual nor methodological narrowness.

In looking at the results of this survey and thinking about what the results suggest about our definitions of literacy I was drawn to a recent article in the *Journal of Literacy Research* by James Gee. The survey results suggest that, as a field, our view of literacy has broadened and expanded and includes socio-cultural dimensions as well as reading and writing. Gee (1999) suggests that a New Literacy Studies perspective is needed to capture the breadth and depth of literacy. This perspective is based on an interdisciplinary effort that takes a socio-cultural approach to language and literacy. Gee argues for a wider "literacy and learning" viewpoint, rather than a narrower "reading" one; a viewpoint that disavows dichotomies between, and debates over, phonics and whole language. The New Literacy Studies perspective argues for a focus not on reading, but rather, on oral and written language as composed of diverse but interrelated "tools" for learning.

Interestingly, the results of this study reveal clear evidence of the "pendulum swing" that is frequently referenced in our literacy history and our literature. First, with the swing toward comprehension in the 1970s, followed by the move toward a "middle ground" with the emphasis on socio-cultural aspects of literacy in the 1980s, and then the swing to decoding in the 1990s. The history of literacy suggests that our views will constantly shift and change with the tenor of the times. Times change, as will our future conceptions of literacy. One need only to think about the current implications of technology as compared with the 1970s to realize how quickly our field can change. While the pendulum of literacy will continue to swing, I believe in the "positive sway" of the pendulum swing. As the pendulum swings we do move ever forward in our accumulated knowledge base about literacy.

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