

Praise for *Leaving Johnny Behind*

Leaving Johnny Behind: Overcoming Barriers to Literacy and Reclaiming At-Risk Readers is a gift to anyone who desires to understand why so many of our most vulnerable citizens—our children—struggle to learn to read and why we, as a country, have let them down.

—Dr. G. Reid Lyon, former branch chief, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute of Health, Child Development and Behavior Branch

Mr. Pedriana has written an important book.

Refusing to become embroiled in dichotomous debates over reading pedagogy, he takes the novel approach of drawing extensively from the best evidence available. As an experimentalist and a social scientist, I have been dismayed by claims among education researchers that the experimental method is not appropriate for research on educational programs when, in fact, the method is ideally suited for advancing general understanding of the effectiveness of educational interventions.

In this book, Mr. Pedriana recognizes the value of bringing diverse methodological approaches to bear on a research question, so long as the research is rigorous. The result is a magnificent book that advocates for teachers, good research, and—most

of all—student learning. I highly recommend this book for anyone concerned about why we in America don't do a better job educating our children and what we can do to improve.

—Dr. Jeff Lucas, Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies,
Department of Sociology, University of Maryland

Pedriana has exposed a raw nerve. He has taken the educational world to task for its willingness to ignore scientific principles and thus create tragic patterns of school failure that will haunt children throughout their lives. This book is a must read for teachers and those who must prepare them for the harsh realities of the classroom.

—Dr. Janie Hatton, former high school principal, National
Principal of the Year and Deputy Superintendent of Schools

In *Leaving Johnny Behind*, Mr. Pedriana confronts the issue of how low literacy and academic failure can provide a pathway to violent crime. Having spent my career working with inmates on death row and others facing life sentences, I certainly can attest to this relationship. Virtually all of my clients had early problems in school, problems whose roots are easily traced to an inability to read.

Pedriana provides a compelling narrative of a fictional Johnny, but a realistic portrayal nonetheless. In so doing, he stresses the need to reach Johnny at the earliest possible moment, and long before middle and high school when pathways to crime have already been established.

This book should be on every teacher's reading list and should be required reading for those preparing to join the teacher ranks.

—Dr. Cecile Guin, Director, Office of Social Service
Research and Development, Louisiana State University

LEAVING JOHNNY BEHIND

Overcoming Barriers to Literacy and
Reclaiming At-Risk Readers

Anthony Pedriana

Foreword by G. Reid Lyon, Ph.D.
Former Branch Chief, National Institute of
Child Health and Human Development



Roseville, MN

Leaving Johnny Behind:

Overcoming Barriers to Literacy and Reclaiming At-Risk Readers

© 2009 by Learning Dynamics Press, LLC

1881 Oxford St. N.

Roseville, MN 55113

<http://leavingjohnnybehind.com/>

Profits realized from the sale of this book will be donated to *Reach Out and Read*. *Reach Out and Read* is a national, nonprofit organization that promotes early literacy by providing books to low-income families and making reading a routine part of pediatric care. <http://www.reachoutandread.org>

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system—without written permission from the author, except for the inclusion of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Pedriana, Anthony.

Leaving Johnny behind : overcoming barriers to literacy and reclaiming at-risk readers / by Anthony Pedriana. — 1st ed. p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

LCCN 2009901788

ISBN-13: 978-0-9822005-4-4

ISBN-10: 0-9822005-4-4

1. Reading (Early childhood) 2. Reading—Remedial teaching. 3. Children with disabilities—Education. I. Title.

LB1139.5.R43P43 2009 372.4

QBI09-600005

ISBN 978-0-9822005-4-4

Editing services provided by Do-Write Editing
Yankton, S.D.

Cover and interior design by 1106 Design
Phoenix, Arizona

First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

*To my wife, Mary Jo,
without whose unending support
this book could not have been written.
I dedicate it to her, our children,
Gina and Scott, Nick and Teri,
and to our grandchildren,
Rosa and Sophia.*

Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Foreword.	xi
Message from the Author	1
Prologue	5
Chapter 1: A Failure to Communicate.	13
Chapter 2: Gayle Force	23
Chapter 3: Soporific Effluvium	35
Chapter 4: Preponderance of the Evidence	49
Chapter 5: Uniformity Unhinged	85
Chapter 6: The Weak Arm of the Law.	107
Chapter 7: So Shall We Reap.	127
Chapter 8: The Unkindest Cut of All	145
Chapter 9: The 3 Rs—Reform, Reform, Reform.	157
Chapter 10: Teaching to Mastery	171
Chapter 11: Through Johnny’s Eyes.	189
Chapter 12: Rescuing Johnny	205
Epilogue	229
Resources for Teachers and Parents	235
Glossary	241
References	245
Index.	259

Acknowledgements

Leaving Johnny Behind spilled out of me because of my commitment toward children's literacy, a passion for making readers of all children, especially among those who began the process with the odds stacked against them. That passion would not have existed were it not for the example of those professional men and woman that surrounded me throughout my career, people who demonstrated their love and dedication to children in countless ways, who never lost sight of the real reason they went to work every day. I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge their relentless efforts.

First of all, to the staff at 21st St. School in Milwaukee where I spent the majority of my career. These were indeed courageous people who were never intimidated by the challenge of marching each day into one of the most impoverished areas in the country and laying their collective souls on the line for those who needed them the most.

Thanks also to that core group of Direct Instruction principals in Milwaukee, dynamic individuals with patience and

fortitude and selfless resolve on behalf of children's reading advancement. Ours was a special bond and I thank them for all they taught me about leadership and what it means to remain steadfast in pursuit of a common goal.

To my son, Nicholas Pedriana, and his wife, Teri Fritsma, both of them writers, researchers, and doctors of sociology. Through our lively discussions, they eventually taught me how to distinguish among the various research platforms, and thereby how to identify the ambiguities that keep legitimate data from gaining acceptance in classrooms.

To my friend, Robert Buege, successful author and noted baseball historian who challenged me to do more than merely talk about a problem. Were it not for his advice, prodding, and encouragement, this book would probably never have gotten beyond the planning stages.

Thanks to my editor, Kathy Grow of DoWrite Editing, who went well beyond her stated role and provided me with the confidence to proceed and knowledge of the intricacies one must address to qualify as a legitimate author.

To Michele DeFilippo and Ronda Rawlins of 1106 Design who together set a standard of customer service that I have rarely seen equaled.

To my brother Tom, who lent his analysis and perspective on the early draft, valuable insight to say the least.

And perhaps more than anyone else, I owe a debt of gratitude to the parents, children, and grandchildren of the 21st St. School Community. Their lives are interwoven throughout my being and my life has been enriched for having had the chance to work among, together, and on behalf of them all.

Foreword

L*eaving Johnny Behind: Overcoming Barriers to Literacy and Reclaiming At-Risk Readers* is a gift to anyone who desires to understand why so many of our most vulnerable citizens—our children—struggle to learn to read and why we, as a country, have let them down.

With this book, Anthony Pedriana has given to the nation, and particularly the education community, a comprehensive examination of the barriers that prevent kids from becoming proficient readers. Many might be surprised to learn that some of the greatest barriers are constructed by the adults who are responsible for teaching them to read. He provides a clear road map for moving beyond the persistent ideological debates—better known as “the reading wars”—that have plagued the field of reading and have actually prevented many youngsters from learning to read proficiently. While he lays out the reasons for the great divide between reading educators over how to teach reading, he does not engage in the type of emotional diatribe

used by many to argue their points of view and the righteousness of their positions.

The contributions this book brings to the field of education are due, in part, to his focus on bringing reading educators together on those instructional principles that all agree are essential to literacy for all. Pedriana brings a tremendous amount of credibility to his task. He is a thirty-five-year veteran of the schools. Throughout that time, he kept reading level ability for all children at the top of his agenda. Like me, he came to discover, through his teaching, that some of the instructional practices he was using were simply not effective with many struggling readers.

These practices were based on the noble idea that students could learn to read “naturally” by being exposed to rich literature and opportunities to engage in free-flowing literacy interactions. Within this context, emerging readers became proficient by constructing their own knowledge about our reading system and did not require a systematic, “teacher-centered” approach to help them navigate the linguistic complexities of our English language. As he points out, many educators eschewed systematic and explicit instruction because of the belief that “drill and kill” methods would stifle a child’s love for reading. He also explains that it is hard to love something that you cannot do—a common-sense realization that many educators have still not achieved.

Like me, after seeing the frustration and fear in the eyes of many students when asked to read, he came to the conclusion that there had to be a better way to teach students to become proficient readers. And, like me, he takes responsibility for letting many kids down and he feels some guilt about that.

This book is a reflection of Pedriana’s journey into the world of evidence-based reading instruction, the conditions under which this instruction is most effective, and for which kids.

You will note, however, that the new insights he gained are not used to bludgeon educators with different perspectives. Rather, he explains—in very thoughtful prose—that there are situations where multiple perspectives will serve the child.

What you will find as you read this book is that Pedriana is a true champion for kids who are struggling to learn the most important set of skills that will enable them to flourish in school and in life. He makes it clear that our children are our nation's most important and cherished gift. They represent the legacy of our efforts to provide a safe and nurturing world for them. They also embody our hopes and dreams for the future.

Yet it became abundantly clear to him that, in addition to the struggling readers in his classrooms, millions of other children also entered preschool and kindergarten without the language and literacy skills needed to succeed in school and in life. And, with this book, Pedriana teaches us how we can improve this state of affairs.

No doubt I am biased in my appreciation for Tony's compelling and riveting story. I have spent over thirty years trying to answer three simple questions:

1. How do children learn to read?
2. Why do so many kids have difficulties learning to read?
3. How can we best help them become proficient readers?

My involvement in the research to address these three questions began in 1978 and took place at Northwestern University, the University of Vermont, and finally, the National Institutes of Health. The research was conducted by over 400 developmental

scientists from multiple disciplines studying well over 40,000 children at forty-four sites nationally and internationally. It took over twenty years to even come close to answering the questions. And the answers that were found came to serve as the scientific building blocks for what is now termed “scientifically-based reading instruction.”

But much of what we found simply validated Pedriana’s observations over his career as a teacher, principal, and mentor to principals. For example, we found that the majority of the youngsters who have reading difficulties have something in common; they are poor. And, as Pedriana points out, they are victims of discrimination. Yet, despite over forty years of expensive federal programs to bolster pre-reading and language abilities of poor children during the preschool years and every instructional fad you can imagine that descended on our public schools, the literacy gap between children of advantage and children of disadvantage has not changed.

Does it have to be this way? NO! We have ample evidence that early identification and evidence-based prevention programs can virtually wipe out this gap, if implemented appropriately.

Unfortunately, we found that the gap widens and accelerates with each grade. Eighty-eight percent of youngsters who read poorly at the end of the first grade read poorly at the end of the fourth grade. Students who have not caught up by nine years of age carry their limited reading skills into adulthood. Those students who have not learned to read by the ninth grade typically drop out of school at significantly higher rates than their classmates who read proficiently.

Reading failure is invasive and cumulative. Without proficient reading skills, many of these kids are doomed to lifelong hardship with little potential for occupational, economic, and

social advancement. They are more likely to become teen parents, end up in prison, and suffer from persistent health problems. Without aggressive and innovative approaches to prevent reading failure, a bleak future awaits many of these children. This is an American tragedy.

As Pedriana points out, this is why effective, scientifically-based instruction is so darned important. Unlike their more advantaged age-mates, many kids from low-income homes have never been read to while sitting on their parents' laps and have not heard stories read at bedtime. It could be that their parents do not read themselves. It could be that paying for food has a higher priority than paying for books. Whatever the reason, low income typically means a limited number of (or no) books in the home, not to mention the absence of magnetic letters, drawing paper, newspapers, and other reading-related materials. It is very difficult for children to develop emergent literacy skills when they do not have access to these resources. We have no choice—it is up to the teachers to pick up the slack.

Poor children hear fewer words at home and have limited conversations with adults. Many have learned only half the words they must know when they enter kindergarten and, more often than not, they will not know the letters of the alphabet or how to follow words from left to right across the printed page. By the ninth grade, many have the vocabulary of a third-grade student. Without these essential early reading and language abilities, most will carry the baggage of illiteracy into their adult years, increasing the chances that their own kids won't learn to read either. Again, we have no choice—teachers have to pick up the slack.

Leaving Johnny Behind: Overcoming Barriers to Literacy and Reclaiming At-Risk Readers lets us know clearly that it does not have to be this way. While we may not be able to address all

the problems caused by poverty, the good news is that we can overcome illiteracy. Research at the National Institutes of Health and elsewhere indicates that the number of children who suffer from reading failure, and thus failure in school, can be reduced significantly *if* they begin kindergarten and first grade with the essential language and reading-readiness abilities, followed by effective reading instruction after school entry. The National Research Council estimated that if children receive proper exposure and systematic opportunities to develop foundational language, reading, and emergent writing skills during early childhood as few as five percent may experience serious reading difficulty. Likewise, our research found that evidence-based interventions with older struggling readers in inner city schools could reduce reading difficulties to less than ten percent.

Pedriana has summarized much of this research in very clear language and brings it to life by showing how scientific findings can inform both policy and instructional practices. He also asks a question that many of us have posed *ad nauseum*: Why is it that many educators simply won't use research evidence to guide their practices? To put a finer point on it, if research is so critical to continually improving practice in other fields relevant to the health and welfare of children, then why do some of those on the front lines of education, such as teachers and administrators, frequently view research in education as trivial or irrelevant? And even when a scientific breakthrough has occurred (e.g., the discovery that phonemic awareness is essential to reading development), what is it about the field of education that makes translating, disseminating, and implementing the findings so difficult?

We now have some answers to these questions and I think these answers are essential if we are to overcome the barriers to

implementing research findings. One reason (that should come as no surprise to anyone in the field of education) is that a decidedly anti-scientific spirit has had a pervasive influence on the perceived value of research. The most current cycle of education's reluctance to use scientific evidence stems, as Pedriana points out, from the philosophy of postmodernism, which, in its most dramatic form, states that truth is relative, in the eye of the beholder, and framed only by one's own experience and culture.

The most hard-line version of postmodernism claims that general cause-effect principles do not exist in the world. Thus, scientific methods which seek to identify them are not useful for education decision-making and practice. Indeed, over the past two decades, data that could dispel some wacky assertions about student learning and achievement that arose from philosophical, ideological, and political beliefs were often not accumulated or disseminated. As a result, untested claims have often trumped scientific facts. It is fascinating that a substantial number of educators and non-educators who see the value of scientific research in fields such as health care and industry fail to see the contributions it can make to education.

To be sure, university faculty and researchers should take a lot of responsibility for the attitudes many educators have about "research" and their teaching. Many schools of education do not typically prepare future teachers to value the use of research to inform their instructional practices or provide them with the knowledge and skills to keep abreast of the scientific literature in their field. Debra Viadero, reporting for *Education Week* in 2003, wrote, "Even if teachers have the fortitude to plow through academic journals, chances are their professional training did not include coursework in how to distinguish good research from bad

So, we find ourselves in this situation: less than one-third of the instructional practices used by teachers are based on scientific research findings. Even when evidence-based practices are used, teachers cannot clearly explain why they have used them. When asked, many teachers report that educational research is trivial and irrelevant to their teaching, is too theoretical and complex, and communicated in an incomprehensible manner. School principals and school administrators trained at the doctoral level are equally reluctant to use research to guide their leadership efforts and infuse research-based practices in their districts and schools.

Recently, Arthur Levine, past president of Teacher's College at Columbia University, reported that only fifty-six percent of principals, for example, found that the research courses they took in their degree programs were valuable to their jobs. A major reason cited was that the courses were too abstract—emphasizing mechanistic aspects of research designs and methods without clear examples of how research can be applied to inform practice in schools and classrooms. In short, the courses emphasized form over function without integrating the two. On the line in the classrooms, many teachers find themselves attempting to implement the latest highly-touted instructional “magic bullet” only to learn, after it fails, that the research upon which it was based was seriously flawed.

Even more frustrating for educational consumers is that the majority of such programs, methods, and educational products today claim to be “research-based” despite having little or no scientifically-sound evidence of effectiveness. Until educational practitioners are properly trained to ensure that they can discriminate between rigorous and valid research and research that

was poorly designed, frustration will increase and the market for even the best research will continue to decrease.

What is so unique about this book is that Pedriana has addressed all these thorny issues, shown how they keep us from teaching kids to read, and then posed several questions asked from the perspective of a veteran educator. Tony is clearly a scientist-practitioner. He has taken us on a fascinating journey in this book that blazes new territory in our understanding of why Johnny has been left behind—and, more importantly, what we can do about it. He has provided us with a superb continuation to the field and to the education of our most cherished gift—our kids.

—Reid Lyon, Ph.D.
Distinguished Professor of
Education Policy and Leadership
Southern Methodist University, Dallas
Distinguished Scientist
School of Brain and Behavior Sciences
University of Texas, Dallas

Message from the Author

Building more and better readers was a matter that confounded me throughout my career. It just didn't seem right that so many of our kids failed to meet proficiency requirements and I always suspected there had to be a better way to meet their needs. Finding those ways was supposed to be the purview of academicians whose job it was to conduct empirical investigations and pass along their findings to those of us in the so-called trenches. I saw it as being akin to how medical research guided medical practice. But it doesn't seem to work that way in education and, specifically, it doesn't appear that reading science has much influence on how reading is generally taught.

None of this is meant to absolve me of anything. I always had strong opinions about what worked best for kids and I could be as sanctimonious and intractable in defense of those opinions as anyone. If there was indeed a better way and I could not find it in all my thirty-five years in the field, then that said as much about me as anyone else and I must be as accountable as the next

person. And, if I find that my efforts were at times misguided and ill-advised, that certainly will not make my twilight years any easier.

All I know is, even from the comfort of my retirement perch, the matter continues to haunt me, but I refuse to go to my grave rationalizing that I worked hard and did my best. It wasn't about working hard and doing my best—it was about making kids read. I recall the superintendent telling us at one of our monthly meetings, "It's good that you all work hard. But you must also work smart. If you do that, you may not need to work quite so hard." That caused a few nervous twitters among some, myself included. I knew that I worked hard, but that did not distinguish me in any way. We all worked hard. Whether I worked smart was another matter.

And so, while I wrote this narrative from the perspective of one with a vision concerning children's literacy attainment, I also wrote it as a way to confront the reality of my own performance, a chance, perhaps, to exorcise my demons, so to speak. You can thus call it what you want—a retrospective, a reflection, a personal assessment—whatever you choose. But the fact of the matter is, my advanced age has not served to diminish my ego or make it any less vulnerable.

So I decided that, if I failed to provide all that was available during my working years, perhaps I could extract some measure of atonement by taking some time to fill in the gaps and relate what I learned to others with a similar mission. In that regard, this is a search for truth, with the most amazing truth being the fact that I somehow had to search for it. I am at once outraged to have learned that those whose role it was to call it to my attention failed to do so and embarrassed to have to admit

Message from the Author

that I was not smart enough to find it on my own. It's like an experienced physician asking, "You mean you can immunize a kid by actually *giving him the disease?*"

My first impulse was to make this book all about the "reading wars." My narrative would be a continuation of that battle, with me riding in like the cavalry to rescue every kid from a lifetime of illiteracy. But, after a time, I began to realize just how misguided such an approach would be. Most wars are caused by raw emotionalism in righteously indignant people prepared to defend their versions of truth and impose them on others, no matter what the cost. It is easy to see the ramifications of that mind-set in the literal world when innocent people die and countless others are mutilated because adults are incapable of resolving their differences in the same way they expect children to mediate their playground scraps.

Fortunately, the exhortations of a professor of sociology (who happens to be my son) led me to conclude that highlighting the conflict surrounding the reading debates would constitute a failure of mission. Despite my initial anger, I knew, in the end, he was right in asserting that pursuing the war analogy would merely add to a process that has already left far too many children as collateral damage. If I were truly looking to advance the cause of children's literacy, then I would be well-advised to find areas upon which all could agree as opposed to ripping the scabs off old wounds.

This book, is therefore, my attempt to discover and promote a message around which reading practitioners can unite and, in so doing, serve children better than we have in the past. I know my effort may amount to little more than a quixotic lunging at windmills. Please indulge my trying to salvage a bit more from

my thirty-five years in the schools and, perhaps, offer something more than what I always did so as to effect something more than what I always got. It may well fall on deaf ears, but at least I will have tried. Right now, that's all I can hope to achieve.

Prologue
Simulated courtroom drama, circa 2000

Prosecutor: *What, sir, is your name and occupation?*

Defendant: *My name is Anthony Pedriana and I am an elementary school principal.*

Prosecutor: *Mr. Pedriana, was it not your responsibility to assure that the students in your school received appropriate reading instruction?*

Defendant: *Yes Sir, it certainly was.*

Prosecutor: *In that regard—that is, in teaching children to read—is it not true that you chose to use some rather unconventional strategies?*

Defendant: *Yes, I suppose some might have considered them unconventional.*

Prosecutor: *And what were these so-called unconventional methods?*

Defendant: *Well, we used something called the alphabetic principle. You know, the kind of thing where kids are taught the relationship between letters and sounds.*

Prosecutor: *I see. And at what age would you begin teaching children this alphabetic stuff?*

Defendant: *As soon as possible. Five years old—earlier if we thought they were ready.*

Prosecutor: *Would you characterize the manner in which you taught alphabets as being somewhat unconventional also?*

Defendant: *Well, perhaps. Our methods were very directed and systematized. Some might consider that unusual.*

Prosecutor: *By directed and systematized, don't you mean drill-based?*

Defendant: *Yes, it did involve some drill. We practiced until we were sure the students had mastered each skill.*

Prosecutor: *Are you aware, Sir, that many in your profession characterize such practices as developmentally inappropriate for children that age?*

Defendant: *I've heard that school of thought, yes.*

Prosecutor: *And despite the generally accepted view in your profession that such tactics were developmentally*

Prologue

inappropriate, did you nevertheless continue to use these same procedures?

Defendant: *Yes, I continued to apply these practices in my school until I retired.*

Prosecutor: *Do I hear you right, Sir, when you admit in front of this court, that you subjected children at the young and impressionable age of five years old to endless and mindless drill-based tactics?*

Defendant: *Well, no, I wouldn't call them endless and mindless. In fact . . .*

Prosecutor: *Your Honor, the prosecution rests.*

Many may view the preceding as a contemptuous way to portray the angst that has characterized early reading instruction for so long. However, I am comfortable in asserting that this attempt at pseudo drama reflects the defensive position in which I found myself when I implemented a reading program that applied direct and systematic instruction in the alphabetic principle to children at the earliest of levels.

I realize that, by merely pointing this out, I run the risk of losing my audience, those of you who lay your collective souls on the line each and every day on behalf of children as well as others aspiring to do the same. I run that risk because it is hard to talk about *anything* related to reading pedagogy without alienating one faction or another. The battles have been characterized in different ways but they have changed little over the years. It's back-to-basics vs. progressivism, phonics vs. whole-language,

code-based vs. meaning-based, liberal vs. conservative, research-based vs. non-research-based, and on and on.

So, as precarious as it is to roil those waters once again, I nevertheless must try. I must try because what I have found is that the whole debate is essentially a fraud. And the notion that we must draw lines in the sand over these issues while children fail to master essential literacy skills is a betrayal of our high-minded expressions of *children first*.

And so I implore you, the reader, not to abandon this narrative in its early stages, but to at least listen to the positions I have taken on these crucial matters and join me on the path that led me to discover them:

1. I am in favor of practices that have withstood the introspective lens of scientific inquiry. (*Now wait . . . hold on . . . keep reading.*)
2. Therefore, I am in favor of alphabetic training at early levels. (*I know this one isn't helping. But hold on for 3 and 4. It will get better, I promise.*)
3. I am in favor of alphabetic training at early levels only when such instruction enhances a child's ability to construct meaning from print. (*Okay, just one more.*)
4. Therefore, I am not opposed to the various forms of constructivism such as whole-language, because there can be no doubt that deriving meaning from print is central to their purpose as well.

Even those of you who have continued to read are likely to view those statements with skepticism, interpreting them as nothing more than straddling the fence and trying to have it both ways. You would be right. You would be right because

Prologue

mounds of empirical evidence state in unequivocal terms that *not only can we have it both ways, but we should have it both ways*. What the data say, over and over again, is that mastery of the alphabetic code and the ability to construct meaning from an integrated whole are companion skills. When properly applied, they advance one another's cause and, thereby, form a symbiotic relationship that lends dynamism and power to our efforts. Embracing one of those to the degree that it leads to the exclusion of the other represents a wholesale abandonment of Johnny and all his cohorts.

This is the unifying message that has resonated from the science of reading over the past four decades. However, despite the fact that science essentially builds a bridge between what have been competing pedagogies, some would have us believe otherwise. They would view my decision to incorporate direct and systematic code-based practices into our daily reading activities as an abandonment of principle. They would see it as a schismatic departure from acceptable practice, one that was sure to compromise children's motivation, rob them of their self-esteem, and replace the joy and wonder of learning to read with a daily regimen of dull and dispiriting drills.

My attempt to carry on in such an environment uncovered just how dissonant and fragmented were the guidelines used to foster reading skills development and the inadvertent and counterintuitive role this disharmony played in keeping children from attaining essential literacy skills. I found the matter so disheartening that I have spent a good share of my retirement trying to determine what could have led to such a sad state of affairs and why those bent on serving children have found so little unanimity on their behalf. The following narrative thus describes my personal journey to attempt to resolve that dichotomy.

Separate and Unequal

I learned early on that poor teaching and/or flawed methodologies can compromise nearly any child's advancement toward literacy, but that most are in a position to overcome such obstacles. Others, however, are far less fortunate. As is the case in so many other domains, it is the poor and disenfranchised who suffer disproportionately from adult failures. And one of the primary causes of this failure stems from the fact that few have the courage to state the obvious for fear of being seen as insensitive, misguided, and naïve. Regardless of how I might be perceived for saying so, poor kids are more likely to suffer trauma from the time they are conceived and throughout their lives. They have less access to resources and are less likely to inherit the kind of family stability that will enhance their chances for success.

I realize this is a societal problem, the solution of which has evaded humankind throughout its existence. But to invoke that stance is perhaps to suggest that some children are just destined to be left behind. I don't believe that and I would venture to guess that anyone who has read to this point doesn't believe it either. We all realize it is our job to confront such inequities and do our best to mitigate them. My investigation of how we might best do that has led me to discover that, when it comes to literacy training, there are some truths out there that we have failed to recognize and others we have adamantly refused to consider even when they were brought to our attention. This book is, therefore, written on behalf of the victims of those failures, those who, through no faults of their own, find themselves at risk of failing to achieve the most fundamental and essential tool for life success.

Prologue

The following are brief summaries of the chapters to follow:

Chapter 1: A Failure to Communicate. Sets out some introductory evidence that research-based techniques for teaching reading are not being used and speculates on the causes for this condition.

Chapter 2: Gayle Force. Describes an experience late in my career that caused me to discover an alternative approach to reading instruction and to modify my beliefs about early reading methodology.

Chapter 3: Soporific Effluviium. Provides some historical background in order to better understand the conflicts that have kept the matter of early reading in a constant state of disequilibrium and, perhaps, explain their influence on the current state of affairs.

Chapter 4: Preponderance of the Evidence. Reviews the findings of nine major research syntheses on the subject of early reading.

Chapter 5: Uniformity Unhinged. Describes the educational community's response to the data, and draws some distinctions between research platforms.

Chapter 6: The Weak Arm of the Law. Describes events that led to Congress's enactment of the No Child Left Behind legislation and its impact on educational practice throughout the country.

Chapter 7: So Shall We Reap. Examines the impact of reading failure on individuals and society.

Chapter 8: The Unkindest Cut of All. Describes the untenable position we assign to teachers when we deny them training based on reading science.

Chapter 9: The 3 Rs—Reform, Reform, Reform. Takes a critical look at the impact of school reform measures.

Chapter 10: Teaching to Mastery. Depicts the kind of direct and systematic reading instruction that adheres strictly to the recommendations of the data.

Chapter 11: Through Johnny's Eyes. Chronicles the life of a student left behind in the quest for literacy attainment.

Chapter 12: Rescuing Johnny. A challenge to the educational community to bring about true reform through strict adherence to the scientific message.

1

A Failure to Communicate

“We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

—WALT KELLY, *POGO*

Early literacy is among the most powerful predictors of school success, gainful employment, and societal adjustment. For that reason, I long ago determined that the sincerest and most powerful expression of child advocacy was insisting on reading-level proficiency for all. Reading ability gives to youngsters an eternal source of joy, hope, and esteem and represents the single most essential tool that will allow them to lead well-adjusted and productive lives. And, because it is so vital, those of us in the schools needed to know how best to go about accomplishing it. For that, I had always followed in the truest of liberal traditions.

Acceptable practices were those that operated from what came to be known as a constructivist dynamic, one that called for individuals to construct meaning based on their prior knowledge and experience instead of regurgitating some kind of prepackaged skill base or someone else’s version of the right

answers. In that regard, curriculum was to be child-centered, respecting each youngster's individual path to literacy. Repetitive measures of any kind were antithetical to this approach, developmentally inappropriate at early levels, and, therefore, to be avoided at all cost.

I didn't just stumble onto these notions. These were the ideals that undergirded all my training as an undergraduate and graduate student and throughout most of my career as a teacher and administrator. It was hard to argue against the idea that such practices had served the needs of the majority.

Still I knew that too many had gotten past us, had failed to advance to appropriate levels. We tried to do better by those kids, modifying our strategies, providing individual and small-group instruction, integrating curriculum, building background knowledge, expending untold amounts of energy to address specific needs. We were encouraged to innovate and/or do whatever we felt could work, as long as we continued to operate within the parameters of "child-centrism."

The freedom this afforded allowed us to trust in ourselves. We always had hope for those who struggled, we always exuded optimism that we could meet their needs, and we always had faith in the principles that reflected our training. What we didn't have was any measure of specificity, any assurance that if we employed a particular strategy and practiced it faithfully day in and day out, then achievement would be the natural by-product of our work. Perhaps there is no such magical formula, but, even if none existed, I was sure we could do better than we had in the past. You will have to excuse me if I choose to take the oft-heard mantra, "All children can learn," in a literal sense and not merely as a matter of political correctness.

A New Look at an Old Paradigm

We've all heard the old adage telling us that, "If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got." We were not getting nearly enough and children were paying the price. It was time to look at the situation from a radically different perspective. We certainly wanted to provide instruction that was child-centered, but what was child-centric about a condition where often one-third to one-half of a class was reading below level? Perhaps my conception of child-centrism was seriously flawed or omitted some important elements.

This bit of soul-searching began when I learned that empirical evidence had shown support for a reading method that ran contrary to the conventional wisdom. The approach was based on the premise that early literacy instruction required direct, intensive, and systematic use of the alphabetic principle—a measure that contradicted nearly all we had been taught. How, I wondered, could there be such a contradiction between what science recommended and what normally occurred in classrooms?

A Failure to Communicate

It wasn't until my career had ended that I had the opportunity to investigate this disconnect and its effects on children's literacy. The results of that personal journey are now between the covers of this book, and it has indeed been a fascinating one.

First, I got a glimpse into the academic turf battles that have played themselves out in this country for nearly a 150 years. I found the debates often went beyond the parameters of polite discourse and, all too often, were more about adults than kids.

Second, I discovered that I was largely oblivious to a knowledge base that spoke to the matter of early reading in clear,

resonant, and definitive terms. It was a unifying message that combined the meaning-based dynamic of constructivism and the phonics-based model that stressed the relationship between sound and symbol. Normally these two constructs were viewed as oppositional forces, but my analysis of the research revealed that they were companion skills that enhanced rather than undermined one another.

It was perplexing to think that educators could not find a way to coalesce around such a unifying message and use it to drive education policy at the national, state, and district levels. But that has indeed been the case because a wide gap continues to exist between what the research recommends and the practices that dominate early reading instruction. How could we claim to put children first when the matter of early literacy training was relegated to little more than a shot in the dark, a virtual crapshoot on behalf of those who needed us the most? As the jailer so eloquently put it to Paul Newman's title character in *Cool Hand Luke*, "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

Finding True North

What is the cause of this communications breakdown? My foray into the reading debates caused me to conclude that, if we must look to blame anyone, it should be those who operate from extremist positions and who choose to remain intractable in the face of overwhelming evidence. Their writings are often so emotion-driven that they come off as diatribes, expressions of an ideology that will not tolerate one iota of dissent. And yet, they continue to wield enormous power and influence over the manner in which reading is taught throughout the English-speaking world.

How can we avoid such pitfalls? How do we focus with laser-like intensity on the goal of reaching kids we have failed for so long? It baffled me as to why we would choose to act contrary to the manner in which humankind has always addressed its most significant challenges—by giving children the benefit of instruction revealed through rigorous science. The raw power of scientific inquiry has always been the ultimate revealer of truth. It has no political agendas, no faith-based assumptions, and no cultural sensibilities. Its ability to ignore all such extraneous and dissonant factors has allowed us to eradicate disease, design buildings that can withstand earthquakes, and isolate the fastest and best ways to regenerate forests. In my mind, to base reading practice on anything else was to mock the very notion of child-centrism.

Remarkably, however, there are some who have chosen to demonize the science that has, and continues to, run counter to what they would recommend. I will attempt to clarify issues related to the science of reading in succeeding chapters, but for now, it is important to make the reader aware of how successful a few have been at keeping the research message out of classrooms and thus, causing us to betray our promise to filter our every decision based on what works best for kids. To make that point, I refer to a report to Congress by Duane Alexander, then the Director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.¹

Alexander noted the scientific progress sponsored by his agency in dealing with three critical public health issues for children: sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), spina bifida,

¹ Fletcher & Lyon, “Reading: A Research-Based Approach,” in *What’s Gone Wrong in America’s Classrooms*, 50.

and reading failure. When science discovered the relationship between SIDS and babies' sleep positions, the medical community wasted no time in getting the information out to parents who immediately began altering the manner in which they placed their infants in their cribs. A second area of progress was the science that identified the role of folic acid metabolism in causing spina bifida and other neo- and post-natal birth defects. The response there was to create legislation requiring that all bread be fortified with Vitamin B.

Not surprisingly, after these actions, investigators noted an immediate reduction in both SIDS and spina bifida.

But the third area of progress mentioned by Alexander involved the knowledge gained about reading and reading failure. The story there was quite different, as evidenced by the testimony to Congress of Benita Blachman, a well-known reading researcher:

The good news is that there have been scientific breakthroughs in our knowledge about the development of literacy. We know a great deal about how to address reading problems even before they begin. The tragedy is that we are not exploiting what is known about reducing the incidence of reading failure. Specifically, the instruction currently being provided to our children does not reflect what we know from the research. Direct, systematic instruction about the alphabetic code is not routinely being provided in kindergarten and first grade despite the fact that, given what we know at the moment, this

might be the most powerful weapon in the fight against illiteracy.²

All this would be much easier to understand if literacy rates were on the rise and we weren't continuing to see ever-widening achievement gaps that disproportionately affect poor and minority populations. In light of that, it is hard to refrain from questioning the motives of a few. Is it really about teaching kids to read or might it reflect some other agenda? Maybe there was a career to validate or an ax to grind. Perhaps it was nothing more than professional self-absorption run amok or blind loyalty to a creed that had somehow managed to interfere with one's true purpose—"true north," as Stephen Covey would call it.³

Nevertheless, many still continue to engage in ideological cherry picking and, in so doing, demonstrate hypocrisy in its purest form. These tactics keep the true message of science from reaching those on the front lines and result in an ever-changing interfusion of the latest innovations, modifications, and gimmicks. Those who choose to pursue "research-based" practices are condemned for having done so, thus confirming our suspicion that a lot of what happens in classrooms is not based on research. When one ponders the needs of a child who has no choice but to rely on adults to do the right thing, one can only utter in bewilderment, "Say it ain't so."

² Fletcher & Lyon, "Reading: A Research-Based Approach," in *What's Gone Wrong in America's Classrooms*, 50.

³ Covey, Merrill, and Merrill, *First Things First*, 51.

A Call for Unity

In any event, I am not so naïve as to think I can change the opinions of those who would attempt to stifle or obfuscate what science has to say about early reading or those who are unwilling even to consider that there truly is a middle ground that can work for all of us. I will not even attempt to do so.

But I can appeal to the vast majority of educators who have never lost sight of their mission. These are dedicated individuals open to anything that will assist them in making readers of each and every child who comes under their tutelage, regardless of the challenge any one of them might pose. And most, I suspect, would be only too happy to avail themselves of an opportunity to get the kind of training that best reflects the research message, if only some experts would dismount from their pedagogical high horses and make it available to them.

There are, however, powerful forces that stand in the way. The very term “research-based” is politically charged because its ubiquitous support for code-based measures causes many to associate it with religious zealotry and/or arch-conservatism, part of a right-wing agenda that challenges progressive thought. I do not wish to engage in that argument. But, let’s just assume for a second that it were true, and that some might have ulterior motives for pushing code-based practices. Are we to disregard the scientific message on that basis alone? Are we to assume that political opposites must always be at cross-purposes with one another? Should we ignore decades of empirical evidence simply because those we dislike embrace it so voraciously?

I just have a hard time understanding how that works to any child’s advantage. The truth of the matter is, accepting the research message and giving it adequate expression in classrooms need not be perceived as either a validation of conservative values

Chapter 1: A Failure to Communicate

or a subversion of progressive thought. Much to the contrary, it represents an opportunity we seldom experience, one that has the potential to transcend ideology and bring synergy to our efforts to make proficient readers of all our children. Imagine that, conservatives and liberals converging in pursuit of literacy for all. It would be a contradiction in terms if those of us who deem ourselves true progressives squandered such a chance.