Shanahan on Literacy

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Editor's Note: *We are honored to reprint with permission a revised version of Dr. Tim Shanahan's post from his popular* ShanahanonLiteracy.com *website. We think readers will find it thought provoking and informative.*

Is Emily Hanford Right?

Teacher Question

Our school district is all abuzz about *Sold a Story*, a documentary about reading instruction and the response it is getting from some reading experts. We've been surprised that you haven't written about this. We're sure you have an opinion. Would you be willing to share it?

Shanahan's Response

I admire Emily Hanford and her work. I've been interviewed several times by her over the years. She always has treated me respectfully. She asks probing questions and relies on relevant research for the most part. In my experience, her quotes are accurate and fitting.

That doesn't mean I necessarily agree with all her views or even how she frames some of her arguments. Nevertheless, in my opinion, she usually gets things right, and I'm sympathetic with most of her conclusions since I believe they're more in tune with what research reveals about reading instruction than the positions of her supposedly expert critics.

The major thrust of her work (not just the documentaries you note, but also earlier productions) has been that readers must translate print (orthography) into pronunciation (phonology) and that explicit teaching of phonics helps kids learn to do this. She also emphasizes that many schools are not providing such instruction and that many teachers aren't prepared to teach it. Finally, she's revealed that the currently most popular commercial reading programs ignore or minimize phonics instruction and teach approaches to word reading that science has rejected (like 3-cueing, in which students are taught to read words by looking at the pictures or guessing from context).

Those positions are sound; well supported by lots of high-quality research. My disagreements with Ms. Hanford's work are more around the edges. I think she puts too much emphasis on the motivations of those who've advanced theories that don't stand the test of evidence. They shouldn't do that. I doubt that they did it just for the money, and whether they did is inconsequential. All that matters is how should we be teaching reading. Also, her reports tend to imply greater consequences of the problems identified than is prudent. She implies that if we taught phonics and dropped 3-cueing (two ideas I agree with), we would do away with low literacy. Neither experience nor the effect sizes of phonics studies suggest that the impact would be that substantial. I accept that enhancing the teaching of foundational skills in the primary grades will probably only improve 4th-grade reading achievement marginally, but that would be a good start and one I hope everyone can embrace.

The counterarguments to Ms. Hanford's reporting strike me as more troubling. I think they do more to confuse the issues than to enlighten. They often seem to have no purpose beyond attempting to discourage the teaching of phonics (a peculiar slant given that such instruction has long been required by all 50 U.S. states).

I have neither the space nor patience to reply to all the criticism, but here are my thoughts on some of the more prominent ones.

Challenges to the Source Rather than the Content

Since the early Greek philosophers, *ad hominem* arguments—as opposed to *ad verbum* ones—have been characterized as illogical, fallacious, and just bad form. Any student enrolled in Philosophy 101 learns that sound reasoning eschews attacks on the person rather than the person's claims.

Accordingly, I reject the *ad hominem* judgments of some of my colleagues.

The idea that reporters can't report on education unless they've taught school or possess a PhD in education strikes me as loony. It is akin to the idea that Woodward and Bernstein couldn't cover Watergate since they'd never been elected President.

The accuracy of Ms. Hanford's reports is legitimately open to challenge, but rejections of accurate reporting because the source isn't a professional educator is fallacious.

I'm flabbergasted that those who reject Ms. Hanford's reporting because she is a reporter aren't similarly up in arms about commercial reading programs created by folks with little or no expertise or knowledge of reading instruction. The latter would seem to be more problematic since the likelihood of it harming children would be so much higher.

As for myself, I try to avoid *ad hominem* judgments altogether, though I certainly recognize the appeal (many of those critics have little expertise in these issues—for example, many in their research and teaching are focused on high school education and aren't particularly conversant in issues of beginning reading instruction). Nevertheless, the issue shouldn't be who the sources are but whether the reports are accurate.

Reading Requires More than Phonics

Most critics have dismissed Ms. Hanford's reporting because of its intensive focus on phonics instruction and decoding. Their criticisms are either that she doesn't provide a definition of reading (so she must not understand what reading entails) or that she is neglecting potentially valuable instruction in other skills and abilities.

I understand why one would want to ensure that children receive comprehensive reading instruction—I've argued for comprehensiveness for decades. Teaching children all the skills that research has identified as beneficial to learning seems like the most likely to be successful approach one could take.

However, journalism is different than teaching. What's requisite for a curriculum, state standards, core reading programs, teacher education, or daily classroom instruction has little to do with what one must include in a journalistic report.

The same can be said about research studies. If I conduct a study on the teaching of reading comprehension, editors don't berate me with complaints that my study failed to consider the best way to teach children to deal with the schwa sound.

Imagine that a medical reporter discovers that doctors and nurses at the local hospital are not following sound sanitary protocols. She documents the problem, interviews medical personnel and patients, and examines local health records and research studies that have addressed the implications of such lapses.

Would you really be convinced that the reporter must be wrong because there is more to medicine than hand washing and instrument sterilization?

Perhaps the hospital administrator's response would be something like, "Ms. Hanford doesn't understand all the necessary components that go into sound health care. You might have noticed that she didn't define

sound health care in her documentaries, nor did she even mention the importance of tasty foods in the Commissary or the proper procurement practices when it comes to essential materials that must be kept on hand (an important part of health care to which I have personally devoted my career)."

We'd all laugh the dude out of the room because we still want the doctors to wash their hands.

My point is simply this: reporting, unlike reading instruction, doesn't have to address everything to be sound and of value.

The reportorial identification of negligence or corruption should never be interpreted as being more than just that. If a reporter finds out that a public official is embezzling, that neither means that all public officials are crooks nor that the one so identified is the only fly in the ointment.

My sense is that neither Hanford nor the many reporters following up on her stories in their own locales are having any trouble finding schools that omit or minimize phonics, or teachers who claim they weren't prepared to teach it.

This should not be terribly surprising to anyone in the field given that *Education Week* surveys have revealed some commercial reading programs that minimize phonics instruction or that omit it altogether are widely used in U.S. classrooms. Likewise, academic studies have demonstrated important gaps in coverage of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary/morphology, oral reading fluency, and reading comprehension in teacher education programs.

Even if your local school district is already doing a crackerjack job with phonics, that doesn't mean that the other 67,000 U.S. schools are on point with decoding. Such reporting may increase the scrutiny your teaching is subjected to, but if you're really addressing phonics, then that shouldn't be a problem.

Hanford's reports do not provide a comprehensive examination of all aspects of a reading program. I don't think we should expect them to do so, and I don't accept that her identification of this problem prevents anyone from teaching other essential aspects of reading.

"We were going to improve our reading comprehension instruction, but that damn Emily Hanford won't allow us to do that!" Yeah, that's the problem.

Comprehensiveness of coverage is a responsibility of educational standards writers, curriculum designers, professors, boards of education, school administrators, and teachers. Not journalists. They are vigilant in trying to identify our shortcomings. They are not required to find all of them.

A fascinating aside: Many critics have written things like, "Of course, phonics is essential" or "Everyone agrees that phonics is an important part of reading instruction." Those admissions usually precede admonitions that this reporting goes too far in advocating for phonics.

To me, that raises a question: If everyone knows that phonics is so important, how could an especially popular commercial reading program omit it for nearly 20 years without any remark from these vigilant reading educators? They blame reporters for not being comprehensive in their conceptions of reading instruction but then let themselves off the hook for being even more woefully inattentive.

There Are Many Ways to Teach Reading

While many of the critics have been willing to concede the value of explicit decoding instruction, others seem to defend its neglect. Their claim is that this reporting is off-base since there are "many ways to teach reading." In other words, in their opinion, teaching 3-cueing is as effective as teaching phonics—and either choice is equally supportable.

Those arguments may appear to deserve 4 stars for affability and reasonability. But only if you're willing to ignore the research.

Studies show that explicit phonemic awareness and phonics instruction consistently provide

a learning advantage. There are no such studies supporting 3-cueing.

Studies show the activation of visual and phonological centers in the brain when word reading . . . they don't reveal similar activation that would suggest 3-cueing.

Readers do sometimes guess words (e.g., damaged pages, reader distraction, lack of decoding ability), but this is more evident with poor readers than good ones.

Usually, we strive to teach students to emulate proficiency. I want my kids to try to golf like Tiger Woods, not some old duffer who can't get onto the green.

Three-cueing is the only instance I can think of that asks students to parrot low success performance rather than proficiency.

There are many ways to teach reading. It is sophistry, however, to pretend that these ways are all equal. Phonics provides a clear advantage.

To those who claim that we need different ways of teaching decoding (e.g., pictures, context) since all children are different, show me the research.

Until such research is available, I'm willing to follow this claim to its logical conclusion. Let's say that I'm willing to entertain the idea that all children learn differently. If that is the case, then why aren't these critics up in arms about programs that omit or minimize phonics given that research has found such omissions to be especially harmful to our most vulnerable children? Their position seems to be not just inconsistent but hard-hearted and downright mean.

Enough.

Emily Hanford's investigative reporting has been useful—a welcome relief from the wishful but misleading reporting that has often plagued this topic. (Patti Ghezzi, the astute former educational reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution*, recently provided an exceptionally candid account of why her past reporting went so wrong [Downey, 2022].) For many schools, these reports have led and will lead to a serious rethinking of how best to meet young children's reading needs. Perhaps some of these long overdue appraisals will be led by wise schoolmen and women who will wonder, "Gee, if we so missed the boat on phonics, how are we doing with other aspects of reading? Maybe we could do better."

One can hope.

Reference

Downey, M. (2022). Former education journalist: How I missed the phonics story. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.* https://www.ajc.com/education/get-schooled-blog/former-education-journalist-how-i-missed-the-phonics-story/2UHWCUJWYRBPXFTRBXJ2HPFI6Y

About the Author

Timothy Shanahan is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago where he was Founding Director of the UIC Center for Literacy. Previously, he was Director of Reading for the Chicago Public Schools. He is author/editor of more than 200 publications on literacy education. His research emphasizes the connections between reading and writing, literacy in the disciplines, and improvement of reading achievement.

Tim is a former associate editor of the *Illinois Reading Council Journal* (and a favorite professor of the current editor), and he is a member of the Illinois Reading Council Hall of Fame. Tim is past president of the International Literacy Association, and he served as a member of the Advisory Board of the National Institute for Literacy under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. He helped lead the National Reading Panel, convened at the request of Congress to evaluate research on the teaching of reading, which has been a major influence on reading education.