

**LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD:  
A CONVERSATION ABOUT TEACHING READING IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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# **LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD: A CONVERSATION ABOUT TEACHING READING IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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Turn-of-the-century prognosticating about schooling seems to fall into two broad categories: wildly optimistic or cautiously pessimistic. Perhaps this is because the evaluations of both historical progress and the current state of affairs in schooling also seem to fall into similar categories. The media have largely portrayed American public schooling, for instance, as an outright failure, not only over the past decade (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Bracey, 1997), but also historically (Rothstein, 1998). During this century, politicians and policy-makers have both fed the media and echoed their criticisms. We believe the current public discourse around schooling reflects that of the past. John Dewey (1968) himself, at the turn of the last century, called for a vastly different education than that provided by the factory-like schools that he said were more frightening than the sweatshops of the day. To be blunt, there is a similar perception about contemporary schools: public education has failed and drastic change is needed. This perception is even more true, it seems, when the topic of literacy teaching and learning is the focus.

With this as a backdrop, we initiated a discussion of American schooling past, present, and, of course, future.

## **LOOKING BACK**

AMF: What have we accomplished since John Dewey called for progressive education?

RLA: As we entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American schools were just coming to grips with compulsory public education. Child labor laws had only recently been enacted and enforced and compulsory attendance was spotty, especially in the most rural regions of the nation. The city

school systems and one-room country schools provided most youngsters with access to schooling through 8th grade, most commonly, but only a few students, and then mostly males, attended school beyond this point. In 1890, for example, fewer than 10% of students were enrolled in secondary schools and an even smaller proportion of females was enrolled. However, high school attendance soon accelerated rapidly and by 1920 universal high school education was required in most states. Nonetheless, two-thirds of those who entered high school failed to graduate (Rothstein, 1998).

In addition, the turn of the century marked the emergence of the *scientific* method as the modern way to solve social problems. There is a familiar ring to much of the educational rhetoric of that era. For instance, Elwood Cubberley (1908), then dean of Stanford's education school, wrote of schools as:

Factories in which the raw materials (students) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of 20th century civilization, and it is the business of schools to build its pupils to the specifications laid down. (pp. 49-52)

This echoes the rhetoric emanating from the business community today. Cubberley went on to note that America was engaged in a global competition where more highly skilled workers were needed and, therefore, schooling had to improve. Needed improvements were to be drawn from scientific analyses, including time-activity studies and standardized assessments, to estimate both intellectual capacity of students and effectiveness of teachers. An educational bureaucracy with more centralized and vigorous control of curriculum and assessment was proposed to manage the new, more efficient methods of schooling. Dissemination of the new science of reading instruction was to be accomplished through the application of the new scientific findings to textbook design, including far more detailed manuals for teachers (Shannon, 1989). Does any of this sound familiar?

AMF: Amazingly familiar. As you said, scientific study was applied to reading within the first few decades of the 20th century and yet, just a few years ago, the profession felt the need to establish a journal and conference named the *Scientific Study of Reading*, lest we reading people forget our roots in scientific inquiry.

Beginning in 1915, there were recommendations for effective reading instruction offered by a handful of education and psychology professors in the yearbooks of the National Society for the Study of Education. The research of William S. Gray and E. L. Thorndike, for example, was used to design graded reading materials using controlled vocabulary, surely one of the most important developments in the teaching of reading this century. Concerns about substantial failure in learning to read prompted these new designs for beginning reading materials. For instance, from the late 1920s to the early 1960s, fewer and fewer unique words were introduced in the primary readers, leading some advocates to decry the whole word method as overly simplistic and limiting to children's reading development (McGill-Franzen, 1993; Smith, 1934).

Nonetheless, in terms of reading curriculum, the controlled-vocabulary basal reader dominated the era from 1930 to the late 1980s. Directed reading emerged as the dominant instructional activity; seatwork, using the ubiquitous workbook, became another. Matching children with graded books at levels appropriate to their development became a central, if often ignored, tenet of reading instruction. Betts (1949) promoted informal oral reading criteria for placing students in texts at their independent or instructional reading levels, thus creating an instructional framework that endures to this day. Students were organized into three groups for reading instruction, which leads me to grouping students – something you have discussed many times, Dick. According to the differentiated educational experiences plan, a scientific idea of that time (Allington, 1991), pacing through the curriculum was based upon some estimate of each group's capacity for learning. There were other schemes, such as the Joplin, Missouri plan, that grouped children by reading achievement, regardless of age, for their reading lessons, an arrangement that is gaining in popularity today.

During the 1920s and 1930s, reading instruction shifted from a heavy reliance on oral recitation to an emphasis on silent reading and comprehension (Allington, 1984). As for the reading curriculum, most commercial basals offered a blend of whole word and phonics lessons. Basal readers now emphasized childhood experiences more than moral tales and offered less visibly patriotic content in the upper grades (Smith, 1934). There were challenges to the existing order, both from advocates of more child-centered pedagogies and from advocates of a return to traditional education (Spring, 1989). By mid-century, Flesch (1955) popularized the call for a greater emphasis on phonics, and Bloomfield and Barnhart (1961) created readers consistent with

linguistic theory of the time, but it was the Dick and Jane reader that prevailed (Langer & Allington, 1992), at least until fairly recently.

RLA: Even as the design of reading lessons was drawn from the increasing array of scientific experiments on reading acquisition in the 1930s and 1940s, the popular press across that era rarely wearied of accusing education of replacing basic skills teaching with "fad and fancy" (Rothstein, 1998, p. 16). This seems a central theme in American education – that no matter what the actual circumstances, the press finds fault with current instructional practice. If instruction is innovative, the press finds faddism; if instruction is basic, the press finds stagnation.

AMF: In many respects, by 1930, modern American schooling, the experience so familiar to all of us, was largely in place. In other words, age/grade groupings were common wherever the number of students was sufficient; graded curriculum materials and achievements were standardized nationally through the textbook and test publishers, and centralized educational bureaucracies had developed at state, county, and city levels. Of course, schools were still legally segregated by race in many states and were commonly segregated by social class.

RLA: As a former basal author, I am chagrined to admit that the widespread use of the Dick and Jane readers led many progressive reformers to characterize schooling as stultifyingly uninteresting (Luke, 1988) as well as hardly fostering the goals of a just and democratic society. At the same time, conservative critics regularly criticized the "slipping standards" and the "rising numbers of illiterates," while calling for a return to traditional schooling (Rothstein, 1998, pp. 10-16). The nation's future was often seen as imperiled because our schools were simply not preparing sufficiently skilled workers, scientists, and scholars. This, of course, occurred as America emerged as a world power both militarily and economically.

In fact, throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, there were relatively consistent complaints about American schools, and one reform plan followed another (Cuban, 1990; Rothstein, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, the 1957 launch of the Russian space satellite, Sputnik, accelerated demands for education reform – that schools become more academically challenging. Education was touted as a national defense issue and, for the first time, the calls for reform implicated a substantive role for the federal government (Dow, 1991). But it was, perhaps, the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision (Winston, 1996),

undoing the *separate but equal doctrine* that had allowed racially segregated schooling, that would lead most immediately to federal involvement in American education.

AMF: In the 1960s, the federal government began to fund education programs to improve American schools, particularly schools that were recently desegregated. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1959 added guidance counselors, primarily to better identify the intellectually gifted students who were seen as needing an accelerated education to advance American rocket science, and funded the education of teachers to work specifically in low-income communities. I had an NDEA fellowship to attend the University of Pittsburgh for a Masters in Reading Education. Without that support in the late 1960s, I would not have become a teacher. What about you?

RLA: Well, I became an elementary school teacher in 1968. My undergraduate education was funded, in part, by a NDEA loan. But because I taught in a high-concentration low-income rural school, 20% of my debt was forgiven each year. In the end, then, I did not have to pay any of that money back. I think I would have still become a teacher without that program, but it did make teaching more attractive, especially teaching in a high-poverty elementary school.

AMF: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and federal intervention in local schools possible. The ESEA was supposed to provide funding for a variety of initiatives, but primarily funding to improve the educational programs of economically disadvantaged children and youth (McGill-Franzen, 1994). The ESEA also provided the funding for an enormous expansion of university-based reading teacher education programs, and many of this programs continue to educate prospective reading teachers to this day.

RLA: Yes. In fact, the reading profession owes much debt to the ESEA. It was that Act that literally institutionalized reading teachers into the American educational workforce. A working premise of ESEA was that adding specially trained reading teachers to schools with many disadvantaged children would have the effect of improving the quality of classroom reading in those schools. Unfortunately, most reading teachers employed under Title I of the ESEA were simply given a room down the hall where they worked with groups of eligible students (Allington, 1986). There was, unfortunately, little evidence that the Title I programs had any

substantive positive effects on the quality of classroom instruction, and many have noted problematic impacts of the ESEA.

Head Start, first funded through the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1965, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, and the Education of Handicapped Children Act of 1975, along with ESEA, were all federal efforts to foster access to improved education for historically underserved populations of students. At least one of these federal educational programs was operating in every American school district by 1976. Thus, federal influence on education was increasing, even though education had been historically viewed as a state responsibility and, therefore, no concern of the federal government.

AMF: But federal intervention was motivated by growing evidence that schools served only some students well. The Coleman report (1966) was a wake-up call to American educators: Schools served only to perpetuate the social and economic inequality of society at large; schools did not make a difference in the lives of children from low-income and minority families. The large gap in achievement between minority and white students provided the impetus to try to level the playing field for children disadvantaged by poverty.

In 1967, as a first-year teacher – a junior high teacher in a large, recalcitrant southern city school district – I was witness to the educational travesty that racial isolation wrought. The junior high student body was entirely minority and poor. I was the school's first-ever reading teacher, hired with Title I money. I taught there for three years. During each of five daily class periods, I had 20 students, a reduction of at least 15 or 20 students from the usual size of an English class. Each quarter, the students changed, so in my three years there, no student ever had two quarters of remediation. Because I was the only reading teacher the school had ever had, and because the need was so great, I taught hundreds of students in my three years. Not one of my seventh graders could read beyond a primer level when they arrived; many could not read at all. One young man told me what he had been taught in nine years of school: To write his name without copying the label his mother taped to his pencil. He proudly showed me.

I believe Title I was needed and is still needed. Title I is, in theory, generous, smart policy, and a remarkable achievement of federal intervention. Unfortunately, an emphasis on compliance produced unforeseen negative consequences in the implementation of Title I.

RLA: The basic design of these federal initiatives created a second educational system within schools, especially schools with many poor children. In most schools, the federal programs were administratively, and often instructionally, separate from the general education program and less effective than had been hoped (Allington, 1994). Timar (1994) succinctly summarized this problem:

Title I shaped behavior in schools in several unintended ways that, in the long term, inhibited organizational effectiveness . . . The program developed its own culture, one that favored uniformity and procedural regularity over innovation, experimentation, and the exercise of professional judgment. Schools could be sanctioned for not following the rules, but they could not be legally sanctioned for failing to teach students. (p. 53)

I would argue that the ESEA policy logic was well crafted but that the implementation went awry. This was a massive program of national scale: A large-scale program implemented by trial and error. In fact, most of the highly criticized red-tape regulatory aspects of Title I evolved after it was clear that many local education agencies were not spending the new federal money on the intended recipients. It is usually quite easy to criticize programs after the fact, but developing ideal social or educational programs that solve the targeted problems is a complex undertaking, especially since policy is invariably distorted as it trickles from Washington to the state capitals, on into districts, and then to schools and classrooms.

AMF: The uniformly disappointing results of the national evaluations of Title I and Head Start (e. g., Austin, Rogers, & Walbesser, 1972; Carter, 1984; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992) sorely tested the heart and will of the American people to continue to support the anti-poverty educational program legislation of the 1960s.

RLA: Yes, but those disappointing results may have been more the result of an unbounded optimism that infected many reformers during the 1960s. Ed Zigler (1992) noted, "Some of the hopes of the mid-1960s were naïve; some led to inflated promises that no social program could possibly deliver" (p. 1). Title I, for instance, provided a few hundred dollars extra per participating child, and there were always more non-participating eligible children than there were participants. The situation has been the same for the Head Start program. Nonetheless, the first large-scale study of Title I sustained effects (Carter, 1984) suggested that the program had little long-term impact on student reading achievement. But this study pointed to the evidence

that early-grades interventions seemed to produce reliably better results than later-grades designs. This finding initiated a shift in Title I policy. For the first 20 years of the program, Title I remediation typically did not begin until third grade or later. As Carter (1984) pointed out, Title I often offered too little, too late. This view was more recently echoed by Puma and his colleagues (1997) in the second longitudinal evaluation of Title I, "The level of instructional assistance Title I students generally received was in stark contrast to their levels of educational need" (p. iii). Title I has been a large and unwieldy program that has never been adequately funded to achieve the substantial and optimistic goals set for it.

AMF: Nonetheless, I would say that the steady and even slightly improving achievement of economically disadvantaged students is testimony to Title I effects. After all, the proportion of school-aged children from low-income families increased rather dramatically between 1960 and 1990, making even a stable achievement pattern across this period something of an accomplishment (Grissmer, Kirby, Berends, & Williamson, 1994).

RLA: I agree. Given the track record schools have with children from low-income families and the increased proportion of those children in the school population – almost a 50% rise in 30 years – the relatively small improvements in reading achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress over the past 30 years (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998) might be considered an accomplishment. But more on this later.

So, as school systems have struggled to educate increasing proportions of the student population to ever higher levels of achievement, public concerns about the actual educational attainment levels of those graduates seems to have burgeoned. A new era of school accountability was ushered in when minimum competency testing was implemented within a decade (1970-1980) across the nation (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). High school graduation tests were put in place that typically required demonstration of some minimal level of proficiency in the basic skills, with a particular focus on demonstrating basic reading proficiency. But most states also implemented earlier levels of minimal competency testing in reading, commonly at third and sixth grade. These assessments gradually became high-stakes assessments as state education agencies soon began releasing school performances to the media and also began to

identify exemplary schools and underperforming schools – schools where the proportion of children failing to meet the imposed standard exceeded state benchmarks (Airasian, 1988).

Performance on the minimal competency assessments was most often unsatisfactory in schools enrolling many children from low-income families. But the achievement levels set on these tests were, in fact, quite minimal levels of proficiency. Nonetheless, every year there were a number of schools that failed to achieve the state minimum standard and those schools were then targeted for state-sponsored improvement plans. This pattern was repeated in state after state.

AMF: Similarly, the federal government initiated the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1971 to monitor student achievement in the basic skills. Across the numerous administrations of the NAEP, and across the various state testing programs, student reading achievement performances gradually improved (Berliner & Biddle, 1996). At the same time, questions began to appear as to the source of the improved performances, especially the reports of dramatic improvements in achievement in some districts in very short periods of time. For instance, our study of the unintended effects of educational reform (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1992) demonstrated that, in several of the school districts we studied, virtually all of the improvement in reported performance on state tests over a decade could be accounted for by the increased incidence of retention in grade and increased identification of pupils as disabled. Retention artificially enhanced reported scores, as low-achieving students were held out of the testing for an additional year of schooling and the performances of pupils with disabilities, if they sat for the exams, were not included on school reports. Haladyna, Nolan, and Haas (1991) reported that substantial test-preparation activity, much of it deemed unethical, existed in schools, with the ultimate goal of enhancing test performances. Similarly, outright falsification of test performances has been reported in the media on a too-common basis (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1993). Such concerns are once again being raised in districts across the nation.

RLA: Concerns about the low demands of minimum competency tests was one of the reasons that national standards and a national test were proposed in the 1990s. This was a proposed level of federal involvement that would have been unthinkable when Title I was created! I think it was with the release of two federal reports in the early 1980s – *A nation at risk* (National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983), and *Becoming a nation of readers* (Anderson,

Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) – that it became clear to me that there were plans for even greater federal involvement in education, in spite of the mixed results of Title I and other federal programs. Along came the first national education summit (Finn, 1991). There, the widely implemented minimum competency goals were vociferously derided and a call for *world class* standards emerged. But the push for federal education standards did not fare well, and so federal funds were allocated to support the development of new state standards and assessments of those standards if a state wished to continue receiving federal education funding. The NAEP achievement reporting was altered, with absolute proficiency levels established for the first time (Rothman, 1998). Achievement of these new proficiency levels was what was to be reported to the public.

Not surprisingly, the new NAEP proficiency levels were at some variance with actual student performance and, thus, the NAEP results became evidence that American schools were failing to educate children sufficiently well. Never mind that the reading achievement of American nine-year-olds on the NAEP kept creeping upward. Never mind that American nine-year-olds outperformed nine-year-olds in 29 of the 32 industrialized nations in the most recent international literacy comparisons (Elley, 1992). Failure to achieve the new NAEP proficiency benchmarks has been used as evidence of the need for fundamental changes to the structure and governance of American education (Bennett, Fair, Finn, Flake, Hirsch, Marshall, & Ravitch, 1998) and for changes in reading instructional methods (e.g., Sweet, 1997).

AMF: But Dick, reading methods have changed, and changed again, over the past few decades. Although the controlled vocabulary basal reading series had remarkable longevity, it was seriously challenged, first by skills mastery curriculum models and materials in the 1960s and 1970s, then by schema theory and the emphasis on comprehension during the early 1980s, followed by a shift toward implementing literature-based instruction, process approaches to writing, and integrated language arts in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This is not to say that basal readers disappeared from American classrooms during that time – they did not (Canney, 1993; Strickland, Walmsley, Bronk, & Weiss, 1994). Rather, commercial basal reading materials changed and, in a large number of classrooms, became but one component of the reading curriculum. Tradebook reading and writing both became more prominent (Allington, Guice, Michelson, Baker, & Li, 1996; Knapp, 1995). In some schools, basals did disappear from

classrooms in the late 1980s and early 1990s, although this was far from a universal experience. Now, I would say that we have gone full circle, with vocabulary control, with an emphasis on controlling the decodability of the words presented (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1998), once again dominating commercial reading materials, and skills mastery emphasized once again.

RLA: But even though the nature of the reading curriculum has shifted over time, American elementary school children's reading achievement has remained quite stable over the past 30 years.

AMF: Are you saying that curriculum materials have nothing to do with achievement?

RLA: Basically, yes. I think this was, in fact, the most important message of the First Grade Studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967):

Future research might well center on teacher and learning situation rather than method and materials. The tremendous range among classrooms within any method points out the importance of elements in the learning situation over and above the methods employed. . . . Children learn to read by a variety of materials and methods. (p. 67)

The most important variable in teaching reading, I believe, is the quality of classroom reading instruction and that seems largely independent of the nature of the curriculum materials. It amazes me that it is only recently that we have begun to attempt to estimate the impact of access to high-quality teaching. What has amazed me more is the incredible impact of access to good classroom teachers. In their study, Bemby and her colleagues (1998) reported enormous differences (e.g., 35+ percentile ranks) in reading achievement for children who spent three years with more effective teachers (upper 40% in achievement gains) compared to children who spent three years with less effective teachers (bottom 40%). Sanders (1998) reports similar differences in patterns of achievement among children whose teachers varied in their instructional effectiveness. In our recent study of exemplary first-grade teachers (Pressley, et al., 1999), there were large effects for exemplary teachers on the achievement of the lowest-achieving children. What is interesting is that the teachers Bemby and her colleagues studied were from a single school district with a common curriculum plan, while the exemplary teachers we studied were

located in a dozen school districts in five states – the epitome, perhaps, of curriculum materials variation. I cannot think of better demonstrations of the impotence of curriculum materials.

That said, let me make one more comment. I do think easy access to a rich array of well-designed curriculum materials can make good teaching more likely. Our exemplary teachers routinely used multiple curriculum materials. But I think that was because they viewed their job primarily as teaching children and not as teaching a curriculum material. If we take this idea of the importance of children's access to high-quality teachers seriously, I think it suggests a quite different approach to better meeting the needs of children who find learning to read more difficult. That is, we would concentrate more on improving classroom instruction and worry less about special programs and curriculum materials.

AMF: On the topic of special programs, I would argue that one primary shift that has been accomplished in the latter half of this century has been the enormous expansion of remedial and special education, which has resulted in non-classroom teaching personnel, many supported with federal funding, becoming a dominant presence in elementary schools. Certainly, the number of children identified as learning disabled in reading has skyrocketed, a phenomenon that has attracted little notice within the reading profession (McGill-Franzen, 1987), but prompted the recently well-publicized NICHD research agenda (Lyon, 1995) and the publication of *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), a synthesis of research and policy recommendations for beginning reading instruction by the National Research Council.

RLA: Yes, but it remains unclear to me just how research on children with learning disabilities informs us about improving beginning reading for most children.

AMF: The research on learning disabilities is relevant to reading instruction if you believe, as I do, that classification of any child as learning disabled is a socially and politically negotiated process based, at least in part, upon family and school resources for intensive instruction for struggling readers and the public reckoning brought to bear upon individual teachers and schools for low reading test scores. A convergence of these elements, I believe, sustains the erroneous belief that high percentages of young, struggling readers learn differently than their peers and cannot be expected to make average progress or participate in the regular accountability stream.

Although struggling readers often confront a host of challenges beyond the quality of their reading instruction, I submit that knowledgeable and caring teachers can teach every child to read, and, indeed, they hold themselves accountable for doing so. Such teachers know reading development, but they also know the children they teach – not only where each child falls along a continuum of literacy development, but also who each child is as a person within particular family and community contexts. Most important, such teachers do not teach from within a rigid pedagogy – whether so-called constructivist or traditional – they teach from what children need to know. Currently, research in the field of learning disabilities has helped to inform teaching and learning for children with diverse abilities and achievement levels, demonstrating that focused reading instruction enables the great majority of children who might otherwise be considered learning disabled to achieve at both average levels and average rates (e.g., Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, Small, Pratt, Chen, & Denckla, 1996).

RLA: I don't disagree generally, but there is a widely disseminated misinterpretation of much of the LD intervention work – reporting that such research supports a relatively narrow and rigid pedagogy for beginning reading for all children (e.g., Moats, 1998; Sweet, 1997). While NICHD officials have discounted these misinterpretations (Fletcher & Lyon, 1998), we still see state policies being enacted based on the misinterpretation (e.g., Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1998a, 1998b). Let me revise my earlier point: I worry that too much emphasis is being placed on a small subset of reading research, no matter how powerful the findings. We are better served by attempting to incorporate those studies into the larger set of studies of reading acquisition and effective instruction.

Moving on, I think federal education policy is now shifting based on a recognition of the failure of 30 years of special programs largely segregated from the core curriculum and the general education classroom. Federal program regulations have begun to emphasize in-classroom service models instead of pull-out programs; instruction on the core curriculum, rather than on a separate and specialized curriculum; collaboration among general education and special programs personnel; and professional development to build the teacher's ability to better serve disadvantaged children. They are also emphasizing non-school programs, summer school, and extended-day programs (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1995; National Commission on Time and Learning, 1994).

In addition, the new state standards-setting process and the development of new assessments to measure achievement of those standards, along with new accountability measures for schools where achievement does not measure up, have all occupied much of the professional and policy debate in the 1990s (McGill-Franzen, in press). There is, of course, a link between the recent emphasis on extending school time and these new standards. As the National Commission on Time and Learning (1994) so succinctly put it:

For the past 150 years, American public schools have held time constant and let learning vary . . . Holding all students to the same high standards means that some students will need more time. . . (pp. 1-3)

Coupled with all of this is widespread public and political support for ending the practice of social promotion and not promoting children to the next grade until they have mastered grade-level standards. But such calls are hardly new; they have echoed across the century, and the extra-time interventions offered today have been prescribed before (Rothstein, 1998).

To me, recent charges of faddism run rampant in American education and calls for a return to the basics, especially a return to an emphasis on phonics as the solution to the perceived ills of American elementary school reading instruction (Learning First Alliance, 1998) sound substantially like the earlier calls that have echoed across the whole of the 20th century. Likewise the calls for relying on research – or someone's interpretation of some of the research – to solve our educational challenges. It was the research of the 1970s that led us away from controlled-vocabulary texts and phonics skill-and-drill programs, the same research that targeted poor comprehension as the major focus for research at the federally funded Center for the Study of Reading.

AMF: I would say that, throughout the recent history of education, whenever there is a sharp political shift to the left, there is an almost immediate pull towards the right, so that the center regains equilibrium. I think that the same forces operate in teaching reading. The exemplary California teachers who are participating in our cross-state policy study insist that they knew right away that phonics was missing from the 1987 literature framework for teaching English Language Arts:

When we adopted [the new framework] nine years ago, our previous basal program was more a whole-language program, influenced by the state framework. But many teachers in California quickly became aware that the programs were missing a lot of pieces. . . . We were in the middle of the whole-language movement, that emphasized literature and de-emphasized phonics. We were still teaching phonics, but the programs we adopted didn't have any explicit phonics instruction in them, so the teachers were sort of grabbing what they could because they knew it was important. (McGill-Franzen, Woodside-Jiron, Machado, & Veltema, 1998, p. 10)

To a teacher, our California respondents in this same policy study did not object to more emphasis on the code in their reading instruction and, in fact, reported more of a phonics emphasis in their practice, but rather they objected to the legislative mandate that they do so.

The way the legislation is written, it is addressing the areas of need in California and we as educators need to [be accountable in] each of those areas. However, when the legislation gets into telling us how to address those areas, then, because it is written by legislators, not educators, it loses its power (McGill-Franzen, et al., 1998, p.11).

Exemplary teachers saw the legislative detail as a rebuke to their professionalism, a breach in the contract between them and the community that they as teachers would know how to do the right thing.

Likewise, the emphasis on 1970s skill-and-drill in Head Start and kindergarten classrooms brought about the shrill denouncement of any literacy instruction at all from the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in the 1980s, thus banishing print from these classrooms for disadvantaged children for at least a decade, including the innocuous alphabet song (McGill-Franzen, 1993). In the process, research was produced (and published) by progressives that suggested that children taught reading by direct instruction were more likely to wind up juvenile delinquents (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1998). I believe that the emotionality of the current debate over direct instruction and phonics has its roots in these excesses of the past. It is not far-fetched to speculate, for example, that children from low-income families need direct instruction in phonemic elements of the language precisely because their experiences in preschool, and even kindergarten, have been bereft of any such attention. What do you think of my theory?

RLA: Well, the problem for me is: What do you mean by direct instruction? I think the Sacks and Mergendoller (1997) and the Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, and Freppon (1995) studies, among

others, suggest that children from low-income families benefit more from rich language and literacy environments than they do from traditional skills classrooms. But I think that the whole-language teachers studied often did offer direct instruction in phonemic awareness and letter-sound relationships. They just did not offer the sort of instruction that most people would label direct instruction. Let me ask you, was the instruction offered by the books and training teachers in our Philadelphia kindergarten study direct instruction (McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi, & Brooks, in press)? There were no teaching scripts. There were no drills, no stack of worksheets, no phonics wall charts.

AMF: To me, direct instruction does not necessarily mean me instruction that is highly scripted in terms of teacher prompts and student response, although I suppose it could be. The defining feature of direct instruction, in my view, is that it is explicit. I am not sure what you mean by drills and worksheets, but I sense that these are code words for bad things. If drills is a code name for practice, then yes, practice should follow explicit teaching, and in those kindergarten classes, practice did follow. Remember the word banks? I don't know what to say about worksheets. I have seen worksheet tasks that I liked and others that I didn't like. A task does not have to appear in a worksheet format to be bad, and, conversely, all worksheet tasks are not bad. I do remember some worksheets in the kindergarten classes. As for phonics charts, if you are referring to "a is for apple" charts, then they were indeed on the walls of the kindergartens we saw in Philadelphia. Whether or not anyone used these charts is another question. Why would they, with their word wall in place? I would say that word walls (Cunningham, 1995), with both high-frequency words and common spelling patterns represented there, are a more transparent medium for gaining knowledge of the orthography, and more useful for explicit instruction, than phonics wall charts.

RLA: Perhaps I have conceded the definition of the term "direct instruction" to those folks who create and market commercial materials that are highly scripted – materials considered teacher-proofed. Kameenui, Simmons, Chard, and Dickson (1997) even argued that "the way the information is packaged before teacher delivery" (p. 67) was one of the defining characteristics of direct instruction. I do think instruction often needs to be explicit, to use Duffy's term (Duffy, Roehler, & Rackliffe, 1986). But part of the expertise of effective teachers is knowing what to be explicit about and when. As for skills and worksheets, what I was attempting to emphasize was

an enormously reduced role of decontextualized drill and practice today compared to historical practices – especially compared to reading curriculum from the 1960s and 1970s.

In fact, in the Philadelphia project (McGill-Franzen et al., in press), the experimental group of teachers learned how to be explicit while reading a story to kindergarten children, while composing a morning message and modeling sound stretching in front of those children, and so on. But they were not given packages of isolated skills with scripts to follow in introducing those scripts to children. Nonetheless, there does seem to be a consensus that explicitness is necessary for instruction to be effective. Perhaps this is one of the key issues for the next century – what to be explicit about and when and how.

One way of thinking about commercial curriculum materials would be to evaluate what features of print and texts they identify as needing explicit instructional attention. The decodable text issue, for instance, seems but a shift in which text features are targeted for explicit attention. But, again, the shift toward more attention to vocabulary control, in this case attention to the relationship of the word structure and the decoding skills children have acquired, seems a response to the basal publishers' more recent lack of concern about the type and numbers of unique words that children encountered in beginning reading materials (Hoffman, et al., 1998). In other words, many classroom teachers noted the difficulty beginning readers had when they encountered so many new words of so many different sorts in the literature-based basals or trade book collections.

AMF: Although you refer to curriculum as the materials (or textbooks) of instruction, the curriculum that matters, in my view, is the *enacted curriculum*. You earlier emphasized the role of the teacher in the enacted curriculum, but the teacher is only one part, albeit an essential part, of the total context. As Ball and Cohen (1996) and others have pointed out, the enacted curriculum is co-constructed by students, and what they think and the knowledge they bring to the classroom, by teachers and their understandings, as well as by the materials teachers and students use (Barr, 1975; Weber, 1970). I do not believe that teachers have to create their own curriculum rather than use commercial materials in order to be considered exemplary. We have been socialized into thinking that commercial curriculum materials are not as effective as curriculum materials that teachers themselves develop. To construct, say, a first- or a third-grade reading curriculum from scratch would require heroic efforts on the part of teachers – I believe

you refer to such teachers as "Joan of Arc Teachers." On the other hand, commercial curriculum materials rarely offer opportunities for teachers to extend their learning beyond implementation of the particular materials at hand, say, for example, with examples of student work or the understandings that underpin such work. Reading Recovery does – teachers build a theory of learning based on the student's response with particular materials. Although many have written against commercial reading materials as de-skilling teaching and teachers (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988), these ubiquitous materials may, in the future, be reconceptualized (and redesigned) as educative for teaching practice, as well as for student learning:

Teachers could be engaged with curriculum materials in ways that generated learning if the materials were integrated into a program of professional development aimed at improving their capacity to teach. In that case, well-designed materials could be a resource for teachers' learning (Ball & Cohen, 1996, p.8)

Teachers often are knowledgeable and discriminating users of commercial curriculum, and I think that is just what we found in our California policy study. The teacher I quote in the following excerpt was representative of exemplary teachers there in that she understood reading development, the possibilities of the commercial curriculum materials, and the needs of the children she taught in particular.

When we adopted [a basal reading program], we did not adopt it as our complete reading program, we adopted it as our shared reading program, which is whole class instruction and direct instruction of skills. Then we put in guided reading separate from the basal, with leveled texts, and [we also put in separately] literature discussion groups with books that are at whatever level the kids are, and [we also put in] the writing piece. If we hadn't done this, we would be back to the stage where we've got a ton of kids who can't read the [grade level] basal. The way we have it structured [now], we've got leveled books in place for kids who can't read at grade level, so they will receive guided reading instruction with books appropriate to their level. (McGill-Franzen, et al., 1998, p.12)

RLA: I don't really disagree with you on this. The key is how commercial materials are used. The problem, as I see it, is that too often just following the reading series becomes the standard in schools where a basal is uniformly adopted. That is, the reading series dominates the instructional time. But no basal series has enough reading material to produce high achieving readers. A basal can be useful as a general framework, say for use on Monday and Tuesday, but when the basal lessons become the total reading program, achievement suffers. I mean, how can anyone justify spending five days on a single 20-minute story or excerpt? If the basal enhances

the likelihood of routinization of instruction, if it fosters unresponsive and unreflective teaching, if it restricts the amount of reading and writing that children do, then it creates more problems than it solves. But this is not a new concern. Betts (1949) noted:

In some schools instructional materials are limited almost exclusively to basic textbooks in reading, science, and other areas. These basic textbooks are often misused. At each grade level the book carrying that grade level designation is used as the prescription for undifferentiated, mass instruction of all the children in the class. At the other extreme are schools that attempt to rule out the basic textbooks. In these situations, conditions can be equally frustrating for teachers and pupils. Teachers can be overworked by attempting to devise study materials. Children can be frustrated in their efforts to deal with materials of unsuitable readability. The method of using instructional materials is a crucial factor in adjusting instruction to individual needs. (p. 268)

As I noted earlier, I think our most effective teachers teach children, not materials. They may use commercial materials regularly, but they do not use them slavishly. They use an array of curriculum materials and array of instructional strategies. Our most effective teachers are curriculum problem-solvers and, often, the commercial materials are part of the solution.

AMF: Schools and programs and reading lessons may change, but when teachers plunge into the risky business of change, there is no guarantee that instruction will improve (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996).

RLA: True, change is not always productive (Elmore, et al., 1996) nor is the process predictable (Johnston, Allington, Guice, & Brooks, 1998). Nevertheless, schools and curriculum are always changing.

## **LOOKING FORWARD**

AMF: So let's talk about the schools of the future. I think that currently, as has been the case historically, there is no clear agreement on just how schools should change.

RLA: Well, in fact, Tyack and Cuban (1995) have argued that reforms are often stifled because they violate the *grammar of schooling*:

Most Americans have been to school and know what a "real school" is like. Congruence with that cultural template has helped maintain the legitimacy of the institution in the minds of the public. But when schooling departed too much from the consensual model of *a real school*, failed to match the grammar of schooling, trouble often ensued. (p. 9)

If Cuban (1990) is correct, we can expect that while some aspects of schooling will change rather rapidly, the nature of classrooms may not be so easily altered. That is, while classrooms today certainly look different than they looked at the turn of the last century, the evidence suggests that the initiate-reply-evaluate (IRE) pattern of classroom discourse dominated then and dominates today. The question, though, is why some would end the dominance of the IRE, while others insist on its merits? In some senses, this difference alone accounts for much of the rancor between traditionalists and reformers today.

AMF: Well, Dick, any question today about discourse is loaded. It is loaded because, to me, talk about discourse has often sounded fatalistic – you are born into a discourse community and there you stay forevermore. Instead, I like the way Applebee (1996) situates discourse within the disciplines. This approach takes talk about language use out of the sticky wicket of race and social class and puts it in the context of disciplinary knowledge, knowledge that is taught and learned in the classroom. Each disciplinary community privileges ways of thinking, talking, and writing, and each discourse community has its own traditions and, I imagine, reforms. I see the central issue here as one of access to the discourse, not one necessarily of discourse structures, like the IRE. So I would pose the question as: "How can we teach all students to become participants in the discourse, say, of English Language Arts, so that they not only understand the discourse, but can transform it?" Appropriate teaching strategies are those that make the process of disciplinary thinking, talking, and writing transparent to the learner and engage the learner in knowing. The work of Langer (1995) suggests important ways teachers can scaffold students' understandings of literature and, of course, chief among these strategies is discussion. Through discussion, teachers can help students move between the text and the interpretation, between literature and their lives. As you suggest, Dick, it is difficult for many to give up the traditional IRE of classroom lessons – Langer tells inservice teachers that it is like getting new bones.

It is worth the effort: Nystrand and his colleagues (1997) found that a single instance of a teacher building upon a student response during a class period correlated with measurable

achievement gains for students in that class. Although these researchers studied secondary classrooms, other researchers at the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement are currently looking at the qualitative dimensions of discourse within exemplary classrooms with integrated curricula. The benefits of teaching strategies that honor multiple perspectives and make the process of understanding transparent have already been documented (Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995; McGill-Franzen & Lanford, 1994).

RLA: It seems obvious to me that these more complicated patterns of classroom discourse are related to the new thoughtful literacy standards that have been put in place. But we have only scant research available on the sorts of instructional environments that foster achievement of those standards. In other words, almost all of the available research estimated achievement using the older basic skills assessments – even *the reliable, replicable research* that is so much talked about these days. Enriching our understanding about the nature of curriculum and instruction that fosters achievement of the new standards would seem a worthy focus of the next generation of researchers.

But the new standards implicate another important facet of schooling – educating those children who have historically found it difficult to keep pace with their peers when offered schooling of similar quantity and quality. Odden (1997) lays the problem out in economic terms:

The current standards-based reform goal is to raise achievement of 75% or more of the students to the level currently attained by only 25% (NAEP proficient level). . . . This goal – a 100-200% increase in results – represents a quantum, not just a marginal, improvement in school performance. (p. 4)

For schools to achieve this sort of improvement represents, perhaps, the greatest challenge to the ingenuity of American educators. No longer will a third or more of the students be allowed to lag in development, completing 10 or 13 years of schooling with minimal academic proficiencies. Even historically underachieving students will achieve at substantially higher levels. Or at least that is the current stance of educational policymakers. It is the children of the poor who currently are most likely to fail to achieve current standards in American schools. Poor children are dramatically overrepresented in special education programs (Wagner, 1995). Poor children are also the target population of the federal Title I program. They are the children most likely to be retained in grade and the most likely to leave school without a diploma. Because children of

color are three times as likely to live in homes with family incomes below the federal poverty line, they are disproportionately represented in the ranks of children having difficulty.

AMF: And poor children and children of color are most likely to be penalized under the new standards movement. As Ron Wolk (1998), the former editor of *Education Week*, said in a recent commentary, education policy is on a "collision course with reality" (p. 48). Students from low-income communities have been unlikely to meet the historical minimal standards, so how can these same students be expected to meet even higher expectations for achievement? Further, we are holding students accountable for a thinking curriculum without having put in place a pedagogy that will enable such learning.

RLA: A carrot-and-stick approach seems to be the prevailing policy.

AMF: I understand the stick: Accountability in the form of public scorn and public take-over of low-performing schools. Improving such schools is an undeniable moral imperative, a Deweyan challenge from the turn of the century – we must offer all children the schools we want for our own.

Beleaguered teachers and administrators are desperate for *programs that work*, to use a current phrase. I guess the carrot offered to struggling school administrators and teachers is a loosely defined research base for choosing one program or set of materials over another and, unfortunately, we researchers have gotten into down-and-dirty mudslinging to support these district shopping trips. It should come as no surprise that faithful implementation of a coherent instructional program, such as that of Success for All (SFA), where none existed before, will improve reading achievement. Bob Slavin himself wrote in an evaluation of the *IBM Write to Read* program (1991) that when a program is compared with nothing, the intervention program will post better results.

RLA: Ah, but the question is: Is SFA a carrot that actually improves achievement? Or, more accurately, given the financial investment, is SFA a cost-effective way to improve achievement? I would suggest the answer is probably not. Venezky's (1998) analysis addressed the question that way. It is true that children attending SFA schools read a bit better, relatively, than the kids in the control schools, but their achievement remained incredibly low in absolute standards

(about 2.5 years below grade level at the end of elementary school). Personally, I don't think Slavin's genius is in curriculum design. Rather, what he understood and what the initial SFA design achieved was a restructuring of resources so that tutoring, parent involvement, and increased reading instructional time were accomplished in schools where most of the children desperately needed access to more and better teaching. The mistake Slavin made, I think, is that he came to increasingly depend on materials to teach and the SFA effort became increasingly standardized, so that local adaptations were discouraged.

But I do agree with you that many teachers, many administrators, and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) all seem to see SFA and some other programs as a carrot. But I don't think this is because they believe that these programs will actually raise achievement. Instead, these supposedly proven programs will be the new fall guys – something else to blame for the failure to educate disadvantaged children. Once these programs are implemented, continuing school failure can be blamed on the program, since it was supposedly a program that worked. Accepting mandates for implementing proven programs will provide teachers and administrators with an alternative defense. In essence, what the AFT seems to be saying is: "Sure, you tell us what to do – minute by minute, day by day. And we will do it. But then don't blame us if we follow orders and implement these programs and achievement fails to improve. We did what we were told. It must be that the programs were badly designed or these kids just cannot learn."

AMF: I am not that skeptical of the AFT. I understand that school-wide curriculum reform, like SFA, is a preferable alternative, in the view of the AFT, to state or city takeover of low-performing schools and the bad publicity and loss of confidence that attends the teaching profession whenever this happens. I submit that when programs improve achievement in low-performing schools, there was no coherent reading program to speak of, and little professional development for teachers prior to the new program implementation. At least SFA and other such programs give teachers a running start: SFA provides the curriculum materials and actually supports teachers in the implementation of the curriculum.

The bleak scenario that you described above could happen, but it is as likely that an explicitly scripted program would work, as DISTAR has at Wesley Elementary in Houston, despite demoralized teachers and against all odds. In this scenario, student learning would transform

teacher and community expectations, as it has at Wesley. Although highly structured reading programs are surely not the ideal – expert teachers are the ideal – if these approaches support some teachers in some contexts, and children learn to read, why are we throwing mud on them? Children cannot wait – they must learn to read with the teachers they have.

RLA: There just is no consistent evidence such programs do work. That and the fact that the little research available has been conducted by something other than disinterested parties (Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Stahl, 1998). I am not surprised when someone, somewhere, manages to implement a program – any program – successfully. Virtually every curriculum approach used in the *First Grade Studies* worked in some classrooms (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). But every program studied did not work well in some classrooms. I am not advocating the slinging of mud, but I am suggesting that the evidence suggests that more expert teachers get better results than the inexperienced ones and that those who would suggest that teacher-proofed materials are the new panacea are simply wrong. Instead of offering packaged programs, I am more convinced than ever that we need to concentrate our efforts on enhancing the expertise of teachers. Perhaps Robert Rothman (1995) said it most succinctly: "It's the classroom, stupid." (p. 174)

Happily, there seems to be growing recognition, among some policymakers, that it is teachers who teach, not materials. Thus, there are calls, like the one below from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

What teachers know and understand about content and students shapes how judiciously they select from texts and other materials and how effectively they present material in class. Their skill in assessing their students' progress also depends upon how deeply they understand learning, and how well they can interpret students' discussions and written work. No other intervention can make the difference that a knowledgeable, skillful teacher can make in the learning process. (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 8)

In an ideal world, in the schools I would design for the 21st century, all teachers would be more expert and have more authority to act on that expertise. They would also work in school environments that were well-designed to support this work. That is, schools would have a rich supply of materials for teachers to select for use in their instruction. School days would be less fragmented and provide teachers and students with long blocks of uninterrupted time for reading and writing activity, time to do the work of schooling. Schools would be collegial places where

the professional staff worked with each other to develop their expertise and improve their schooling.

AMF: I hope that, as the SFA developers learn more about teachers' understanding of the curriculum materials and students' responses, there will be more opportunities for teachers' learning beyond SFA.

RLA: Well, if I had to select a school design from the catalog of school reform efforts currently operating across the country, I would go with the Basic School (Boyer, 1995) and the Learning Network school designs (Herzog, 1997), blending the two together. In both cases, there is a general framework that can guide school reform. But, in both cases, the reforms are developed more from inside than imposed from outside. In both cases, teacher inquiry is an important component of how change proceeds. So, too, is collegial conversation and professional problem-solving. In both cases, the focus is on improving instruction by fostering teacher development. This approach, of course, seems risky to many policymakers because it acknowledges the importance and expertise of those who work daily with children and turns decision-making largely over to the teachers. This exemplifies what Rowan (1990) called a commitment strategy to reform as opposed to a control strategy (where you tell people exactly what to do). He traces the pillar-to-post swings of policymakers between commitment (e.g., site-based management) and control (e.g., mandates for daily phonemic awareness lessons) over the past several decades. I do think that the sorts of schools we will have in the 21st century will depend largely on whether policymakers decide to invest in fostering commitment to reform as opposed to simply trying to mandate it.

For instance, right now, the new standards movement seems designed to redefine the nature of academic work and that seems to me another area of contention in educational reform. The debate was perhaps best characterized by a candidate for the post of state superintendent of instruction, who, in criticizing the state social studies standards, vowed that if elected, kids would learn important facts – like the capitals of the 50 states. She was not elected, however. Nonetheless, there are influential figures – Hirsch (1996) comes to mind – who hoist the banner for facts, for item-based learning goals. On the other hand, there are folks who carry the banner for inquiry-based education and downplay the importance of facts.

AMF: Linda Darling-Hammond, whom you quoted earlier, has said that the reforms of the last century, while almost indistinguishable from those of the present in the emphasis on thoughtful literacy, failed to survive because teachers of that era were not prepared to teach within a constructivist pedagogy that holds the academic curriculum and the needs of learners in equal sway. Even now, lest history repeat itself, Darling-Hammond (1996) warns us to consider the complex pedagogy teachers need to meet the goals of the new standards movement: "[Curriculum reformers] fail to consider that teachers teach from what they understand and believe about learning, what they know how to do, and what their environments will allow" (p. 9). Enacting change is complex, and there are few absolutes. Teachers need support, and the kind of support depends on what they know, understand, and believe, and the context of their practice.

RLA: This might be a good point at which to raise the issue of the potential role of technology in learning to read. Having lived through an era of unfulfilled predictions as to how, first television, and then videotape recordings were going to transform curriculum and instruction, I cannot help but be pessimistic about the influence of technology on schooling, especially on classroom lessons. I suppose that if an inquiry-based education becomes the preferred curriculum model, then the Internet might play some substantial role. I can almost imagine classroom-based tailored testing on computer, much like the recent versions of the Graduate Records Exam. I think computer technology won't have much of an impact until the workstations are built right into student desks. At that point, they can substitute for the textbook and the worksheet and then the dominant pattern of instruction could continue. But I'm not sure that should be seen as progress.

AMF: Right now, I see technology as another way to privilege those who have and to disadvantage those who have not. The issue is access. I am thinking here of out-of-school use – roaming the Internet at home, e-mailing friends, practicing for the SAT, composing and revising homework assignments, doing phonics. Of course, we all say that technology has enormous potential – it does, but for whom? Before Bill Gates finishes the wiring of community libraries, perhaps he could find a way to build a library in the many low-income communities without one, and for those low-income communities with libraries, find a way to keep them open more than two or three hours a day.

RLA: I worry that the trend of increasing public approval for the privatization of public education may result in a balkanization not only of American schools but also of American society. We haven't really discussed the contribution public education has made to the civil nature of this melting pot of a nation. I worry because I think we are already too stratified on economic factors and because the trend toward greater income separation between the haves and the have nots has been accelerating. While our schools are too economically and racially segregated, I do think the notion of the *common school* experience is a useful ideal for public education.

AMF: Well, Dick, the common school experience seems like just another word for the same-old, same-old view of the world that most of us experienced in school. And American communities and the schools within are already balkanized. Fortunately for us and our children, the schools in our community are good ones. Bethlehem Central High School, in our community, was ranked by *Newsweek* (Matthews, 1998) as one of the 100 best public high schools in the country; the elementary schools there have been similarly honored. American public elementary and secondary schools in middle-class communities are excellent, better than private schools, and possibly the best public schools in the world. In a related news magazine article, the most successful schools in large urban areas were frequently parochial, and these schools were not effective because of the religious connection, but because of their smaller size, the strong community connections, the shared values of high academic goals, and the expectation of service to the community.

These are the schools we, as a society, should want for all children. I have to believe these are the schools that the National Congress for Public Education celebrated last year in Washington, DC.

Unfortunately, other American public schools, those serving children from impoverished communities, are rarely as good as schools in middle-class communities. Why should poor children be trapped in bad schools? It seems to me that those who inveigh against charter schools or tutoring vouchers for poor families are not supporting children, but rather a principle (that of public education as a common good). Forgive me for saying this, but it seems racist and elitist to support public school policies that deny poor and minority children an education comparable to that of middle-class children. School choice will be the civil rights issue of the new millennium.

For a civil society, it matters not at all that the society is diverse, only that it be just, and accord all its children the same opportunities to learn.

RLA: I agree with your argument up to the point where you decide that a common public education is an unsalvageable ideal. The reason that the achievement gaps between more- and less-advantaged children have been narrowing is that we have actually made some progress in reducing the discrepancies you rightly denounce. But I worry also that schools are being saddled with a baggage not of their making – a baggage they cannot and should not have to carry alone. Coles (1998) noted that politicians are cheered by our endless rancorous debates about the one best way to teach beginning reading because, in his view, that debate allows them to continue to ignore the larger and more expensive social factors that contribute to the likelihood of children's school success.

I was stunned by the implications of a recent large-scale longitudinal study of more- and less-advantaged children (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997). They found that the whole of the achievement gap at sixth grade – almost three years' difference – between these two groups of children could be accounted for by the achievement differences children arrived at school with and accumulated summer reading loss! By assessing achievement twice a year, they were able to demonstrate that learning across the school year was comparable for the two groups of children. Schools did not catch the disadvantaged children up, but when they were in school they fell no further behind either. Entwisle and her colleagues (1997) concluded:

Of the many ways to improve the school climate in poor neighborhoods, the main one is to correct the mistaken but politically correct perception that these elementary schools are falling down on the job. (p. 164)

They go on to argue for substantial investments in urban community development – development of opportunities for poor children to have a childhood more like those our own children lived outside of school. I am quite sure they would support your call for better stocked, better staffed, and more accessible public libraries in economically disadvantaged communities. Vouchers and charter schools seem like the perfect political solution – you just move the same money around a bit and continue to blame the teachers, the unions, the parents when things just get worse for the most vulnerable children and their families.

AMF: I am not persuaded by Entwisle and colleagues. I believe that schools can and must make a difference in the lives of all children, and if the schools we have do not support and inspire children from poor communities to be all they can be, then as educators, we have a moral imperative to step out of the box and create schools that do.

RLA: So I guess the answer to "What sort of schools will we have in the 21st century?" can best be stated as: It will depend. It will depend on the decisions we as a society make about what it means to teach, what it means to learn and to be literate, and whether schools are seen as important in achieving the ideals of a just, democratic society.

AMF: Indeed.

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