

Specialized Literacy Professionals

A Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association

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Volume XVI, No. 1

Fall, 2006

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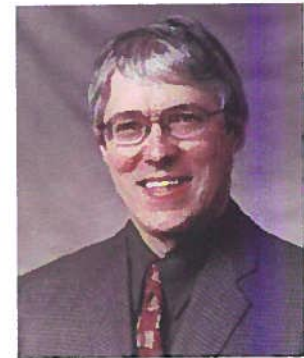
The Literacy Professional

A publication of IRA's *Specialized Reading Professionals* Special Interest Group

Tim Shanahan Speaks

By Jack Cassidy

Timothy Shanahan is professor of urban education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and director of the UIC Center for Literacy. He is president of the International Reading Association, and a longtime member of the IRA special interest group, Specialized Reading Professionals. Shanahan served on the National Reading Panel, a group convened by the National Institute of Child Health and Development at the request of Congress to evaluate research on successful methods of teaching reading. He also chaired the National Literacy Panel on Language and Minority Children and Youth and the National Early Literacy Panel. He has over 100 publications including six books.



1. Tim, you have less than a year left in your presidency. What do you hope to accomplish?

I hope to put IRA in a position where it can facilitate the reauthorization of the Reading First and Early Reading First Reading First legislation. I also hope IRA can successfully advocate for the expansion of the Striving Readers initiative. By working with government agencies, we can improve reading instruction in the United States. Member surveys indicate these are things that the average IRA member wants, and I would like to make sure that the average member is better represented in IRA.

2. For most of the year's I have conducted interviews for What's Hot, you have been one of those interviewed. This year, adolescent literacy is very hot issue. Why do you think that is so?

Not only is it hot, but it "should be hot." In the past ten years, we have seen improvements in the reading achievement at the fourth grade level, but no improvements at the middle and high school levels. Literacy in this society is not a "little kid" subject; it needs to be a Pre-K through twelfth grade concern.

3. In your columns for Reading Today, you have taken some controversial stands on SSR and scripted instruction. Why?

I'm not trying to generate controversy. I think the field should be open to discuss these issues openly and courteously. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) and scripted instruction are both interesting topics.

SSR is widely recommended. I used it religiously when I taught elementary school. However, the research support for this strategy is very weak. Most people are afraid to talk about that fact. As I said in my article "we must jealously safeguard instructional time and follow the research carefully."

There are two problems with the term "scripted instruction." The first is that there is no clear definition. Some people think that scripted instruction is actually a

Continued on page 2

Tim Shanahan, *Continued*

word-for-word transcription of what the teacher should say and how the student should respond. Others think that all teachers' manuals are a form of scripted teaching. Another problem is that we seem to be locked in a fight between either slavish adherence to scripts or to a completely laissez faire approach. There has to be some middle ground on these problems.

- 4) Some of your critics would say that you have been an unequivocal advocate for the education policies of the Bush administration. How would you respond to them?

My positions on the Bush education policies are very similar to those of the IRA membership. No Child Left Behind is a huge law. It has dozens of things I like, and dozens of things I do not like. Recently IRA did a random survey of the membership. More than 80% of those responding liked the reading initiatives in NCLB, but opposed the accountability measures. I agree with the members on both issues, and believe we must remember that this is the first administration to ever put substantial money behind reading instruction.

5. What do you see as some of the unintended consequences of the National Reading Panel report? For instance, because writing was not studied by the national Reading Panel, it is being ignored by many districts.

The same thing has happened with oral language. Both topics were considered by the Panel, but we didn't have time to review everything. Since there had never been a panel like

the NRP before, we honestly had no idea how the report might be used. There is nothing wrong with implementing the findings of NRP, since each of those courses of action have so much research behind them, but we need more panel reviews of that type to expand the list of instructional approaches that are publicly accepted to have sufficient research evidence.

6. What's your favorite food?
Bacon (and horseradish).
7. What are you reading for fun?
Pillar of Fire; America in the King Years 1963-65 by Taylor Branch. It is the second volume in his trilogy about the civil right movement. I just finished the first volume in the trilogy and can't wait to get to the third.
8. What are your favorite avocations?
Long distance bicycling and reading.

Thank you, Tim. I'll ask our readers to send you bacon recipes.



Our Members Publish.

This column is a new feature of *The Literacy Professional*. It highlights the books and articles that our members have published in 2006. Please e-mail Jack Cassidy (Jack.Cassidy@tamucc.edu) with the publications that we have missed.

Camille Blachowicz (National Louis University, IL) is the lead author of *Partnering for Fluency* published by Guilford.

Longtime SIG members Shelley B. Wepner, (Manhattanville College) and Linda B. Gambrell (Clemson University) are editors of the new IRA book, *Beating the Odds: Getting Published in the Field of Literacy*.

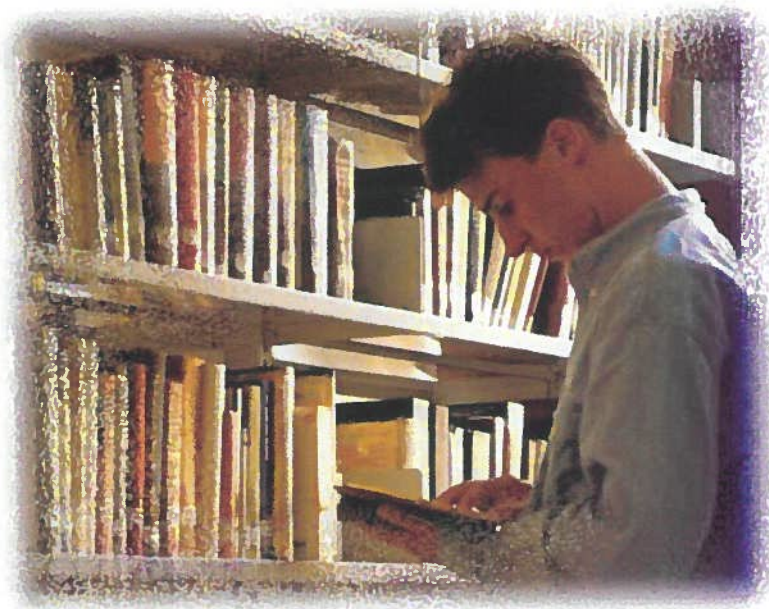
Linda Gambrell is also one of the authors of a chapter ("Supporting Students' Motivation to Read") in *Understanding and Implementing Reading First Initiatives: The Changing Role of Administrators* published by IRA. A number of other SIG members also have chapters in this book. Richard L. Allington (University of Tennessee) is author of "Critical Factors in Designing an Effective Reading Intervention for Struggling Readers." Rita Bean (University of Pittsburgh) is lead author of *The Literacy Coach as a Catalyst for Change*. Cathy Collins Block (Texas Christian University) authored "Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Practices." Martha A. Colwell and Sherry L. Alleman (Woodland School, MA) are authors of



"Revitalizing the Literacy Program: A Work in Progress at One Elementary School." Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois at Chicago) is author of "Where Does Writing Fit in Reading First?" Dorothy Strickland (Rutgers University) wrote the foreword for the book.

Jack and Drew Cassidy (Texas A&M University-Corpus-Christi) had their article "What's Hot, What's Not for 2006" translated into Spanish as "Temas Calientes"; it appears in the Spanish language journal *Lectura y Vida*.

Jack Cassidy, Sherrye Garrett (Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi) have an article in the September issue of the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* entitled "What's Hot in Adolescent Literacy: 1997-2006". Sherrye Garrett is also the lead author on an article in the *National Association of Laboratory Schools Journal* entitled "Finding Images of Love: A Unique Collaboration Between Parents, Children and School and University Faculty in a Dual Language Laboratory School



Informational Text Sizzles

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Informational text achieved two sizzling designations in Jack and Drew Cassidy's (2005/2006) most recent "What's Hot" list. The literacy specialists who responded to the survey said informational text was "very hot" and should be very hot." I have personal and professional reasons for cheering the increasing interest in informational text.

Professionally, I have been involved with university-based reading clinics most of my professional life. In the clinic, we would see upper elementary students who considered themselves good readers suddenly finding themselves unable to comprehend what they were reading. They were not suddenly disabled; they had just begun to encounter content reading, nonfiction, and expository texts. They had little experience with or schema for nonfiction.

Personally, I have a son who has always hated fiction and narrative text. Although he is an avid reader, he never liked story time in elementary school or reading class in middle school. Why? The texts presented were always fiction and narrative. He wanted to read about the real world. His enthusiasm for nonfiction was never affirmed in reading and language arts class.

I was not surprised, then, when Nell Duke's seminal studies about first grade classrooms showed that students interacted with informational text just 3.6 minutes a day and that only 9.8% of texts in classroom libraries were nonfiction. The same study found that children in low SES schools spent even less time engaged with information text, 1.4 minutes a day, and had even fewer informational texts in their classroom libraries. (Duke 2000).

Duke's studies coincided with a growing emphasis on informational materials in national and state standards, as well as state assessments. In my state, for example, students are required to integrate information across three different texts: nonfiction, fiction, and visual.

My students and I are currently investigating why teachers use so little informational text in their classrooms. It may be that teachers have not had experience with quality children's nonfiction. We conducted a brief survey of online syllabi for children's literature courses and found that of 25 syllabi, only eight included nonfiction as a topic of study. Teachers may also be unfamiliar with resources for identifying good nonfiction, such as content-related professional organizations. The National Council for Teachers of Mathematics and the National Science Teachers Association provide recommendations for children's literature in their various publications. The National Council of Teachers of English recognizes quality nonfiction with its Orbis Pictus Award.

Barbara Moss (2003) found that teachers complained that well-written, accurate, and attractive nonfiction texts were not easily available. That situation is changing. Educational publishers now recognize the demand for more informational text at all levels of the curriculum and are providing many new materials. An increasing number of nonfiction trade books, big books, posters, charts, and guided reading sets can be found today.

I celebrate the renewed interest in information text on behalf of my son and all those other students who have been denied the excitement and variety that informational text offers. Greater emphasis on informational text can only enhance our students' reading experiences.

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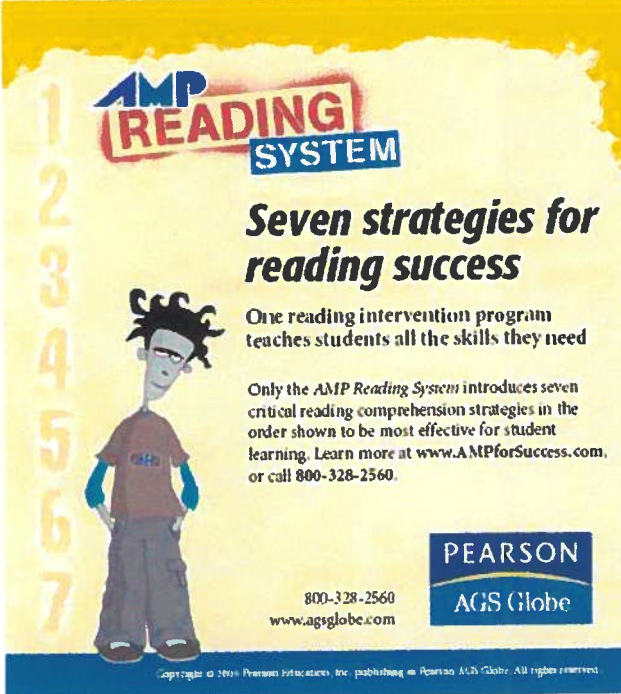
✓ Teacher Education Under Fire; IRA Responds

Teacher education has come under fire this year. The first report, entitled *What Education Schools Aren't Teaching About Reading--and What Elementary Teachers Aren't Learning*, was published in May by the National Council for Teacher Quality (NCTQ) and the full report is available on-line (www.nctq.org). On the basis of the syllabi from 72 institutions around the country, the researchers rated some of the required reading methods courses for elementary preservice teachers. The goal was to see if the selected courses prominently featured the components highlighted in the Report of the National Reading Panel (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency vocabulary and comprehension). The NCTQ report indicated that most institutions were not teaching the required components as outlined in the National Reading Panel study. In one of the appendices, the NCTQ researchers even listed the texts used in these courses and gave them ratings like "acceptable", "not acceptable" and "not relevant." Many of the texts by prominent reading educators were rated as "not acceptable" or "not relevant". The NCTQ report also provided sample syllabi that were acceptable and ones that were not. Needless to say, the NCTQ Report was widely criticized by many literacy leaders for: its sampling techniques; its reliance on the NRP Report as the gold standard; and its total dependence on syllabi to judge course quality.

The second report, *Educating School Teachers*, was written by Arthur Levine, President of the Woodrow Wilson

National Fellowship Foundation and President Emeritus of Teachers College, Columbia. It too is available on-line (www.edschools.org). This report drawn from a number of national surveys also is critical of colleges of teacher education. The report cites a number of factors for this poor quality including: insufficient quality control by both the states and national accreditation agencies; a curriculum in disarray; inadequate preparation of teacher education students; and a disconnected faculty whose instruction is outdated and too theoretical.

Prior to the publication of these reports, the International Reading Association had already assembled a team of professionals from around the country to set standards for the reading preparation of preservice teachers. The group includes SIG members and former IRA Presidents, Jack Cassidy and Dorothy Strickland, along with a number of other prominent reading professionals including representatives from the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development. The QUESTER (Quality Undergraduate Elementary and Secondary Teacher Education in Reading) task force is charged with setting standards to identify distinguished programs in reading for preparing preservice teachers. Institutions and faculty wanting more information should contact Gail Keating at IRA Headquarters (gkeating@reading.org).



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✓ Check the Red Check

Do you have a red check on the mailing label on the front of this newsletter? If you do, it means your membership in our special interest group (SIG) is about to expire or you have not yet joined. If you have two red checks, it means your membership has already expired. In any case, it is time to RENEW your membership. Our SIG includes many prominent IRA leaders such as former IRA Presidents Mary Austin, Dorothy Strickland, Jack Cassidy, Ira Aaron, Doris Roettger-Svoboda and Dick Allington. Many present members of IRA's Executive Committee and Board are also included such as Tim Shanahan, Linda Gambrell, Jill Lewis, David Hernandez III, and Maryann Manning. This special interest group takes stands on important issues affecting all specialized reading professionals. We need your support.