

The Politics of Knowledge

Why Education Research Does (or Does Not) Influence Education Policy

Frederick M. Hess

The American Enterprise Institute

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The collected papers from this conference are available online
at www.aei.org/event1455.



Research and the Reading Wars

James S. Kim

Harvard Graduate School of Education

AEI Conference: The Politics of Knowledge

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Agenda

- What's the reading war about?
- How has the war been fought?
- What are the consequences?
 - Research
 - Policy & Practice
- Conclusions and Suggestions



What's the reading war about?

- Early reading instruction
 - Jeanne Chall, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967)
- Professional autonomy
 - Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading* (1971)



How has the war been fought?

- Experiments published in peer-reviewed journals and syntheses of research by scholars
 - Theoretical debate: Does context help children decode new words?
 - Scholars are adversaries: Chall vs. Goodman, Stanovich & West vs. Smith
 - Contribute to scientific consensus, resolve questions
- Ideas disseminated through professional organizations, state/local boards of education
 - Political debate: Do policy mandates promote teacher autonomy?
 - Whole language theorists communicate directly to teachers
 - Change practice, put teachers at the vanguard of policymaking

What are the consequences?

REVIEWER'S REACTION:

I Should the manuscript be published in a future issue of the Reading Research Quarterly? NO.

II. General Comments: A worthless study which adds to the abundant confusion about "learning words"--16, count 'em--and "reading." What 6 year old could remember (or needs to) which/witch is which? Forty wax to the author! This study is the buries. How did they chews to hall these words out and ring sound out of them?

III Importance of the Study: None--or rather negative. The study signifies nothing, but adds sheer weight to the unwarranted focus on words.

IV. Procedures and Data Analysis: Poor. The first sentence is an unbased assumption and the rest is down hill from there. All could read. All learned all words. All learned to do better things they were taught to do better. Even statistically insignificant "findings" are massaged beyond all justification. Sources are misquoted to make the focus on teaching words as units seem to be valid.

V. Writing Style and Organization:

VI Rewrite Suggestions: Really! When will we get to real issues? When will we try to look at real kids reading real language? And when will we lift our eyes from the word to meaning?



What are the consequences of working through peer-reviewed journals?

- Peer-review is slow process, and accumulation of evidence is evolutionary—consensus builds in 1980s, 1990s
- Research is usually 1-2 steps behind demands of practitioners (need to fix problems today, not in 20 years)
- Expert panels do not include teachers in policymaking process
 - 1983 Becoming Nation of Readers
 - 2000 National Reading Panel



What are the consequences of working through prof org, state/local boards?

- Intended (1987)
 - CA language arts curriculum reception to whole language practice; textbooks for future teachers support practice
- Unintended (1989-1994)
 - Whole language scaled up in 1980s, but practice is unresponsive to empirical evidence
 - Rapid scale up of whole language practice linked (causally) to low reading and causes reaction—mandated phonics that undercuts professional autonomy



Conclusions

- Science is good, and National Reading Panel (2000) gets beyond dualisms, pro-teacher
- Major problem in reading wars is political:
 - Adversaries (academics) argue about retrospective interpretations of research
 - Teachers excluded from decision-making process



Questions

- How do we create new mechanisms for adjudicating scientific disputes and forming consensus reports in reading (education policy in general)?
- Would such changes deepen the legitimacy of good science and create incentives for practitioners and policymakers to use evidence?



Suggestions

- Teams of Rivals and Adversarial Collaboration as the Norm
 - *UK Literacy Panel* (nearly half teachers)
 - *Psychological Science* (2 adversaries collaborate on prospective experiment; data controlled by arbiter; published results within 1 year)

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