

Reading, the Research

Educators' contemptuous dismissal of scientific research has far-reaching implications.
By Sandra Stotsky

Reading has the longest and richest history of all the curricular areas researchers have studied. To give you an idea, one of the classic works still examined by graduate students is Edmund Burke Huey's study on eye movements during the act of reading, published in 1908.

What is remarkable is not that almost all the major questions in reading pedagogy have been resolved by a large body of credible and consistent evidence from this huge volume of research, but that they have had to be resolved repeatedly.

And this is because the evidence has been willfully ignored by schools of education and all those they influence, from teachers, administrators, educational publishers, professional educational organizations, and testing companies to policy makers.

In *The Academic Achievement Challenge*, the last book she wrote before her death in 1999, Harvard's Jeanne Chall makes this point over and over again, with exasperation and sorrow.

One of the world's experts on reading research and instruction, Chall was a major contributor to this body of research through her work on readability, her analysis of the research on beginning reading instruction, and many other studies.

In one of my last conversations with her in 1998, I asked her what kind of reading research she thought was still necessary. Her answer was clear and cutting:

"We don't need any more. It's been clear for decades what we should do. The problem is that we don't do what the research evidence supports, and in fact often do just the opposite."

As Chall noted, there have been two basic, competing theories about the development of reading skill. In one theory, repeatedly confirmed, its development takes place in a series of stages, with beginning reading differing from skilled reading.

This multi-stage theory predicts that a lack of success in the early stages — in sounding out and identifying words whose meanings they already know — retards students' success in later stages when they must, among other things, learn the meanings of words they may be able to sound out with ease but not understand.

In the other theory, known as whole language or balanced literacy, beginning reading does not differ as a process from skilled reading. Proponents of this one-stage theory assert that beginning readers learn to read through their effort to derive meaning from written language.

Different pedagogical practices have been logically related to these two theories. To implement the multi-stage theory, children must receive systematic instruction in phonics for identifying printed words, regularly read aloud, develop decoding skills to the point of automaticity, receive systematic instruction in vocabulary, and use textbooks with vocabulary controlled by spelling patterns.

To implement the one-stage theory on the other hand, children must induce on their own the alphabetical principle underlying the written code, rely on a word's context to identify it, acquire the meaning of difficult words naturally through multiple exposures, read independently and silently to concentrate on comprehension, and read only "authentic" literature from the beginning.

As is well-known, the evidence has consistently supported the multi-stage theory, along with pedagogy emphasizing explicit instruction in skills and mastery to the point of automaticity.

In her book, Chall noted how intractable ideological preferences are. But, rational being that she was, she still ended with the hope that scientific evidence would come to be respected by educators.

However, Chall failed to give sufficient weight to the fact that scientific research in education has been consistently disparaged as "positivistic" and irrelevant by the major proponents of whole language since the early 1970s. They have cleverly argued from the start that their theory and its associated pedagogy could not be assessed by scientific methods.

Their sarcastic dismissal of scientific research has influenced educators for decades, keeping tens of thousands of graduate students and prospective teachers from studying methodologically-sound research and discouraging them from using best practices later in their own work.

Indeed, it may have encouraged several generations of teachers to transmit a contemptuous attitude toward scientific research in general to their own students. We do not know because no researcher located in a school of education or a graduate student contemplating dissertation research in the past two decades would have had the courage or support to inquire.

Educational policy-makers are in an unenviable position. Most of those who prepare new teachers and retrain experienced ones in schools of education do not appear to accept the results of scientific research on the nature, development, and teaching of reading and writing. Rational argument is not possible with those who maintain that evidence does not matter.

A civically-healthy society needs a system for teacher preparation that respects and honours rational approaches to issues in curriculum and instruction. Alternatives to these dysfunctional institutions must be created.

(Adapted with permission from "Why reading teachers are not trained to use a research-based pedagogy". Dr. Stotsky is visiting research scholar at Northeastern University in Boston and can be contacted at sstotsky@aol.com for the full article.)