Learning to live with dilemmas and complexities:

the plight of a practitioner who has the misfortune to believe in research

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Mrs. Hammond! I'd know you anywhere from little Billy's portrait of you!
A Poem

If recess came from 9 to 10
And phonics from 10 to 10:04.
I think I’d like my recess less,
And maybe phonics a little more!
Review the big ideas of this conference

- What are the common messages across speakers and discussions?
- But also a broader goal…
Goal: Convince you that the reading research enterprise, the entire enterprise, not only deserves our attention but also our tender loving care.
Big themes of the conference

- Within Speakers
- Across Speakers
Allington

- Beware the ideologues and profiteers in the free marketplace
- The search for a panacea is misguided because it fails to admit the fundamental fact that children differ
- Developmentally appropriate practice may require more, not less, attention to literacy development
- Things that really matter: read a lot, talk a lot, get a little help from your teacher friends
Shanahan

- OK to mandate some things, like time
- Four components: words, fluency, comprehension, and writing
- Research-based instruction
- Professional development
- No canned programs
- Monitoring instruction
- Continuity: vertically, horizontally, across Programs, content area, parent work
We do know a lot about how to teach comprehension strategies. It makes a real difference when we teach them. It is just very, very hard. Changing the mix of text matters--a lot.
Taylor

- Reform is a long, arduous journey, but it can make a difference
- Professional development, with some continuity over time and across grades and roles, is what matters most
- Shared leadership
- Above all, changing instructional practices inside classrooms to support kids in accepting more challenge and more responsibility
Stahl

- Instructional models differ in a number of key dimensions
  - The role of the teacher and learner: who dictates the pace of instruction
  - The relationship between the whole and the parts
  - The role of context: scaffold or noise
- Keep your eye on the prize: comprehension, appreciation, motivation, the club
No matter how much kids look alike on the surface, deep down they really do differ from one another.

Kids get to the same overall score in many different ways.

Teaching to the test, to any test, is not going to help all kids improve, even on that test.

Beware the way we align instruction with assessment.

Teachers deserve a full tool box.
Ladson-Billings

- Teachers must believe that kids will learn what they teach.
- The deficit lies within the pedagogy not the kids
- Hard to put ideas into practice (walk the walk not just talk the talk)
- Not just what to teach, but how to make use of resources within a local context. Adaptation, not adoption, is needed
- Researchers are not invisible
Strickland

- Variability is a fact of life in classrooms
- Scaffolding ought to be a pervasive instructional activity for teachers
- Instructional planning and implementation is a complex, but manageable activity
- Independent reading is essential, both out of school and in.
Phonack

- Things are not always what they seem
- There is no accounting for some people’s behavior.
Across Speakers
Professional Development is the key. Why?

- Individual variability in kids and schools demands versatility on the part of teachers
- Versatility requires deep knowledge of content, pedagogy, and development
- Deep knowledge can only come from rich, consistent, and continuous professional development
Opportunity

- To read (all sorts of things)—narratives, informational texts, predictable texts, decodable texts, interesting texts, moving texts.
- To write (all sorts of things)
- To talk (with one another as well as the teacher—about everything—words, stories, strategies…)
- To get a little help from your friend the teacher
We must be vigilant to avoid the all too easy diversion

- Easy to be diverted to issues like curriculum and assessment
- When the key lies inside our classrooms in the ways in which we work with our kids.
- We need to be vigilant not to situate the problem OUT THERE
- The fault lies in ourselves, not in the stars: both the bad news and the good.
Scaffolding is the key instructional move

- Teacher modeling
- Gradual release of responsibility
3. a model: Cognitive apprenticeship

With any luck, we move this way (----->) over time.

But we are always prepared to slide up and down the diagonal.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

Teacher Responsibility

Student Responsibility
Changing Teacher Roles

High Teacher
Low Student

Explicit Instruction
Modeling
Scaffolding
Facilitating

Low Teacher
High Student

Participating

Au and Raphael
Percent of Task Responsibility Assumed by the Student

Primarily Teacher

Modeling*

Direct Instruction*

Guided Practice

Region of Shared Responsibility

Scaffolding*

Facilitating*

Participating*

Primarily Student

Percent of Responsibility Assumed by the Student
And now to the larger picture
Some context for today’s presentation

- Good news: People are paying attention
- Bad news: People are paying attention
- Can’t pick and choose our favorite approaches or studies
- Must understand the commonalities in all inquiry
- Must appreciate both the contributions and limitations of any sort of research effort
Some context for today’s presentation

- Note the big swings
- In 1970, qualitative and interpretive research had great difficulty making in onto programs
- By 1995, it was quantitative-experimental research that needed affirmative action.
- 2002: seems like qualitative research is once again in jeopardy of marginalization, at least in the policy-practice conversation
Some context for today’s presentation

- Resurgence in research synthesis
  - 1998: Preventing Reading Difficulties
  - 2000: National Reading Panel

- A new role for research in setting policy
  - REA: From reliable, replicable research to scientifically based reading research (SBRR)
  - Reading First/New ESEA: SBRR 113 times
  - Rolling out at the state level this fall
Some context for today’s presentation

- New Policy Strategy
Establish the expectation that practice should be research based:

- employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation and experiment
- involves rigorous data analyses that are adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions.
- relies on measures that provide valid data across observers and occasions
- Published in peer-reviewed journals (or reviewed by a duly constituted panel)
• Apply the rigorous research criterion to as many policy environments as possible:

- REA funds
- Reading First
- No Child Left Behind (more generally)
- Program adoption
- Professional development
- Teacher education
Make links between the environments

- Performance Standards For Students
- Student Assessments
- Content Standards
- Professional Development
- Standards for Licensure
- "Wild Card"
- Standards for Teacher Education Accreditation

Standards for Teacher Education Accreditation
My version of research-based practice

- I am all for research based practice, but…
- If we are going down that road, let’s make sure we have a clear road map
- And pay attention to all the rules of the road
  - “Make it clear when we are using off road vehicles.”
- In the rest of the talk, I will share my slate of rules of the road with you.
Rule #1: Policymakers have to read beyond the headlines*

When the research is transformed into policy, often only the headlines make the journey--so whatever detail and nuance were in the original report are lost

*or have such a reader on staff
Headline: Systematic, explicit, synthetic phonics improves reading achievement

Reality: When a program that includes systematic synthetic phonics among many other elements (lots of writing, lots of reading of a whole range of texts, and lots of supplementary activities), a small but robust effect for a subset of the population is found on a measure that requires kids to read lists of pseudowords.

Headline from NRP: Teach phonemic awareness

- If we dig a little deeper, we find
- Phonemic awareness helps
  - If taught early (K-1)
  - Mostly on measures of word reading
  - If taught along with L-S correspondences
  - Especially when taught in small groups
  - If limited in scope (about 18 hours total)
Headline from NRP:
Teach phonics (in some places, synthetic)

- Digging deeper: Phonics helps
  - If it is taught early (not great beyond gr 2)
  - More on WR than Comp
  - If it is systematic and explicit
  - If it is embedded in a rich curriculum
Headline from NRP: Teach phonics

- Digging deeper: Phonics helps
  - If several caveats are recognized
    ✓ (no evidence for one approach over another, including synthetic)
    ✓ (no evidence for decodable text)
    ✓ (no evidence for its remediation benefits)
Headlines from NRP: Silent reading does not help
Independent reading does not help

- Digging deeper
- NRP did not study independent reading
- Studied techniques to promote independent reading
- Concluded that the research base was too meager to support any conclusions one way or the other.
- Does not mean that independent reading is not important, useful, or consequential
- Just that the experimental evidence on techniques to promote it is moot on this point.
Rule #2: When research is applied, it ought to be applied in an even handed way

- All the research, not just the bits you like
- Some research is victim of second among equals conspiracy
  - Conceptual understanding of vocabulary
  - Comprehension strategies
- (yes we know it’s important, but we’ll get to it later)
Puzzle: How does SBRR get us to phonics for struggling readers

- The NRP report suggests that beyond grade 2 there is little support for systematic phonics either for garden variety students or for struggling readers.
- Yet… we see lots of policy support, especially here in California, for phonics-base programs for older, struggling readers.
- LA headline just two days ago
Puzzle: how does SBBR get you to decodable text?

- There is very little research on decodable text, or other sorts of text for that matter.
- There is certainly no research basis for privileging decodable text over other sorts of text (predictable, high frequency, “authentic”)
- So how did we get the 2000 Texas mandate for 80% decodable text?
- And why do we see so much of it in basals and little books?
Puzzle: How does SBRR get you to all these program endorsement?

- Visit any number of websites (e.g., ECS or NWREL) and you can find a list of “research-based” programs
- New initiative (Stahl and Pearson, in limbo)
  - Describe the programs carefully
  - Evaluate the strength of the research-base for various programs, both their components and their overall efficacy
Research-based programs

- Found a lot of research-based components, but with a lot of variability across components within a program.
- Few, if any, meet the gold standard of randomized experiments
- Or even the silver standard of independent evaluation
- Mostly vendor-conducted or -sponsored research
- Irony: those with a strong research base tended to yield conflicting results.
Research Based Programs

- Virtually all programs will be able to claim that they possess components that are "research-based"
- But the programs, as entities, will not be "research-based"
- Slavin’s Wright Brothers analogy
  - Scientifically based flying research
  - Only the Wright Brothers flew the plane
A grave puzzlement: What should we do when the research provides little guidance?

- Rely on intuition and conviction
- Rely on experience
- Rely on professional consensus
- Rely on the best evidence available even when it is not experimental
When the experimental research is silent

- The danger is that those who read, for example, the NRP report may infer that the questions that are not addressed may not be important:
  - What sorts of texts should students read?
  - What sorts of instructional groupings should I use in my classroom?
  - What should I do about writing to support reading?
  - How should I structure discussions?
Another puzzlement: What about the questions research does not speak to?

- Another irony: even in programs that have been “blessed” as research based, there is a lot of professional judgment!
- The problem is not invoking professional judgment; we have no choice.
- The problem is hiding it under the halo of research.
Another puzzlement: What do we do when we don’t have the right sort of evidence?

- When the gold standard is not available to answer a question of importance, what are we to do?
- Is it permissible to use other sorts of research to provide at least provisional answers to questions?
- Independent reading
Rule #3: Research can never be the sole determinant of policy: some questions cannot be answered through research.

- Who gets to go to what schools?
- Who gets access to what curriculum? What teachers?
- What sorts of teachers work in what sorts of schools?
- What sorts of compensation should teachers receive?
- How should teachers be permitted to enter the profession?
- What will we take as evidence that students are competent? Engaged?
Researchers may have the option of limiting their inquiry to that subset of questions for which there is ample experimental research to use in constructing an answer, but teachers and administrators do not have that luxury.
Rule #4: It is our moral and ethical obligation to use the best evidence we can muster for making policy decisions of consequence

Corollary 1: When we have no evidence, we must fess up, we must make it clear that we are basing our policy on values
One way to divide policy standards

- Experimental research
- (Experiments and Quasi-experiments)
- Natural Experiments
- Best Practice Research
- Correlational Research
- Case Studies
- Ethnographies
- Professional Consensus
- Mandate
- Individual Judgment
- Tradition
- Belief
Another way

- Experiments
- Natural Experiments
- Best Practice Research
- Correlational Research
- Case Studies
- Ethnographies

- Professional Consensus
- Mandate
- Individual Judgment
- Tradition
- Belief
- Conviction
- Hallucination
Rule #5: Many questions are better studied with non-experimental methods

- There are important policy questions for which other sorts of research may not only be relevant but actually preferable to experimental research.

Examples

- Consequential validity of assessments
- Impact of special programs

- You cannot randomly assign, but you need to answer the question
  - (like smoking or health care)
  - Independent reading seems more like these issues
Rule #6: Theory and basic research should inform and shape, but not supplant, applied research, especially in the policy arena

- Inform instructional and policy research
- Make us smarter about our instructional research
- But, demand instructional research prior to advocacy.
- Use theory and basic research to critique policy
- But always be prepared to find a discontinuity between theory and practice.
Rule #7: Even when research deals the cards, professional judgment has to play the hand
How do we address the “on average” dilemma?

- What is best for the group may not be best for individuals within the group.
- Teachers ought to use “research-based practice,” but we will always want them to use it flexibly.
To listen to advocates, you would think we got results like this. Not true! We NEVER get findings like this in educational research.
The range of results issue

Despite differences, there is lots of overlap. Clearly for most kids, it does not matter, and for others M1 is better.

What we get are marginal improvements, not panaceas or silver bullets.
Not too different from medicine

- Cholesterol
- Treatments
  - Drugs
    - Lipitor
    - Zocor
  - Homeopathic herbs
  - Diet and exercise
Cholesterol, cont

- Doctors look for differential treatments
  - Match the treatment to known characteristics of the patient
- Trial and error
  - Try one treatment (or several)
  - Assess progress
  - Regroup
- Admit side effects up front
- Isn’t this exactly what we want for ourselves as teachers
Research based practice and professional prerogative

- A real issue in districts in which the pedagogical knowledge base of beginning teachers is suspect.
- 40 some thousand “pre” credentialed teachers in California
- Districts in which 33% of new hires are pre
- Hobson’s choice
  - Adherence to the TM versus
  - Vague recollections of my second grade experience
Rule #8: Research should promote the teacher knowledge required to exercise professional prerogative

- Teachers deserve a full set of assessment and instructional tools to assess the situation and to determine the most appropriate approach for each student.
- They should have the knowledge to look for special characteristics that shape instruction.
- And the inquiry skills to do trial and error without doing harm.
- And the prerogative to make those choices.
Make sure our current and future teachers have a Full Tool Box

- We shortchange teachers when their preparation leaves them with a single strategy, approach, or even philosophical perspective.

- A major function of research (and professional development!) ought to be to expand, not contract, the set of tools available to teachers.
Even if we have “modal” or “default” programs, we will always need to promote flexibility and versatility.

Even in situations in which teacher knowledge is uneven, we ought not to mandate methods for those who have demonstrated that they possess the knowledge required to make differential decisions and promote achievement for all kids.
A Full Tool Box...and a commitment to continual learning

- Broad and deep professional knowledge--the kind that expands teachers’ repertoires--is, and always has been, our only hope and our only guarantee to a rightfully uneasy public.
- Not a recipe for pedagogical relativism--anything goes!
The other side of prerogative

- If teachers aspire to this sort of prerogative, they MUST accept accountability for their knowledge.
- They MUST be prepared to find that their intuitions and hunches and experiences are not enough.
- And that sometimes new evidence trumps old methods and even best practice.
- In short a disposition to inquire and learn
Rule #9: As individuals, we must be accountable to the uses of our own work.

- When our own work is used by policymakers to support a policy, we must monitor the validity of its application.
- And when it is misused, we must say so, in as public a manner as possible.
- What is true of the individual is also true for the collective.
Rule #10: We need to promote synergy and complementarity across methods

- Some personal examples
- Winsor study on PA
- Pathways to PA are very different in code emphasis and meaning emphasis
  - Code-emphasis: Phonics instruction
  - Meaning-emphasis: Invented spelling
- An experimental design would never had led to this insight
**Recent example in CIERA School Change study: Taylor et al**

- Consistently found that the incidence of higher order questions explained growth from the beginning to the end of the year on a variety of measures, including st tests, fluency, writing.
- Was it really HOQ or was HOQ an index of something else.
- Go back to the field notes to inspect teacher descriptions
Works the other way too

Without careful experimentation, we would not know what we know about either the range of application and the limitations of various approaches to teaching phonics.
Complementarity

- I wish we could make the unfortunate confounding of research methodology and instructional preference go away.
- I wish we had more experiments on constructivist classrooms and more and more ethnographies of skill-oriented classrooms.
- More of us should combine numbers and narratives.
A personal coda

- A plea for complementarity: John Steinbeck, *Sea of Cortez*
- The sierra:
- D.XV11-15-IX; A.11-15-IX
- See it, fight it, even eat it.
And so we should go too, doubly open into the classrooms, schools, and policy contexts in which we so desperately want to make difference.

To see if together, with open minds, and open hearts, and a realization that we are forever a part of the lives of children whose lives we are trying to impact,

we might fashion programs more complete, more nourishing, more effective

than any of us could produce on our own.
CIERA as a federally funded entity may be ending

But we hope that CIERA as a concept, an idea, a movement that strives to meet the challenges of improving reading instruction and achievement in settings where we struggle to make a difference will live long after the funding.

See you next year!
A couple of helpful references