Expressions of power and ideology in the National Reading Panel

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This study probes the consensus-building process within the National Reading Panel’s deliberations (1998-2000). We focus on the Panel’s work because of its Congressional mandate to settle differences within the field, and because it provides a rationale for the reading portion of the latest federal educational initiative—President George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind”. According to the initiative’s official website, the Panel’s report provides the basic architecture for the design of scientifically-based reading programs. Through the Reading First Initiative, the Bush Administration will make $900 million available to elementary schools that develop reading programs “anchored in scientific research.” With such political backing, the Panel’s work occupies the center of most debates about what should be included and excluded from the best reading programs. Moreover, the financial incentive motivates state and local educational officials to design reading curricula based on the Panel’s findings. In these ways, the National Reading Panel Report is a de facto policy document.

The Panel (NRP) makes two distinctions between its work and that of the National Research Council’s Committee on Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (NRC). First, the NRC did not specifically address how vital reading skills should be taught, and second, it produced a “consensus document based on the best judgments of a diverse group of experts in reading research and reading instruction” (p. 1). This second distinction is important for our study because it implies that while the NRC report is based on the best judgments of a few, the NRP report is based on something more substantial than personal or even professional judgment. Rather, the NRP report is based on “an objective research review methodology” (p. 1). In other words, the NRC report, while useful, is limited by its association with the Committee members’ values, while the NRP report is spared these limitations because the “NRP elected to develop and adopt a set of rigorous research methodological standards” (p. 27). Therefore according to their standards, the NRP report is not a consensus document, but “an evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature and its implications for reading instruction” (subtitle of the report).

Are there any values expressed in the NRP report? It is our thesis that the NRP report was based on a consensus that emerged from the very inception of its work, before any research was considered. First, members of the Panel agreed that science should direct all decisions made about reading instruction in American schools. This decision could not be

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1 Panel members’ names have not been included in this article at the request of the Yearbook editors.
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Based on scientific data; rather, it must be based on a conviction that scientific explanations of nature bring us closer to true representations of reality than any other type. This, of course, is a value judgment because other types of explanation are available such as historical, ethical, and cultural. Also, panel members "elected to develop and adapt" a strict meta-analysis procedure as the optimal way to employ that science, a second indicator of consensus.

Operating within their consensus then, the Panel assumed that these two actions positioned their conclusions above value judgments. Yet their selection of science as the sole arbiter of what should and should not be included in elementary school reading programs is an expression of the Panel's values. Congress did not thrust these values upon them. The Congressional charge that commissioned the Panel had only three points: 1) conduct a thorough study of the research and knowledge relevant to early reading development and instruction in early reading..., 2) determine which research findings and what knowledge are available for application in the Nation's classrooms; and 3) determine how to disseminate the research findings and knowledge to the Nation's schools and classrooms" (see the Congressional Record, available at http://thomas.loc.gov). Research and knowledge need not be limited to science, and particularly not only to the experimental and quasi-experimental types championed in the NRP report. This was enabled by the Panel's consensus, their agreement on collective values.

Working from the transcripts of the Panel's official meetings, the regional town meetings, and interviews with seven of the fifteen Panel members, we sought evidence of this consensus and its consequences in the process of the Panel's work. Our intention moves us beyond the criticism of the Panel's work beginning to enter publication (Coles, in press; Cunningham, 2001; Garan, 2001; Gee, 2001). Our analysis has three theoretical frames: critical policy analysis, ideology critique, and discourse analysis.

Critical Policy Analysis

Most policy research concerned with literacy education begins and ends with functionalist assumptions. That is, after a policy has been recommended or implemented to adjust literacy education in order to ameliorate a social concern, policy analysts study its process, content, and consequences to judge its adequacy according to the policy's projected outcomes (see the policy section of the Handbook of Reading Research, edited by Kamil, Mosenthal, & Pearson, & Barr, 2000). These analysts assume that policy is a functional element designed to prevent further breakdown in the system and to return the system to its social status quo. Yet, policy analysts need not adopt this assumption because policy may be more a matter of the authoritative allocation of values than a natural rational-deliberative process (Easton, 1953).

Policies begin with their makers' images of an ideal society, and they are intended to be operational prescriptive statements to realize that ideal. Ideals are based on values, and values do not float independently from social contexts. Therefore, policies have histories and social attachments. Critical policy analysis is the study of the histories and social attachments of policy ideals. As Prunty (1985) wrote, "the authoritative allocation of values draws our attention to the centrality of power and control in the concept of policy" (p. 136). Critical analyses, then, require not only an examination of a policy's effectiveness on its own terms, but an investigation of the values embedded within it; of the images used to make the policy seem necessary and compelling; and of the real, expected, and unanticipated social consequences of the policy (Marshall, 1997). For this study we accepted the assumptions of critical policy analysis and directed them toward the NRP's deliberative process, seeking to address the ways value, power, and control were apparent in its work.

Idiocy

Because the U. S. Constitution does not afford the federal government a role in public education, it must find ways to influence state and local policies and practices without use of sovereign authority. One of the ways it attempts to influence educational practice is through the sponsorship of state-of-the-art reports on specific subjects. The National Reading Panel report is an example of this practice. Yet, the authority of this report does not rest on law or direct control, rather its authority must be elicited through the consent of legislators, educational officials, and educators. To obtain this consent, legislators, officials, and educators must accept the legitimacy of the government's calling for and funding of the study, the Panel, itself, as well as the contents of the report. To gain this acceptance, government and the Panel relied on ideology.

In the 15th century, French philosopher Destutt de Tracy coined the term ideology to denote the science of ideas that would reveal the sources of biases and prejudices. The term has a wide variety of uses that share a common notion that different systems of thought distinguish among, yet hide, particular sets of self-interest (Eagleton, 1991). As such, ideologies operate to legitimate the values of particular groups through the gentle enforcement of systems of thought. The process of legitimization involves at least six steps:

1. Promoting beliefs and values congenial to it;
2. Naturalizing such beliefs so as to render them self-evident;
3. Universalizing them to make them appear inevitable;
4. Denigrating ideas that might challenge it;
5. Excluding rival forms of thought; and
6. Obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself.

In this study, we looked for signs of how the consensus concerning science might serve as an ideological function within the Panel's deliberations.

Discourse

Discourse takes place in social situations. Institutional identities help to orient participants through language use in order to manage the tasks and activities of the institution (van Dijk, 1997). Simply stated, people adapt what they say, how they say it, and how they interpret what is said based upon their institutional roles or identities and those of
other participants. This is accomplished through such linguistic resources as person reference, lexical choice, grammatical construction, and turn taking. Discourse analysis, then, is the study of the construction of institutional identities through the use of language to accomplish institutional goals. We used discourse analysis to search for empirical evidence of the use of ideology in the process of legitimization of government and Panel values through the process of the development of the National Reading Panel report.

METHOD

The work of the NRP was conducted by panel members invited from a pool of 400 nominees. The panel was comprised of the following: seven university professors, three college administrators, one middle school teacher, one elementary school administrator, one physician, and one accountant. (One additional panel member who was present at the first meeting left the panel for personal reasons. This person's seat on the panel was never filled.)

Because our examination of the process of the NRP deliberations took place after the Panel had concluded its work, we sought the public record of those deliberations. Because the federal government's sunshine policy is to record all public meetings, we obtained the verbatim transcripts of all talk during each official meeting, and the verbatim testimonies and Panel exchanges at the four NRP town meetings held in various parts of the country. Because words are spoken to do things as well as to say things, they have practical and social impact as well as communicative function. Once transformed into a written text, the gap between the speaker and the reader widens and the possibility of multiple reinterpretations increases. In order to narrow the gap and to decrease the number of possible reinterpretations, we tape recorded and transcribed semi-structured interviews with seven of the fifteen original panel members. These three types of transcripts served as our data sets.

We first read through a sample of the eleven full meeting transcripts and four regional meeting transcripts (3,242 pages), underlining key phrases, to get a general sense of the themes and potential categories. Our initial coding was denotative (see Barthes, 1967); that is, it was broadly descriptive and easily recognizable by those involved. Responses were compared for patterns of similarity and dissimilarity (Spillane, 1998) to allow a systematic exploration (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of the relations among participants and their values as they were crystallized in the report. After our initial coding was completed, we decided to link our initial categories to broader theoretical models. Subsequent analytic coding was connotative (see Barthes, 1967), as the findings of these initial categories were interpreted and linked to the broader semantic fields, specifically to theoretical models of ideology (Eagleton, 1991) and discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1997). As we found examples that corresponded with the theoretical models, we also looked for counter-examples, conducting a negative case analysis that would help us to make revisions to the theories (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). While some disagreement may have occurred among the panel at different times, we found no negative cases that would cause us to alter these theories. In other words, the ideological consensus and institutional discourse the panel

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engaged in precluded any single member from radically diverging from the group. Mention of disagreements and dissent are included in our discussion below.

For the study of ideology, we treated each transcript as a unit of analysis, looking for examples of ideology. Theoretically, ideology should pervade the proceedings, and we should find a consistent pattern in the employment of these steps among statements, queries, conversations, testimonies, reports, and speeches recorded in the transcripts. Taking into account these six steps moved our analysis beyond simplistic explanations of domination, propaganda, or conspiracy theories to demonstrate the subtle and situational-ly specific ways in which ideological legitimization operates (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). When we found evidence of possible dissent among the panel, possible ways in which any member or groups of members would resist the ideology of the group, we worked through the documents again to determine the validity of the claim. One example of this included a panel member's assertion during an interview that the panel's work was consensual until the end:

There wasn't any real overt dissent until the end. There was one member who just basically said that everything we did was not worthwhile, and she had her reasons for saying this I guess... But she didn't dissent early on when she could have, she dissented after the fact. She was like the only person who had, you know, taken that position and her main complaint was that whole areas were being neglected, such as whole language, which we said, we looked at that literature, there's a very good literature on that. (panel member, personal communication, 03-26-01)

We tested this possible contradiction, as we did with others, using a variety of methods. We re-read meeting transcripts, revisiting our coding sheets and summary sheets. Because the transcripts were in Microsoft Word, we were able to conduct keyword searches of the documents (in this case, using terms such as "whole language") to confirm our findings. Similarly, we re-searched the documents by looking at participants' names to find episodes during which dissent among members may have occurred. In this particular case, we found evidence to support the panel member's statement that radical dissent did not occur early in the meetings, substantiating our claim about the ideological legitimization of the group. The only time the words "whole language" were spoken at a full panel meeting by the panel member in question above (with the exception of the last meeting on January 31, 2000), was when she stated her support for investigating phonics instruction:

I would prefer on the phonics question anyway that we look at differences in the way in which phonics is taught, different ways of teaching it, and amounts of it because I am certain that you will find phonics taught in basic programs and in whole language programs, and the differences are now, how much, and when. (09-10-98, p. 249, lines 11-16)

To the contrary, other panel members from research universities discussed whole language at length during the September 10, 1998 full panel meeting, and various participants brought up whole language repeatedly during the regional meetings.

For the study of discourse, we looked at sentence construction, word choice, and exchange rituals according to van Dijk's (1997) suggestions. Again, we were looking for
consistent patterns in which the language seemed directed by the goal of legitimating the rationale for the NRP, the Panel and its values, and the content of the report.

Results

Our findings demonstrate that the panel used ideological means in an attempt to legitimize itself and its work. In what follows, we show how ideology validated the panel’s work, using Eagleton’s (1991) categories. Then, we explain how panel members’ language revealed their values and identities as ideologues in these deliberations. It should be noted at the outset that each category has multiple examples to support the points we make. However, due to space limitations, single examples are offered.

Promoting Beliefs or Values Favorable to the Group

The NRP promoted beliefs and values favorable to the group. Early on, the panel described what research would be acceptable for their review, choosing to give preference to research that was scientific in nature, as determined by its reliability, replicability, use of random samples, and other similar criteria. In spite of these predetermined and seemingly firm criteria, exceptions were made in order to accommodate some panel members’ own beliefs about what the report should contain, even if these beliefs failed to meet the predetermined criteria. Panel members deliberated about the importance of particular areas of study, areas that were often aligned with their own personal research agendas, when they began the report. Panel members advocated strongly for the study of phonological awareness, vocabulary, fluency, technology, and comprehension, among others, even if there was no extensive scientific research in these areas, and even if there were other areas that could be considered.

One particularly illustrative example is a university researcher’s proposal to consider teacher education research, in spite of its lack of scientific studies, at least as measured by the panel’s criteria:

...I think maybe this [teacher education area] is one of those cases where what we have to say is that, okay, we cannot just do journal articles for this, that we have got to look a little more broadly, and make sure that it is clear that this is a little more speculative, but here is what we know rather than simply saying let’s demote this.... (09-10-98, p. 179, lines 11-16).

He continued:

...I think we also need to give up in this case this idea that it has to be an experimental study because when you are looking at this thing the journals are full right now of teacher training studies and their effects that are ethnographic, descriptive, observational, whatever you want to call it. We have not considered that as a class of studies, but this is a case where since we do not have a lot of experimental studies we need to go with the next best evidence. (09-10-98, p. 188, line 19 to p. 189, line 3)

By proceeding with teacher education as a subgroup, the panel promoted its own beliefs that this was an important area of study, in spite of the fact that there was not research available that was aligned with its own standards.

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Naturalizing Values

The panel’s decisions made their values appear natural and self-evident. Most obvious was that the group assumed scientific criteria should be followed, even though some individuals may have raised alternative suggestions. Rather than questioning the use of science, they questioned whether they would engage in good or bad science. This occurred in spite of some panel members’ points that, among other objections, there was merit in different kinds of research (panel member from a research university, 07-24-98, p. 88-89, full panel meeting), and education research should not be “defined away” because it was not medical or physics research (panel member from a different research university, 07-24-98, p. 240, full panel meeting).

As one example, during a full panel meeting as the panel struggled with the methodology, one of the university researchers explained:

This conversation is getting into an area where I have had concerns for a long time and that is how “objective” can we be and what is this job going to be? And every time we have this conversation to me it ends up we are experts and we are going to be doing these meta-analyses based on our expert judgment and nobody else has ever figured out a way to do it differently and I do not think we ever can either, and I think that is fine because we are going to do a good job at meta-analysis ... Then we experts are going to do the best job we can choosing what we want to focus on in our report ... We will do our best. (11-10-98, p. 76 line 4 to p. 77 line 4).

The use of science was part of a series of “of courses:” “of course” they should follow the government’s charge; “of course” they should establish scientific criteria; “of course” others should follow their example; and “of course,” a hierarchy existed between the scientific and non-scientific members of the panel, a point we’ll discuss in more detail in what follows.

Universalizing Values

The panel members attempted to universalize their values in a variety of ways. First, there was extensive dissemination of the report, both in publication and video formats as well as panel members’ appearances at professional conferences. The report was distributed to the media, schools, parents, and the government, among others. Further, there were suggestions that a standing reading panel needed to be formed to carry out the work this group began, panels that would follow the same scientific methodology (panel member from a research university, 09-10-98, p. 38), and that subsequent U.S. Department of Education and National Institutes of Health funding should be based on the panel’s findings (Director of agency overseeing the panel, 09-10-98, p. 226). There were also suggestions that the panel’s criteria would influence the content of professional journals. During the third panel meeting on September 10, 1998, a panel member from a research university suggested that the forms the panel used to direct their identification of scientific stud-
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Obscuring Social Reality

Although the panel was given opportunities to take up social issues, race and class did not enter the Panel’s deliberations or report. As one example, a university researcher spoke to the panel at the Houston Regional meeting and explained that there is a reading crisis, and that this crisis disproportionately affects minority children. Similar attention to Hispanic and African American populations was given at the New York and Chicago regional hearings, none of which was translated into the panel’s report. In fact, limited English Proficient and English as a Second Language studies were excluded from the panel’s report, even though, as Elaine Garan (2001) noted in a recent issue of Language Arts, the panel’s findings on phonics instruction were generalized to these populations.

When Tim Shanahan, a panel member, took on the task of responding to Garan’s critique, he did not address this point in his written response (Shanahan, 2001).

Similarly the panel was silent about socioeconomic class issues, even though the topic was mentioned several different times. The chief education officer for Chicago Public Schools told the panel about the systematic changes taking place to improve literacy in her district, including efforts to improve the nutrition and access to meals for children in the schools. Before outlining the extensive reform work taking place in the Chicago Public Schools, she noted:

But as you can imagine in a school system as diverse as Chicago there are many reasons why students may or may not be achieving. Some of them socioeconomic, some of them an aging workforce, some of them lack of funding, some of them the requirements that are put upon us by a very, very strong teachers union. I do not know that we could separate any one of them and say that those were the reasons that our students were not performing but instead of trying to lay the blame our concern was how do we get into our schools and make a difference. (05-29-98, p. 133, lines 6-13)

In spite of many similar reminders that socioeconomic issues influence reading and the teaching of reading, the panel decided to ignore class issues.

Personal Reference

Personal reference in an ideological analysis of discourse is the use of a personal pronoun to index institutional identity rather than personal identity. An example of this is found in the comments from the agency director to the panel during the first meeting (pronoun highlights have been added):

I have spent a lot of time crafting the formal charge to the panel because it is so important in setting out your agenda. Because of its importance and the fact that I do not think I can state it any better in paraphrase than it is written, I ask for your indulgence if I read it verbatim. We will then have an opportunity to discuss it and try to clarify what may seem clear to me but to nobody else as well as try to interpret the charge. (04-24-98, p. 4, lines 10-16)
In this excerpt, we see the Director positioning himself as the crafter and interroter of the charge for the panel (Edmondson & Shannon, 2002). He distinguished clearly between his role and that of the panel. This distinction is evidenced through his use of the personal pronouns "I", "me", and "your" as he set himself apart from the panel members as a more knowledgeable other. His use of "we" attempted to suture his relationship with that of the panel in referring to opportunities for discussion and clarification. However, it is clear by his deliberate choice of personal pronouns that he assumed a position of authority and control over the panel.

Lexical Choice

Lexical choice is indicative of the interactional salience of the participants' use of professional language. This can be related to the asymmetrical relationship between the professional's knowledge and that of the layperson's, and can serve as a mechanism of control, exclusion, and dissemination.

Panel member representing the lay public:... could—could I—I just get a definition? What is ethnographic?
Panel member from a research university: Probably people around this room could define it a lot better than I could.
Panel member from a second research university: Somebody care to take a crack at that? [names panel member from a third research university?]
Third researcher named by second researcher: Is this going on the record?
(Laughter.) (07-24-98, p. 216, lines 9-15)

Power relations were evident as both the first and second university panel members deferred the question of the layperson member to the third university researcher, who was reluctant to answer. The layperson's uncertainty of the meaning of "ethnographic" and the deference of panel members to provide a working definition clearly demonstrates the salience of professional versus non-professional language use. It demonstrates who was in control of knowledge during the meetings and how discussions were limited to a certain form of psychological/scientific perspectives.

Grammatical Structures

Several agendas struggled for control of the National Reading Panel's deliberations. For example, excerpts from our database demonstrate how various members sought a "true science" of reading instruction or an established hierarchy of knowledge and professional roles in the field. These agendas, apparent in members' selections of specific grammatical forms, revealed the interactional function and dimension between syntax and the pragmatics and consequences associated with its use. In the following quote, a representative from the Widemeyer Baker Group, a public relations firm sub-contracted to distribute the NRP report, explained how the panel needed to think about marketing (emphasis added):

Widemeyer Baker representative: Well, form does follow function and ordinarily you would start with the content all nailed down and then get into some

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questions about how we should package it. We did think that it was useful to lay a couple of ideas out there just to get this kind of discussion going or thoughts in your own mind... We do have basically a sales job in some respects because although people want the answers and want the solutions, that does not mean that they are going to necessarily devote the time, be it several hours or longer, to pour through the text. And so you want to create a report or report formats, reporting formats that are accessible to as many different types of audiences as possible. (11-10-98, p. 114, lines 15-37).

Two points are important to note. First, public relations were considered before the report was written, and second, the report would be managed in order to sell it to the public.

Turn-taking

Turn-taking, within the context of the Panel's meeting room where there was no formal prescription governing who speaks and when, provides evidence of an asymmetrical distribution of questions and answers. This suggests that such talk is managed locally through the interaction of the participants. This was particularly evident in the reports of subgroups to the full panel.

As one example, the chair of the comprehension subgroup, presented the group's preliminary findings on September 10, 1998. Other members of the subgroup were present at the time. The presentation covered 65 pages of the meeting transcripts, and the chair spoke uninterrupted for 24 transcript pages. When he concluded, a panel member, also a university researcher but one who had not been on the subcommittee, asked the other subcommittee members for comments. A university researcher spoke first, sharing insights about the procedures they had used, which covered approximately 10 pages (with the exception of a few comments by the subcommittee chair), and then a second subcommittee member, also from a major research university, contributed comments about defining comprehension (2 pages). At this point, the panel member who had first asked for comments from other subcommittee members specifically called on the panel member from a middle school to comment (in contrast to the others who had volunteered to speak):

[Panel member from a middle school]: Thank you. We were—I must say as a practitioner from the practitioner's point of view I had some concerns and I did voice them on yesterday... (09-10-98, p. 105, line 22 to p. 106, line 19)

After the teacher panel member had spoken briefly, the panel member who had asked for other subcommittee members’ input, named the layperson on the subcommittee, asking her for comments. The comments from both these women take little more than a page and a half, combined, and they are followed by 28 more pages of talk about the comprehension subgroup’s work, primarily dominated by the chair of the subcommittee and the same university researcher who had sought input from others on the subcommittee. When the comprehension subgroup finished, the chair proceeded to present findings for the technology subgroup.

This exchange demonstrates the silence of the non-scientific members of the Panel. Turns were habitually volunteered by university scientists and solicited from non-sci-
tests. The two panel members who were not university researchers provided short comments in comparison to those offered by the others, a pattern that continued throughout the full panel meetings.

DISCUSSION

Although not without some diversion and disagreement, the Panel's deliberations (as captured on the transcripts) were ideological in nature. That is, we identified multiple examples of each of Eagleton's steps of legitimization: promoting values (e.g., experimental and quasi-experimental research, technology, teacher education, phonemic awareness), naturalizing values (e.g., never questioning their exclusion of half the panel members to make important decisions), universalizing values (e.g., generalizing their conclusions across contexts and social groups), designating others' ideas (e.g., exclusion of non-experimental research when it suited their interests), excluding rivals (e.g., no historians, linguists, or progressive teachers invited to serve), and obscuring social reality (e.g., neglecting race and poverty as factors in reading instruction). There were no signs of conspiracy in these actions. Rather the Panel's consensus on science ensured that their efforts to legitimate the federal role, the panel, and the report remained persuasively invisible, yet thoroughly convincing. Moreover, it was not only what Panel members said, but also how they said it that illustrates the ideology at work during their deliberations.

Patterns within panel members' language revealed that they assumed the ideological identities as legitimators of the enterprise. Personal references demonstrated a clear hierarchy of importance and control. Lexical choice suggested limited knowledge of alternative positions and sets of values that would express different complexities of reading instruction that fell outside of a particular type of psychological work. Grammatical structures could be interpreted as revealing an intention to sell these values to a public too busy or trusting to attend to detail. Turn-taking showed how the legitimization agenda was enforced through who spoke, to whom, for how long, and in what ways.

Our critical policy analysis suggests that the NRP's process and product have not so much reconciled differences within our field as they have worked strategically to structure the relationships among differences, naming which knowledge falls within the official consensus and which is to be considered dissent. The panel used the rhetoric of science as a technology of power in order to legitimize and hide their values, attempting to quiet disruptive discourses in our field. This is apparent in both the content and process of talk during the Panel's deliberations. While the Panel's authority to name and choose appears to have been objective and value free, it is our claim that it was and is primarily an artifact of ideology. Their success may be apparent in their ability to define the terms of their critics, as nearly all have argued within the panel's scientific frame, and none have offered critiques that employ other ideological or epistemological frameworks.

The NRP's consensus, then, enabled some discourse communities to legitimize their contributions to the conversations about and practices of literacy, reading, and schooling, while marginalizing others. The rhetoric of science not withstanding, consensus is an acknowledgement that power is being invoked in order to enforce the values of some groups over others. In shedding some light on how power and ideology operated in the NRP, our intention was to reframe concerns about the NRP to investigations of its fundamental values and to redirect questions on policy to the ideal society that they projected. To us, Congress's call for the NRP expressed a deep fear of diversity that would challenge the values of control and predictability. We believe this fear is dangerous to democratic principles and hope that our work can contribute to collective efforts to explain the differences in our field, to identify the origins of those differences, and to develop ways to live together with those differences.

REFERENCES


