

EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Worlds Apart?

Timothy Shanahan

Recently, scientists photographed a gamma ray burst 3.8 billion light years from Earth. It was briefly detectable to space-based telescopes because it emitted more energy in a few weeks than our sun has in its entire life.

A gamma ray burst 3.8 billion light years away. Wow, that's as far apart as anything I can imagine, except... The only distance greater than that is the distance between educational policy and classroom teaching.

Teaching is demanding. There is much to think about when meeting the needs of so many children. Teachers need to think about kids and parents and books and... policymaking?

Although educational policy might seem remote from classroom life, it has become a major shaper of what and how we teach, and it is not likely to go away. This article will explain how educational policy has changed over the last generation and what its implications are for classroom practice in the teaching of reading.

A Brief History Lesson: Federal Educational Policymaking

Historically, educational policymaking has been left to the states (and local districts) with

occasional federal involvement. However, over the last 50 years, educational policy has taken more of a national slant. This is due partly to the increased power of the federal government, but even many recent state policies appear more national in scope.

According to the U.S. Constitution, state and local governments are responsible for education. But that hasn't prevented the federal government from adopting some education policies (Shanahan, 2011). The national government, for example, made land grants contingent on the building of schools on portions of that land. Or, after the abolition of slavery, it set up more than a thousand schools for the freedmen and provided special reading textbooks for them. The federal role in education has been *categorical* rather than *general* (Graham, 1984); that means the Feds have not given the states funding to support their own policies but have given support for specific categorical activities, such as for particular activities or classes of students.

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This began to change in a major way in 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson promoted the extensive federal education legislation (Graham, 1984). Programs such as Head Start and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA) became law (Graham, 1984; Jeffrey, 1978). As with previous federal programs, this support was categorical. It was aimed at helping disadvantaged children and, initially, efforts were made to segregate these funds from schools’ general budgets. Although the federal policies were carefully written to ensure that there would be no federal decision making over classroom teaching, the efforts to make sure that these funds did not replace state funds or were not combined with them had instructional implications. For example, these arrangements usually led to Title I students being given pull-out reading instruction from different teachers and materials than in the state-supported classrooms.

Another “innovation” from federal policy was an increased emphasis on educational testing. Title I programs were required to provide annual test results, something uncommon at the time (Bailey & Mosher, 1968). Soon, the Feds required the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to provide ongoing monitoring of educational achievement starting in 1969. This provided both a standard against which progress in literacy achievement could be measured and a model for the states’ own testing programs, which soon began.

This all sounds pretty neutral, doesn’t it? Small amounts of money targeted to specific problems not already being addressed by the states, minor side-effect impacts on how we teach, and no real efforts to change teachers and teaching through policy. Some states were a bit more active in such matters—for example, several states involved themselves in the selection of reading textbooks—but for the most part, state policies usually were as distant from classroom life as the federal ones. At that time, local school boards and school administrators provided any policy guidance, and generally classroom practices were in the hands of the teachers.

What changed all that? Lots of things. Those national tests showed that we weren’t making much progress in raising reading achievement despite increasing costs in education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Those data also made it pretty clear that the negative impacts of poverty and racism weren’t so easily erased, but it was still widely believed that schools could alleviate such problems. Then in 1983, a White House report, *A Nation at Risk*, set off a wave of school reform efforts that continue to reverberate today (Davies, 2007; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). That report revealed that U.S. students were lagging behind their international counterparts and that this gap had economic consequences. The economy was shifting from being an industrial one dependent on a

low-education workforce to becoming an information-based economy requiring highly educated workers. The challenges foretold by that report continue today, and the emphasis on trying to improve education through policy has become commonplace in the lives of teachers.

The most enduring result of these reform efforts has been the education standards movement. The idea was to aim schools at more demanding learning goals, and progress in meeting those standards could be determined through achievement testing (Jennings, 1998). During the 1990s, the states voluntarily set their own educational standards. Then, in 2002, with NCLB (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002), the federal government expanded its funding for Title I programs but also mandated new testing, reporting, and accountability requirements, and it established some new literacy programs (Reading First, Early Reading First), too.

What had begun in 1965 as seemingly toothless assistance to local districts to help them teach students in poverty had now grown into something more extensive, something with the power to require substantial compliance with federal mandates for all students, not just the direct beneficiaries of the categorical programs. Title I had operated in most of the nation’s school districts, which made them reliant on federal financial aid, and changes to Title I during the 1990s made it easier to combine federal and state educational programming. Specifically, that meant that those schools serving high concentrations of economically disadvantaged children no longer had to segregate the federal funds—such schools could spend those dollars on all of their children. Finally, the Civil Rights Act (1964) held that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of,

or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.” States that did not comply with this law could lose their federal education funding. These powers were originally used to racially desegregate schools (Davies, 2007), but during the past decade they have allowed the federal government to influence education in other ways (Henry, 2001). For example, states must now test their students in reading in grades 3–12, they must report those results separately for various demographic groups, and if any of those groups are failing to meet the states’ standards, then the schools must provide extra tutoring to students in those groups. Complaints that such policies violate the states’ educational authority have been rejected by the courts; states, if they accept any of the \$138 billion that the federal government now spends on education, must comply with the federal policy mandates (New America Foundation, 2013).

Federal Policy and Reading Curriculum

As noted earlier, state policies were not usually very prescriptive about how to teach reading or writing. With the occasional exception of a few large states that delved into such issues indirectly through textbook adoption policies, schools were required to teach reading, but what they were to do about that was largely left up to the teachers.

This began to change during the 1980s, when California adopted a particularly specific and thorough “English

Language Arts Framework” (1987), along with various rules and regulations about implementation of those requirements. This framework required a literature-based English language arts curriculum; teachers could no longer use materials written specifically to teach reading. They had to use children’s literature as the basis of their teaching, and this literature could no longer be edited or simplified in any way for use in teaching. Reading was to be taught through reading, without decoding instruction or other skills practice or support, and writing instruction was to take the process writing approach (learning to write by writing). Teachers were told they could no longer use spelling books, either.

There is no doubt that states have the right to set educational policy for public schools. What California did was well within its constitutional authority, but no previous state policies had ever been so intrusive or prescriptive about what reading instruction was to look like. One might have expected a major reaction from education groups against such an intrusive policy, but there was little pushback, and more than 30 states soon adopted similar anti-skills reading instruction policies. Some leading educators even lauded the California policy: “[I]n my judgment, the English/Language Arts Framework is an appropriate tool for reforming reading and language arts instruction in California schools. Generally speaking, the practices and approaches it encourages are the right ones, from a research point of

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view, for the state to be putting its moral force behind” (Anderson, 1988).

In the early 1990s, NAEP results revealed that reading achievement was at its lowest point since the assessment began. For the first time, NAEP could compare states rather than just taking the national reading temperature. When California ranked particularly low in that comparison, its widely acclaimed language arts framework took the blame. The solution to that problem in California and elsewhere? New state policies aimed at requiring different approaches to instruction. They mandated the kinds of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction that had been eschewed by the previous mandates.

The debates over these policies, and their evident success—NAEP scores recovered—became the backdrop for federal policymaking. The arguments focused heavily on research findings (not teacher authority) and on what teachers could do to improve achievement. Consequently, the subsequent federal policies focused heavily on research-based instruction.

Initially, these federal efforts were not particularly specific or intrusive. In 1978, Congress passed the Reading Excellence Act. This law provided extra funding to some schools to teach reading in research-based ways. The law did not indicate which methods to use—that was up to the states—but they had

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to do so by making a research-based case for their approaches. Later, when NCLB became the law of the land, the federal government had gotten much more specific about what it wanted to see in America’s classrooms. By then, the findings of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) were known, and Title I schools that were not meeting their state standards could obtain Reading First funding to upgrade their reading instruction in prescribed ways. Congress had previously been careful not to involve itself in matters of curriculum, but the idea of these decisions being made on the basis of research findings, as determined by a disinterested panel, was a different thing.

Reading First schools were required, in the primary grades, to explicitly teach phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary (word meaning), and comprehension for the simple reason that large numbers of research studies had found that such instruction could help children to learn to read. Although a relatively small number of schools were eligible for Reading First funding, all other Title I schools were encouraged to adopt these policies (though without special additional funding), and many local school districts and even states (e.g., Florida) adopted these requirements as well. As in the past, the federal government was requiring categorical changes (in this case, through a policy aimed at high-poverty schools that were failing to

meet standards) that had a much wider impact on schools across the country. All states ended up with those research-based skills in their educational standards, and all major textbooks aligned themselves with these skills as well. The federal government funded research-based instructional practices in some schools, and the result was the widespread adoption of those standards and practices nationwide. Part of the success of this policy was likely due to the fact that it had already been adopted in several states.

Why was there so little pushback from teachers? Although many educators may not like the idea of having instructional practices imposed upon them, it is also hard to ignore the substantial research supporting the effectiveness of these approaches or to discount the big reading achievement gains for young children since the early 1990s. Teachers might prefer autonomy, but overall, they care most about their students. One wonders if the effectiveness of these standards was due less to the government mandates and more to the fact that these policies increased teacher awareness of the potential effectiveness of explicit basic skills instruction.

Coordinated State Curriculum Policies

When NCLB required schools to meet their states’ standards, one might imagine them investing in professional development, instructional materials, and preventive and remedial instruction to reach those goals, but in many cases, state policymakers just lowered their standards. They started to reverse this shameful series of events in 2009. At that time, through the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 48 states agreed to participate in the development of a shared set of educational standards in core subjects. These were not standards produced or supported by the federal government, though later the Feds provided incentives to encourage state adoption. Neither the NGA nor the CCSSO are government organizations, but their policies are set by the men and women who serve as the nation’s governors and state school superintendents; even with that, these new educational standards had to be submitted to the usual procedures established in each state for the approval of curriculum changes.

In 2010–2011, 46 states and the District of Columbia adopted these standards. The CCSS documents indicate that the standards are goals only and that they do not tell how to teach (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). However, such goals can never be completely separated from the methods that might be used to reach them.

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The CCSS represent the greatest change in literacy education policy in a generation. These standards differ from the ones they replace in many ways, but perhaps the most fundamental shift is that they reassert the division between outcome goals and curriculum. Previous standards were so thorough that they specified everything that students had to accomplish. In that, past standards were less like goals and more like a curriculum or a scope-and-sequence guide to daily instruction. In this, the CCSS shift many key instructional decisions back to classroom teachers. Some critics, for example, have chided the CCSS because of their failure to explicitly specify what students need to learn about manuscript printing, cursive writing, or keyboarding skills. The CCSS require that students accomplish sophisticated levels of writing or composing, but how and when children need to learn to put words on paper is not prescribed. Some may view these “omissions” as a glaring weakness of the policy, but the point is not to dictate everything that teachers need to do. Thus, these policies impose outcomes rather than bothering themselves with how and what teachers will need to teach to reach them; that is up to the teachers.

What other notable shifts in classroom practice are inherent in these shared state standards? For one thing, the policies maintain the instructional commitments required by NCLB; teachers are still supposed to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, and oral reading fluency. The standards themselves are not particularly comprehensive in this regard (they essentially say students must learn the foundational skills of their grade levels), but the appendices to the standards are quite detailed—more specific, in that regard, than anything in NCLB.

Furthermore, the standards emphasize that students must learn to read complex texts. Past standards were

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explicit about the cognitive skills that students had to demonstrate during reading (e.g., summarization, inferring, recalling literal information). The CCSS still describe such cognitive skills requirements, but now they also indicate how demanding the texts must be where students are expected to implement these skills. Reading experts have long claimed students could only make reading gains if they worked in texts at their “instructional levels” (Betts, 1946). Most elementary teachers match books to students in such ways, as do significant percentages of middle and high school teachers (Shanahan, 2013). Unfortunately, if students don’t learn to read more challenging texts by the time they graduate high school, they will not be college- or career-ready. Students can learn to read if they work in materials at their instructional levels, but research also supports the idea that they can learn to read when the materials are substantially harder than this. Even the use of “frustration level” materials can sometimes generate greater achievement (Morgan, Wilcox, & Eldredge, 2000). The CCSS policies require that students learn to read more challenging texts, but teachers have to figure out how to get there.

The standards also require teachers to spend more time than in the past teaching students to read informational text. Studies suggest that American kids may read such materials less well than stories, and this policy is consistent with the directions set by some leading reading educators (Duke, 2004). Other CCSS changes include the promotion

of close reading, writing about text, the use of multiple texts in reading and writing, greater emphasis on technology, emphasis on texts over skills, and several smaller changes.

Conclusions

It is, of course, too early to know how effective the CCSS policies may be in promoting higher levels of reading achievement, but it should be evident that if they are not successful, then other policies—from state and federal governments—are sure to follow. Research continues to show the importance of reading education to students’ future economic success; second-grade reading achievement predicts what students’ incomes will be when they are in their 40s (Ritchie & Bates, 2013).

As long as literacy education plays such an important role in the economic well-being of individuals and their communities, then policies will be established to try to ensure that children succeed in reading.

This article began with the idea that policymaking and teaching seem far apart. Given the demands of teaching, this will always be the case to some extent. But if we are going to get it right, it is essential that teachers be involved in all aspects of the educational enterprise. Teachers need to make a serious effort to understand the purposes and requirements of literacy education policies, but they should also try to inform and shape such policies both personally and through their professional organizations (Lewis, Jongsma, & Berger, 2004).

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