ERRATA sheet for *Resisting Reading Mandates* (Garan)

P. 3, line 10: “Gwynette” should read “Gwenette”

P. 3, line 11: The sentence “It is she who first protested the credibility of the panel and wrote a minority report” should be moved to line 14 after the sentence “Dr. Joanne Yatvin is an award-winning teacher and principal and has forty-one years of experience as a classroom teacher and school administrator.”

P. 43, Table 1: In the At-risk kindergarten and 1st-grade students row, under the Oral Reading column, there should be two asterisks after 0.23 small based on 2 (K) and 4 (1st-gr.) studies; there should be three asterisks after 2nd-6th-grade disabled and low-achieving readers.
details, qualifiers, and cautions that appear in the more extensive Subgroups Report. 52

In the section that follows, you have at your disposal the documented contradictions of the NRP report, which should be an enormous help in diffusing pressures to comply with the erroneous conclusions.

HOW THE NATIONAL READING PANEL MISREPRESENTED ITS OWN FINDINGS

To understand how the panel misrepresented its findings, I ask that you visualize three separately bound formats. First is the most widely distributed booklet, the neat little thirty-two-page Summary Booklet of the results. Second is a brief, neat little publicity video which, like The Summary Booklet, extols the virtues of the NRP report without mentioning any of its limitations. Finally is the lengthy Report of the Subgroups, nearly five hundred pages in length, replete with data, tables, appendices, discussions, and statistical methodology and terminology. Hidden in that labyrinth of tables, obscured in the rambling contradictory discussion sections, and buried among the data are the true findings of the NRP—as opposed to what found its way into the neat little Summary Booklet. Here in the NRP’s own words is the truth versus the contradictions.

The Claim in the Summary

“The meta-analysis revealed that systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through 6th grade and for children having difficulty learning to read” (The Summary Booklet, p. 9).

The Contradiction. “There were insufficient data to draw any conclusions about the effects of phonics instruction with normally developing readers above 1st grade” (2-117). This statement directly contradicts the claim in The Summary Booklet and on the video that the results apply to the general student population.
Furthermore, the results for children in grades 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 were not statistically significant for spelling, comprehension, or for general reading.

**The Claim in the Summary**

“Across all grade levels, systematic phonics instruction improved the ability of good readers to spell. The impact was strongest for kindergartners and decreased in later grades. For poor readers, the impact of phonics instruction was small . . .” (*The Summary Booklet*, p. 10).

**The Contradiction.** “The effect size for spelling [for children in second through sixth grade] was not statistically different from zero. . . . [phonics was] not more effective than other forms of instruction in producing growth in spelling” (2-116). There are no data, at any grade level, indicating that phonics helped children to spell conventionally. The studies for younger children accepted invented spellings and the results for all children in grades 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 showed no significant effect sizes. In addition, there were no results reported anywhere for “good readers,” a population mentioned only in *The Summary Booklet*.

**The Claim in the Summary**

The panel’s results indicate that “. . . systematic phonics instruction . . . are indicative of what can be accomplished when explicit, systematic phonics programs are implemented in today’s classrooms.” (*The Summary Booklet*, p. 9).

**The Contradiction.** “There were insufficient data to draw any conclusions about the effects of phonics instruction with normally developing readers above 1st grade” (2-117). Furthermore, the results applied to only problem readers and cannot be applied to ESL children. In many classrooms, ESL students actually are the typical student!

*I was shocked that what has been touted as a “comprehensive review” of the research in reading relied on so few studies.*
We’ve all seen the claims that the NRP reviewed 100,000 studies and yet we see that their analysis was actually very narrow. Why is that?

Here we have yet another misleading statement. The panel may have put 100,000 studies into a database, but they most certainly did not personally read, much less analyze, even those studies that they selected to be used in the meta-analysis. The studies were actually turned over to the graduate students of Steven Stahl, one of the panel’s contributors. It was these graduate students who analyzed the studies; the highly regarded members of the National Reading Panel did not even see the majority of them.53 And let’s not forget that because the panel members monitoring the alphabetics section didn’t read and critique the studies themselves, they were not really in a position to identify possible research flaws, contradictions, and errors. In other words, not only is the meta-analysis verifiably flawed, but also the individual studies may be flawed. Thus the “science” is even more questionable.54

Why did so few studies make it into the meta-analysis when the field of reading has literally thousands of studies on the subject? If we accept that the panel established rigorous criteria, don’t we need to question those criteria if so few studies in the history of the profession were appropriate? Perhaps we need to question the panel’s medical model rather than wondering why so few studies met the criteria. Given that hundreds of research studies are conducted yearly, if that model were indeed an accurate tool for assessing the reading process, wouldn’t the majority of the professionals in the field adopt it?

As we have seen, some of the sections didn’t even adhere to the criteria the panel established in the first place and included studies that were not experimental. Furthermore, the panel made subjective decisions not only in the selection but in the interpretations as well. Here is a direct quote from the report that contradicts its own claim to scientific accuracy:

Where there were too few studies that satisfied the panel’s criteria to permit a meta-analysis, the panel made a decision to conduct a more subjective-qualitative [emphasis mine] analysis to
provide the best possible information about an instructional topic. (The Summary Booklet, p. 5)

In fact, the section on comprehension was based on just such a subjective, nonscientific analysis. Too few studies in that section met the panel’s original selection criteria (4-42). Recall that the Comprehension subcommittee arbitrarily concluded that its analysis supported direct instruction. On the other hand, it dismissed the hundreds of studies supporting SSR. There were too few studies for both SSR and explicit instruction to meet their selection criteria. However, the panel accepted the nonscientific findings for direct instruction but rejected those for SSR. Why? Because the SSR studies were not scientific! While I might not agree that the findings of the Comprehension subcommittee were totally objective, at least it recognized the complexity of the reading process and did what the Alphabets committee should have done. It admitted that the original medical model was inappropriate and unrealistic and that an honest, relevant meta-analysis could not be conducted given the complexity of the reading process, the few studies that were available, and the diversity in each study’s respective outcomes.

It sounds as if the majority of the reading researchers don’t use the medical model in their studies. Why did the panel decide it was appropriate?

Here we will recall that the majority of the panel was comprised of cognitive psychologists and professional researchers. The vast majority of them are not classroom teachers and never actually taught children to read; consequently, their worldview is colored and shaped by a very narrow, misguided perspective. We all know that children are complex and that learning cannot be broken into little pieces that all fit neatly together in some controlled experiment. If the process of reading were so simple that we could squeeze it into a single formula, then with all the quick-fix, cure-all methods that have paraded across the educational scene, we would have figured out by now how to ensure that “no child is left behind.” Oh, and we’d all be doing it, wouldn’t we?
Yet another factor can distort the judgment of scientific researchers. Because they are only with students briefly—they come into classrooms, experiment on their “subjects,” and then leave—they don’t experience the complex interactions that color teaching and learning. In fact, such complexities are inconvenient and undesirable in experimental research, which, by its very definition, strips away complexities in order to focus on a single, clean “variable” and a single, easily measured “outcome.” The big picture cannot be a consideration in what experimental researchers do or they could not measure it. Isn’t this obvious from the few studies the panel included in its analysis?

Do any of us really believe that out of the thousands of studies that have been conducted in the entire field of research on phonics, only thirty-eight were good enough for the panel? And don’t forget, the panel itself determined that at least twelve of those studies were of questionable reliability. Most researchers in the field of reading recognize that the reading process is not as cut and dried as the panel would have us believe.

This panel, then, was not by any means a cross-section of the reading profession. Panel member Joanne Yatvin states that certain members of the NRP made virtually all the decisions. Teacher-practitioners such as Joanne Yatvin, as well as the lone parent on the Alphabetsics subcommittee, were in a sense token members. The decisions were made by the scientists.56

But even though the scientific medical model the panel claimed to use was inappropriate for complex reading behaviors, from what you’ve documented, the results still don’t support their claims. I guess what I’m asking is, “Did they just deliberately misrepresent the findings?”

I guess what I’m answering is, “I don’t know.” I will say this, however. When panel members are painted into a corner as they were by my published, tightly documented critique of the NRP, they make only vague, general admissions to errors and contradictions. They will not stand up and admit that their research was not valid, reliable, or generalizable, much less that the results do not
support the conclusion that “systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten [through] 6th grade and for children having difficulty learning to read.” They admit the report contains flaws and contradictions, but they will not themselves delineate what they were. Quite frankly, the panel’s admissions to “mistakes” remind me of the vague confessions made by politicians when they are caught in some impropriety: “I’m not perfect. I’ve made mistakes...” without articulating the specific nature of these mistakes or accepting the responsibility for amending them.

But—this panel claims to be “objective.” Are their evasions deliberate?

Again, I must say that I don’t know. However, there are some facts that we need to address even though it is awkward, even embarrassing to do so. There are questions that are entirely appropriate for us to ask, as this report was funded with our tax dollars and will impact our education system from preschool through university settings.

We all know that in the judicial system, judges and lawyers recuse, or remove themselves from any procedures in which they have even a small personal, professional, political, or financial interest. The purpose for doing so isn’t because such involvement establishes wrongdoing. The reason is that in matters of great importance, it is essential that those in control be above suspicion. They must conduct themselves in such a way that there is not even the appearance of impropriety. We have the right to expect that panel members claiming objectively would also recuse themselves from research that would advance their own personal interests.

Surely, then, when the panel was established, Congress and the NICHD ensured that the panel represented a truly balanced, objective group of researchers.

Unfortunately, research is not held to the same standard as proceedings in the judicial system. The scientific researchers on the
National Reading Panel had vested interests in the outcome of the report both professionally and, unfortunately, financially.

**WHAT SOME PANEL MEMBERS HAD AT STAKE IN THE NRP RESULTS**

**The Professional Stakes**

The professional careers of many of the panel members have been established on experimental research. If they admitted the results of their “landmark study” did not confirm their deeply ingrained philosophies, they would be negating the lifetime of work on which their reputations have been built. I’m not suggesting that such bias is even conscious, but let me ask you this: Isn’t it difficult to admit that you are wrong in even minor, personal decisions? How many of us could really step back and say, “This evidence shows that virtually everything I’ve ever accomplished, everything on which I’ve built my career and professional reputation is irrelevant and just plain wrong”?

**The Financial Stakes**

Another factor that clouds the credibility of the panel’s findings are the financial interests of some panel contributors and the connections of McGraw-Hill Publishing to the Bush administration. I started to make a flow chart establishing the relationships, but I discovered that they are so intertwined it was impossible to do so. It was like trying to establish a “flow” in a plate of worms. I’ll start with the contributors to the National Reading Panel and work my way through the connections from the research—to the profits of McGraw-Hill—to the links with the Department of Education and the Bush administration.

*Marilyn Jager Adams.* Marilyn Jager Adams is a contributor to the NRP. She is the author of the government-sponsored report, *Beginning to Read*. She is also a coauthor of Open Court, published by McGraw-Hill. This government-supported researcher is cited
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