The Role of Professional Knowledge in Reading Reform

When the editors of *Language Arts* invited me to step back, take a deep breath, and embrace the big issues in literacy—why does it matter? what does it mean? why bother?—I was honored to be asked and excited to avail myself of a rare opportunity—to be intentionally reflective. Reflection did not come easily. Every time I started to write the piece, my thoughts turned from the big issues in literacy to the current political situation in the United States and to the ways in which literacy education, particularly reading education, has been socially constructed and politically situated in the last several years. For months, I resisted the temptation to wallow in the politics, but finally I succumbed, perhaps on the grounds that for me, nothing matters more. So for better or for worse, that is what I have chosen to write about.

I have been an educator for 39 years—first as an elementary school teacher and then as a professor of reading research and education. I have witnessed wide curricular swings between student-centered and curriculum-centered pedagogy in depressingly regular cycles. I have seen us embrace and then reject and then re-embrace tests that assess reading and writing in their atomistic aspect (remember the skills management systems of the 1970s?—the new assessments in the marketplace bear an eerie resemblance to them). I have also seen tests assume a position of curricular influence well beyond their technical or conceptual merits and, in the same time frame, witnessed the demise of careful teacher observation and diagnosis in policy discussions. I have seen enough of these cycles to prompt me to question the Western tradition of inevitable progress toward a virtuous end and to opt instead for an Eastern tradition of history as inevitably repetitive cycles. Even so, through all of these cycles and pendulum swings, I have never been as concerned about the state of literacy education as I am today. What concerns me is not whether we are in yet another pendulum swing—we probably are. I am alarmed by rhetoric and policies that betray such disregard for teachers and teaching.

Within the new rhetoric, the text is *teacher quality*—indeed No Child Left Behind demands that every state provide every child and parent with a “fully qualified teacher” by 2007. And there is much talk about ensuring that teachers have access to teacher education and professional development that is based upon “scientifically-based reading research.” That is all well and good. It is hard to argue with full qualifications and evidence-based professional development. But the subtext is *minimal professional standards*. How else can one explain Rod Paige’s characterization of effective teaching as a simple combination of subject matter knowledge and verbal fluency (USDOE, 2002)? How else can one explain the increasing popularity of “scripted programs”? How else can one explain the flirtations with a marketplace model to replace a professional growth model for determining who stays in the profession? A marketplace model lets all comers into the profession and weeds out those who cannot produce results; by contrast, a professional growth model requires teachers to meet increasingly rigorous standards at different stages of their career. How else can one explain the policy of championing test scores rather than program completion as the primary pathway to a credential? Followed to its logical conclusions, the policies we are currently implementing will lead to a generation of teachers who pay homage to externally imposed stan-
always press for knowledge that is deep and broad as the hallmark of our profession. No matter how definitive our research, no matter how clear the findings from studies evaluating the relative efficacy for different interventions or approaches, no matter how transparent our policies and mandates, we desperately need teachers who can apply their craft with great flexibility. Why? Because of the undeniable fact that children differ from one another, and they cannot easily be threaded through the same needle’s eye. We ask no less of doctors. We want doctors who use the most up-to-date knowledge of their field in concert with situated knowledge of patients’ histories and routines in order to determine optimal courses of action, regardless of whether exercise, diet, or drugs, or some combination of the three is the most likely remedy for a symptom or ailment such as high cholesterol. Moreover, we want doctors who can use their inquiry skills to alter a treatment when the evidence tells them it is not working. Similarly, we want teachers who use their deep knowledge of subject matter along with knowledge of children’s histories, routines, and dispositions to create just the right curricular mix for each and all—and we want them to use their inquiry skills to alter those approaches when the evidence that passes before their eyes says they are not working. Professional knowledge, deep and broad, is the only basis for flexibility of this sort. But these degrees of freedom come with strings attached. Teachers who aspire to professional prerogative must accept the responsibility for keeping their knowledge current, and they must be prepared to alter their practice on the basis of new knowledge—to accept the possibility that new knowledge trumps old practice, no matter how comfortably the old ways fit. In short, they must possess a disposition for lifelong learning.

Well, what is not to like, you say? Who would want anything less for our profession? Unfortunately, there are some who appear to want much less, who would reduce the profession to the technocratic enactment of a carefully scripted program, one in which teachers do precisely as they are told. The biggest challenge we face as a profession is convincing an uneasy public that we, and their children, deserve more. A good first step would be to accept greater accountability for knowledge in return for greater prerogative in responding to diversity. A good second step would be to document the claim that teachers teach better and students learn more when teachers and students have more choices. To fully meet this challenge, many more steps would need to follow (recapturing authenticity in assessment, crafting texts for early readers, ensuring that students gain access to the tools of non-fiction and critical literacy—to name but a few), but I would be thrilled to see these two steps get off to a flying start. We don’t have much time to waste.

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