From the Editor

Karen F. Thomas

Western Michigan University, karen.thomas@wmich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation


This Editor’s Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
The national reading summit:  
A commentary

On September 18 and 19, the U.S. Department of Education hosted a national Reading Summit in Washington D.C. The charge for the summit participants, as stated by Secretary of Education Richard Riley, was “to lead a new crusade to dramatically improve child literacy in America.” Riley called for a collaboration of policy makers and educators. Each governor received an invitation to put together a team of seven people representing the states’ and territories’ stakeholders in young children’s early reading; I served as one of the seven from the Michigan delegation. The National Academy of Science’s report Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children served as the organizing focal point of the summit.

Secretary Riley set the tone for the conference in his opening remarks highlighting five challenges deserving reading educators and researchers attention. He challenged:

1. Parents and/or other family caretakers to read to and with their children at least 30 minutes a day;
2. Reading researchers to “once and for all end the reading wars;”
3. Each state to collaborate and link all the schools and agencies providing early childhood services;
4. Those who work with learning disabled, African American, and limited English proficient children to help them read well; and
5. Teacher educators to do a better job of preparing teachers of reading.

Then Catherine Snow, Chair of Report Committee, presented segments of The Academy’s reading study emphasizing that the reading community of researchers and educators do have a scientific basis through replicable research to know how to prevent reading difficulties in young children. Following Snow’s comments, the summit then had a series of workshops devoted, in one way or another, to improving young children’s reading. The summit culminated in each state and territory coming to a closure around a plan to implement findings in The Academy’s report.

Had the summit equitable represented teachers who task it is to teach young children and those who prepare teachers as well as responsible policy makers whose knowledge comes from being in schools where reading instruction occurs, the summit might have been
something more than a political maneuver. While the following
comments are specific to the conference and its tone, they are not
necessarily divorced from the report; the summit and the report on
which it was based were so inextricably bound.

One had only to read Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young
Children to stay abreast of the conference proceedings, I found the
workshops lacking and self-serving. Some workshop presenters advov-
cated specific school reforms in an attempt to reform literacy educa-
tion — reform programs which cost big money to purchase and
maintain. I found this offensive. In the middle of one workshop in
which the presenter was pushing a rather costly school reform, a fel-
low participant slipped that day’s Carl Rowan editorial under my
wandering eyes. Rowan’s article, titled “It’s the Teachers, Stupid”
reminded me that literacy reform is in the hands of teachers. It’s al-
ways the teachers. They know what works and with whom. They were
conspicuously absent from this conference.

Depending on the individual participant’s background, the
summit may have been helpful and encouraging, or even informa-
tional for preventing reading difficulties for our young children. Ef-
fective classroom teachers and teacher educators would have learned
nothing new from this summit. They were conspicuously absent from
this summit. For my part, I consider the following summit aspects as
new:

1. The national endeavor to link up all state departments of
   education with each other and the federal government; and
2. The federal challenge asking for a commitment from each
   state and territory to submit a plan to assure successful read-
   ing in young children by the end of grade three.

The collaboration appeared to be the only new aspect.

My response to the new aspects of this reading summit is best
characterized as mixed. I am heartened at the attention being focused
on early reading by the federal and state government. With such at-
tention focused on early reading instruction, legislative bodies may
see the necessity for stricter requirements for pre-school education
agencies and an appropriate place for resource allocation. I am also
encouraged that the focus on those populations who traditionally have
reading difficulties (i.e., from poor urban areas and limited English
proficiency backgrounds) should receive “the amount of instruc-
tional support needed as gauged by the entry abilities of the school’s
population” (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 328). The study
points out that this type of resource planning would fly in the face of
the current and ill-conceived “practice of giving schools bonuses for
high test scores” (p. 328). The summit did not emphasize the above
point, but the study addressed this issue.

A troubling point emphasized at the summit revolved around
the issue that scientific evidence does exist to prevent reading diffici-
luties. This bothers me; I am not eager to see what does exist construed
as a “quick fix” to early reading difficulties. One could have left the
summit with the notion that all that early education personnel have to
do is implement all the pedagogical suggestions listed in The National
Academy Press to prevent reading difficulties. Another quick fix I
fear is the basal publishers’ response to this report as a mandate to
assemble systematic, consistent, formal, and well-articulated phonics
and word patterned basals. *(Here we go again!)*

What was *not new* at this reading summit can best be outlined
as:

1. A reinforcement of the artificial establishment of two reading
camps — “phonics” and “whole language;”
2. The attempt to end the “reading wars;”
3. An attempt to blame one or another institution/agency for
reasons why our children have reading difficulties;
4. The mistake that poor teaching and impoverished teacher
education, not power and politics, are at the base of reading
difficulties in our nation’s children;
5. An oversimplification, if not miss-statement that our fourth
graders are scoring poorly in reading; and
6. An obvious lack of teachers’ voices.

What was *not new* at the summit revisits some of the old prob-
lems plaguing the reading world. First, the “phonics” versus “whole
language” terminology bandied about at the summit keeps an artifi-
cial war waging. I must add, as an aside, that no reading educator nor
researcher in attendance spoke of “phonics” versus “whole lan-
guage.” However, the fact that so many outside the reading research
world used that phrase means it is a popular perception keeping alive
a war — a war with, unfortunately, real armies. My real concern in
this call to end the reading wars appears to be a call to end the debates
and close down the voices of alternative research. The second, and
unfortunate, point addresses the profession of choice to blame for
many of the reading difficulties. Teacher educators were clearly the
profession receiving blame. While the reading study’s *suggestions*
regarding teacher preparation should serve as a mandate to state leg-
islative bodies to support institutions of higher learning, at the summit
those suggestions became *criticisms* of teacher educators. Third, there
can be no mistaking what this summit clearly communicated, i.e., that
教学 methodologies, not power and politics, are the causes for our
reading difficulties. Power and politics must be factored in the blame
through the following forces: moneys not appropriated for literacy
support; basals purchased and mandated by states and school districts;
and state mandated curricula devoid of teachers’ voices. These fac-
tors leave out classroom teachers as decision makers in reading in-
struction as well as teacher educators. Last, the presence of classroom
teachers (elementary and high education) was sorely lacking; they
were conspicuously absent. They were outnumbered greatly and
gravely by state departments of education personnel and politicians of
one sort or another. Where was the collaboration? How can you call a summit calling for collaboration and have it attended mainly by state department of education personnel and attempt to blame teachers and teacher educators for reading difficulties?

The summit's intent "to dramatically improve child literacy in America," remains to be seen. I am afraid that the summit, like much of the curricula governing reading, will not involve the classroom teachers of literacy nor many of those who prepare classroom teachers. The responsibility shifts to teacher educators to make sure this happens. While the "landmark report of the National Research Council" as Secretary Riley labels it, offers cogent suggestions, imperative caveats, remedies, and timely concerns, they are issued to all stakeholders in young children's early reading initiatives — not just teachers and teacher educators. One did not leave the summit with that shared responsibility. Fortunately, much of the study may succeed where the summit failed. But the study will fail if it is accepted as a canon for teaching reading to young children. It is a way for some, not the way for all.

Karen F. Thomas
Co-Editor, Reading Horizons