

Prologue: Becoming Becoming a Nation of Readers

Ian A. G. Wilkinson

Ohio State University

Judith A. Scott

University Of California, Santa Cruz

Elfrieda H. Hiebert

Textproject &

University Of California, Santa Cruz

Richard C. Anderson,

University Of Illinois, Champaign–Urbana

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Prologue: Becoming *Becoming a Nation of Readers*

IAN A. G. WILKINSON, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY; JUDITH A. SCOTT, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ; ELFRIEDA H. HIEBERT, TEXTPROJECT & UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ; AND RICHARD C. ANDERSON, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, CHAMPAIGN—URBANA

In this foreword to the special issue of the *Journal of Education* celebrating the 30th anniversary of the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading (BNR)* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985), we share the backstory of the making of *BNR*. We view our role as that of commentators, narrators, and storytellers. As members of the Staff of the Commission on Reading (Elfrieda H. Hiebert, Judith A. Scott, and Ian A. G. Wilkinson) and as the Chairman of the Commission (Richard C. Anderson) our task, as we see it, is to tell the untold story of how *BNR* came into being and to reflect on what we were able to achieve given the circumstances of the time, what we wish we could have achieved, what issues went under the table, and what lessons can be learned from the endeavor.

THE TIME AND PLACE

It was the early 1980s at 51 Gerty Drive, Champaign, Illinois, Center for the Study of Reading (CSR). The CSR was the primary center for reading research, with its major funding coming from the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education (an agency then named the National Institute for Education [NIE]).

Dolores Durkin (1978–79) had recently published her landmark observational study that revealed a critical lack of direct instruction in reading comprehension, and comprehension was at center stage both at the CSR and in the field at large. Chief among the conceptual tools for understanding comprehension at the time was schema theory (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Rumelhart, 1980) with its elegant articulation of the relationship between a reader's knowledge of the world and text comprehension. Structural accounts of narrative and expository text (e.g., Stein & Glenn, 1977; Meyer, 1975) were also furnishing useful tools for explaining comprehension and memory for text. Research on metacognition (Brown, 1980) was helping to illuminate the active role of the reader in monitoring and repairing comprehension.

These conceptual tools were also supporting research on comprehension instruction. P. David Pearson and his students (Hansen & Pearson, 1983; Raphael & Pearson, 1985) were helping teachers capitalize on the knowledge–comprehension relationship, highlighted by schema theory, to further students' comprehension. Ann Brown and her students were examining instructional procedures to help students deploy metacognitive strategies to make and monitor meaning, such as 'reciprocal teaching' (Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

These new ways of thinking about comprehension and instruction were also prompting examination of basal reading programs—the

staple of American reading education at the time—as well as content-area texts. Isabel Beck and colleagues (e.g., Beck, Omanon, & McKeown, 1982) demonstrated that the way basal reading lessons were designed often set up roadblocks for students' story comprehension. Chip Bruce (1984) showed that publishers' adaptations of trade books had the potential to reduce students' interest and involvement in reading. Alice Davison and Robbie Kantor (1982) argued that basal publishers' adaptations to meet readability requirements hindered rather than helped students' comprehension, sounding the death knell for readability formulas (at least in their current guise). And evidence was mounting from Bonnie Armbruster and Tom Anderson's research (e.g., Armbruster & Anderson, 1982) that the structure and language of social studies and science texts were not conducive to readers' forming a coherent understanding of the content. These were not good times to be a basal publisher or textbook author.

A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), with its scathing attack on U.S. educational policy and practice, had just been published, and a response was needed from the reading community. In conversations that Richard C. Anderson, as Director of the CSR, had with the Center's governing board and its primary NIE officer, Monty Penney, questions arose about beginning reading—an issue that had not been a primary focus of the Center. Out of these conversations came a mandate, and some financial resources, to convene a commission of national experts and to produce a review of the role of phonics in beginning reading, sponsored by the National Academy of Education.

THE PROCESS

The first two members of the Staff were hired in the fall of 1983—Judith Scott (Judy) and Ian A. G. Wilkinson—who were first-year doctoral students, one from California and the other from Australia, with Richard C. Anderson (Dick) as their advisor. As their initial project in the first semester of their doctoral programs, they were tasked with helping to create this newly funded federal report. The third member of the Staff, Elfrieda H. Hiebert (Freddy), came in as a Visiting Associate Professor from the University of Kentucky with a one-year appointment that started in January 1984. She had been chosen because of her work in early reading, most notably two papers that had been published in *Reading Research Quarterly*.

The report was initially conceptualized as a meta-analysis on beginning reading instruction. Accordingly, we scheduled a visit with Gene Glass, an expert on this approach, then a professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder, to help design the most rigorous

meta-analysis possible. Gene indicated that a key requirement would be to find all works on the topic, including those that had not been published in archival journals, such as dissertations. Dutifully, Ian and Judy searched for such tomes in the cavernous stacks of the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana library. Those forays into dusty library shelves yielded overflowing carts of hardbound journals, hours of Xeroxing, and a plethora of annotated notes.

During this time, Dick, the Chairman of the Commission, and the National Academy of Education assembled the Commission, a carefully selected group of academics representing the spectrum of viewpoints about the reading process, environmental influences on reading, and teaching techniques and tools. The members of the Commission were: Isabel Beck, professor, University of Pittsburgh; Jere Brophy, professor and co-director of the Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University; Jeanne S. Chall, professor and director of the Reading Laboratory, Harvard University; Robert Glaser, professor and director of the Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh; Lenore Ringler, professor, New York University; David Rumelhart, professor, University of California, San Diego; Dorothy Strickland, professor, Teachers College, Columbia University; and Sue Talbot, teacher, University Elementary School, Bloomington, Indiana.

Our first meeting with the Commission took place in an airport hotel in Chicago where we had a weekend to hammer out our plans for developing the report. We arrived with our tidy notes on the progress of our meta-analysis, only to realize within the first hour that NO ONE on the Commission wanted the report to be a meta-analysis on the role of phonics in beginning reading instruction. Rather, all were adamant that we pay attention to reading as a lifelong pursuit, and that the work of the CSR on schema theory and the role of comprehension, beginning with a child's earliest experiences with text, needed to be emphasized in this major new report.

Our work on the meta-analysis was tossed aside, and the table of contents for the report began its development in that room (with saleswomen next door celebrating Mary Kay cosmetic awards!). As Jeanne Chall wrote in her Afterword, the Commission had long and lively discussions, but came to a consensus on most issues, particularly the framing of the report, in a relatively short amount of time. They agreed to define reading as a constructive, fluent, strategic, motivated, and lifelong process that began as soon as children started to read, and they rejected the division between learning to read and reading to learn. They also agreed it was important to discuss classroom interactions, the role of basal readers, and the importance of creating a literate environment.

Armed with these mandates, we went back to the Center to flesh out the text of the report. Freddy, Ian, and Judy synthesized research on topics in an expanded outline, working on drafts until they were ready to present to Dick who would then polish (or rewrite!) the drafts, send them back for more work, and the process continued. When Dick and Freddy thought the input of the Commission was needed, they sent a draft of a section for review. The timeline was tight; everyone worked late hours and weekends to try to complete the report in the allotted 12 months.

In the early 1980s, most computing was done on mainframes and most offices still used Selectric typewriters. Being at the vanguard of innovation, the Center invested in the first mass-produced microprocessor-based 'portable' (more aptly 'luggable') computer—the inimitable Osborne: two floppy disks, no hard drive, a 5" screen, the size of a large sewing machine, weighing in at 24.5lbs. *BNR* was composed on these machines.

As summer approached, there was still much to do. Dick decided we needed a more focused and concentrated effort at a retreat at his cabin by a lake in Wisconsin. So, Freddy, Judy, and Ian drove the 450 miles to the lake to work and live together for a week. Almost driving into the lake on our arrival late at night, picking blueberries and meeting a bear, cooking with Jana Mason (Dick's spouse and a researcher at CSR), and hours and hours of hashing out various elements of the report—these were some of our most memorable experiences.

Back at the Center we continued to write and, as each part was completed, the report was sent for the Commissioners' feedback. As one might imagine, there was considerable back and forth to develop a consensus view on synthesizing the research. Throughout, Dick worked tirelessly to create the "voice" of a report that could be read and understood by the "average informed citizen." Finally, the Commissioners signed off on the report. The concerns of one Commissioner—Jeanne Chall—that the report did not adequately address those with special problems in learning to read were expressed in her Afterword.

At the final meeting of the Commission (in October, 1984), we also received enthusiastic endorsement of the report's name. Ramsey Selden who had worked on *A Nation at Risk* had advised us that the right name would be a make-or-break decision in the public's interest in the report. But, as the October meeting with the Commission approached, we still hadn't come up with a name for the report. Then, one day at the post office, Freddy saw the release of a new stamp—Lincoln and his son Tad looking at a book, pictured above the label "A Nation of Readers." Freddy returned to the Center, excited and confident that we had just the right name for the report. The Commission would be adamant that the word *Becoming* must preface the phrase. Judy set to work to determine whether the stamp or at least the image of Lincoln and his son were available for use on our cover, without copyright payments. We were elated when we learned that the image was in the public domain. Months later, immediately following the release of the report, Freddy went to the Library of Congress to see the original picture of Lincoln and Tad and, with dismay, realized that the two of them were looking at pictures. There wasn't a single word of text on the page! But by that time, the die was cast.

We had a name and an image for the cover but, it turned out, no funding for publication. Not willing to concede defeat, we came up with a strategy for publishing the report. Judy, whose prior publishing experience consisted of designing public fire safety materials and a summer internship at *Learning Magazine*, became the publishing agent for the report. With a small investment of \$5000 from a generous donor, she worked with the University of Illinois

print shop, designing the layout and colors of the book. She worked out the price, \$4.50, based on the cost of printing and shipping, with a \$1.00 profit from each sale. The seed money allowed an initial print run of 2,000 copies, generating sufficient income for another printing of 5,000 books. After a batch was sold, the profits were used for the next print run and so on.

With the help of Senator Paul Simon, Illinois' senior senator at the time and a friend of the Center, the newly minted Secretary of Education William Bennett agreed to appear at the National Press Club in Washington DC to accept the document on behalf of the U.S. government. Unlike subsequent reports (e.g., the report of the National Reading Panel in 2000), the release of *BNR* in March of 1985 occurred with relatively little fanfare. There were few newspaper articles or televised events and, of course, no Internet exposure and no website (the first browser would not be available until 1990). Most of the dissemination occurred through word of mouth—initiated, for the most part, at professional meetings such as the International Reading Association convention. Ultimately, over 311,000 copies were distributed across the country and around the world.

OPPORTUNITIES MISSED

We should not have been surprised at the critiques and varied interpretations of the report (e.g., Davidson, 1988), but some of the responses did surprise us. And, with hindsight, we can identify topics we should have covered and nuances we should have added. One topic that, in retrospect, we think the report should have addressed more fully is vocabulary. Work on vocabulary was prominent at the Center from its inception (e.g., Pany & Jenkins, 1978). During the year we wrote the report, the seminal paper “How many words are there in printed school English?” (Nagy & Anderson, 1984) was published. One Commission member was in the midst of publishing a series of studies on the effects of vocabulary instruction on comprehension (e.g., Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982), while another had hypothesized that, because of declines in vocabulary levels in textbooks, SAT scores had dipped in the 1970s (Chall, 1977). Did the emphasis on comprehension and schema theory and the demands of beginning reading capture the spotlight and push this critical topic to the sidelines? Was the research on vocabulary still in its infancy? We simply don't know (or remember) why this topic was given short shrift.

The report's broad and comprehensive scope led some to expect that some attention would have been paid to writing. The interactive nature of writing and reading in the emergent stages of reading was addressed, and one of the report's 17 recommendations called for more time spent on writing. But writing did not receive its due treatment; Commission members were clear that their mandate was to address research on reading development and instruction.

The two staff members who had worked in California classrooms (Judy and Freddy) lobbied for attention to the needs of students who are members of minority groups. Jim Cummins's (1981) description of work with English Language Learners

(ELLs) in Canada was receiving attention, and reports were coming from an NIE-funded study of ELLs (Fisher, Tikunoff, Gee, & Phillips, 1981). Nonetheless, the general consensus was that research in this area was, as yet, too limited to warrant any firm conclusions on how reading instruction needed to be adapted or strengthened for ELLs and more generally, for students who are members of minority groups. The report missed the opportunity to highlight the failure of schools to adequately address the needs of such students.

Also receiving scant attention in the report was the role of social context in learning to read and the notion that reading (and learning) is a social process. These ideas gained prominence with the social turn in literacy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but their importance was already apparent in the work of sociolinguists and like-minded scholars in the 1970s. Some of this work—that of Shirley Brice Heath and Gordon Wells—made it into *BNR* but only insofar as to say that children's experiences with reading and language in the home were important. Thinking about the social in a broader sense than what goes on in interaction in the home was regrettably absent from the report.

LESSONS LEARNED

One of the lessons we learned is that when you provide a well-researched critique, you need to provide an alternative. *BNR* cautioned against overreliance on readability formulas. But there was little for publishers and policymakers to use in their stead. Following *BNR*, the nation's two largest states, California and Texas, initiated policies against the use of readability formulas as one of the criteria for adoption of reading and English textbooks in their states and called for “authentic texts” (texts from real-world sources, such as trade books) at all levels, including first grade. The number of different words in beginning texts increased substantially (Fitzgerald, Elmore, Relyea, Hiebert, & Stenner, 2016). The next textbook adoption cycles in California and Texas would change course and mandate another form of beginning texts—decodable ones—but the percentages of unique words in beginning texts remained high, and many unique words appeared only a single time. High levels of unique words with only the most frequent words repeated are challenging for beginning readers (Hiebert & Fisher, 2007).

Another lesson learned, even more clearly than we may have suspected, is that politics trumps evidence. *BNR* contained a strong evidence-based recommendation for an early emphasis on phonics, summed up with the maxim: “Do it early. Keep it simple. Except in cases of diagnosed individual need, phonics instruction should have been completed by the end of the second grade” (p. 43). But given the emphasis on meaning and comprehension running through the report, the message was not viewed as strong enough by particular advocacy groups. In the late 1980s, the CSR was again embroiled in an evidence-based analysis of the role of phonics in beginning reading. The research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, under pressure from a congressional mandate (Zorinsky, 1986),

directed the CSR to conduct a more focused synthesis of beginning reading, which led to the publication of Marilyn Adams' (1990) *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*.

Yet another lesson learned was to be careful what you wish for. Although the report was hailed as the definitive statement about reading—indeed it was dubbed “The Surgeon General’s Report on Reading”—it was perhaps too definitive. Some key points were based on a foundation of less than conclusive evidence. Some people in research funding agencies, as Dick would later find when the time came for recompetition for the CSR, concluded from the report that all important issues in reading had been resolved and little further research was needed.

Ongoing Relevance

BNR was intended to be a policy statement providing a unified view of reading and reading instruction. As with any scholarly work, it was a product of its time. Published on the heels of the cognitive revolution in reading research, it reflected a constructivist perspective on learning and a view of reading as occurring at the intersection of reader, text, and task. Notions of the role of social context in reading were waiting in the wings, and the social and political turn in literacy scholarship was arguably a subtext being written offstage.

As some important features of American reading education fall by the wayside (e.g., well-organized and monitored independent reading), new policies and demands surface (e.g., formal reading instruction in kindergarten), and old practices reappear with new labels (e.g., readability formulas become text difficulty or complexity systems); we believe that the report continues to have relevance. No other report has been as comprehensive nor as accessible in its content to practitioners, policy-makers, and parents. In this era of extreme polarization, it is also a model for creating a consensus statement from representatives across a spectrum of viewpoints.

On some topics such as the use of text complexity systems for selecting and teaching texts, a substantial amount of research has not been gathered subsequently, and *BNR* remains a summary of critical evidence. The term “readability formulas” may seem like an archaic term in the current Common Core State Standards (CCSS) context where text complexity is a focus. But the summary of research in the first section of the chapter “Extending Literacy” that deals with readability formulas remains relevant, especially when quantitative systems are used to identify bands of text complexity at different grades in Appendix A of the CCSS (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010) and the supplement to the CCSS entitled “Measures of Text Difficulty” (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2012). Today’s quantitative systems may be called text complexity systems, but they function in a similar way to the readability formulas described in this section of *BNR* by algorithmically establishing text complexity on the basis of sentence length and vocabulary frequency.

Becoming a Nation of Readers was a remarkable document for its time, but much has happened in the intervening 30 years. Other policy documents have been written and enacted. Looking back

and looking forward, what is the legacy of *BNR*? For the last three authors of the report at least, *BNR* had a strong influence on the trajectories and topics we would follow in our academic careers. The degree to which *BNR* had an influence on the teaching of reading and the field at large is a matter for our colleagues to decide in this special issue of the *Journal of Education*.

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Ian A. G. Wilkinson is a professor at Ohio State University. Professor Wilkinson can be reached at wilkinson.70@osu.edu.

Judith A. Scott is an associate professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Elfrieda H. Hiebert is CEO and president of TextProject and a research associate at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Richard C. Anderson is professor emeritus at the University of Illinois, Champaign–Urbana.