Triple R Teaching

What can you tell me about the National Reading Panel? Did you know that it was a group of fourteen scholars who spent two years studying the research about teaching reading? What if I told you that even though the panel issued its report over twenty years ago, most teachers don't know what's inside it? Today's episode is all about the National Reading Panel, its report, and why it matters.

Let's set the stage with the opening paragraphs of the National Reading Panel Report: Practical Advice for Teachers by Timothy Shanahan:**"Context:** It is the 1990s and dark shadows lie across the land of reading education. Time and other news magazines begin referring to “reading wars,” war being an apt metaphor for the bitter debates over how to teach reading that were raging in the nation. On one side are those who view the hallmark of sound literacy education as a sufficiently supportive environment: If classrooms provided books that were compelling, if classroom routines were not so routine, if it could be possible for children to love reading enough, then reading would happen. On the other side are those more focused on explicit teaching: If we could provide all children with the skills needed, if we could teach reading well enough, if we could teach reading early enough, then all children would be able to read.

"Response: When this war of words between whole-language and basic-skills philosophies became so intense that it disrupted schooling and threatened to undermine confidence in public education, something unprecedented took place. For the first time in history, the federal government, under President Bill Clinton and the U.S. Congress, required that a group of scientists, teachers, administrators, and teacher educators determine what research had to say about reading. This panel, the National Reading Panel, was not to put forth opinions or even strive for consensus— but was to understand the actual research findings so schools could proceed to do what was best for children."

Does it feel like you've gone back in time? You may wonder why the National Reading Panel even matters. Why should we care? They're not the only ones who have done meta-analyses of the research.

Well, Timothy Shanahan points out that the National Reading Panel was a unique group. It was a group of fourteen scholars who had been selected from a list of three hundred nominees. These panelists were not allowed to have financial ties to commercial textbook publishers, and they received input from over four hundred teachers at five

different public hearings. The panel was open and upfront about its work and even audiotaped and transcribed its meetings. The National Reading Panel did not offer opinions about its research findings, and they were not allowed to omit any studies that came up with a result that they didn't like.

The panel drew evidence from only specific types of research. The studies had to be those in which practices were tested by teachers in classrooms under conditions that allowed the learning benefits to be measured. They only drew conclusions when there was a high degree of certainty, all major conclusions were based on a synthesis of a large number of studies called a meta-analysis.

A meta-analysis is the examination of multiple independent studies of the same subject in search of overall trends. The panel was chosen in 1997 and its members began deliberations in 1998. They met often over the next two years, deciding which questions about teaching reading to consider, and paring down 100,000 documents to a much more reasonable number.

The National Reading Panel did not study every issue related to reading. For example, it did not look at preschool reading instruction, teaching reading to English language learners, or best practices for teaching writing. It did not examine the efficacy of specific curricula. The National Reading Panel did leave many questions unanswered, but it answered many questions as well.

Unfortunately, what the panel revealed about the Big Five: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary, is often completely neglected in schools of higher education, schools that are training future teachers. Most teachers don't have any idea what's in the National Reading Panel's report. We're going to change that with a five episode series about the panel's findings and recommendations. We'll get started next week with phonemic awareness.

For today's show notes, including a link to the article that I quoted, check out reachallreaders.com/episode2.