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War, What is it Good For? An Essay Review

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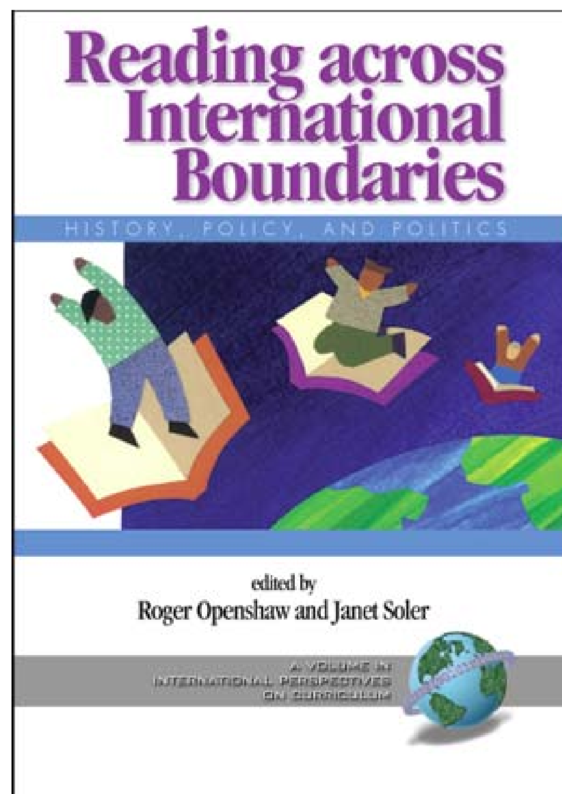
Anyone who is inclined to think that the "Reading Wars" are over, or that the main warriors in these wars are only professional educators and researchers who support either whole language or phonics approaches to reading will continuously rethink their views during the reading of *Reading across International Boundaries: History, Policy, and Politics*. Openshaw and Soler have compiled a collection of essays that makes visible the ignored warriors in the literacy debates—the policy planners and "policy entrepreneurs, " to borrow a term from Hall, who have found their places on the frontline of the battlegrounds with the power of dominance as their weapon of choice. A central theme of this book is that the politicization of literacy in public debates has consistently shown itself to be the winning warrior. Ironically, though, none of the warriors has been able to achieve one of the major 'stated' objectives of the war—the removal of performance gaps between mainstream and non-mainstream students.

As the title of the book suggests, the articles presented here cross the boundaries of English speaking countries, namely England, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia. Using comparative examples of the interactions between policies and reading teaching practices, the ten essays in this volume show how the teaching of reading is shaped by historical, political, and social contexts. Consequently, this collection of essays not only pinpoints similarities and differences across international boundaries, but also contributes new insights into critical literacy theories. To be sure, the astute reader will leave the book with a new arsenal of weapons for understanding the political and pedagogical nature of the reading wars, schooling, and education policies.



The four introductory chapters in part one of *Reading across International Boundaries* set the context for the remaining chapters by examining policy development in two countries that have stood on opposite sides of the battleground—New Zealand, a government supported holistic approach to teaching reading (chapters one and two), and England a government supported skill-based, phonics approach to teaching reading (chapters three and four). A theme that runs throughout part one is that despite differences in the dominant pedagogy of the two countries, each has a similar winning warrior—centralized reading programs that are aligned with the politics of the country. In chapter one, Openshaw reconstructs the rise and fall of respect for New Zealand as a nation with close alignments between education policies and reading teaching practices. The rise was marked by the highly acclaimed holistic approach to literacy that served as an model for other nations, and the fall by evidence of failures of this dominant method to achieve one of its major strategic objectives: "closing the achievement gap" between low-income and middle/high-income students. Openshaw argues that "far from being an antipodean exemplar against which shortcomings elsewhere in the world can be measured" (p. 4), the New Zealand experience demonstrates that whether reading programs have or do not have official governmental endorsement, as in the United

States and England, "the political and economic imperatives that encourage relatively simplistic remedies for reading failure remain as formidable in New Zealand as they are in England and the United States" (p. 15).

The central question addressed in chapter two is why New Zealand continues to show relatively high levels of disparity between good and poor readers. Tunmer, Prochnow, Greaney, and Chapman argue that New Zealand's achievement gaps are triggered largely by a constructivist, whole language orientation to teaching reading. Challenging the government supported holistic approaches to reading, these authors point to the failures of holistic methods to close the achievement gap. At the heart of the problem, they argue, are the different amounts of cultural capital that students possess at school entry. From their perspective, the most promising strategy for closing the gap is to emphasize differential instruction by requiring literacy teachers and remedial specialists to use research-based assessment procedures and instructional strategies "to cater [to] the differing skill needs of beginning readers, with particular attention focused on developing word-level skills and strategies during the early stages of literacy learning" (p. 37). However, those familiar with skill-drill problems encountered by other countries, including the United States, might question the validity of this argument on the grounds that the real goal of reading, i.e., comprehension, tends to suffer if there is not a delicate balance between teaching decoding skills and helping children to read for meaning. The shift in emphasis that Tunmer and his colleagues speak of is in operation in England.

Turning attention to England, Soler (chapter 3) asserts that the dominant narrative in public debate has shifted from the constructivist grounded whole language approach to a skill-based phonics approach, reflecting a shift from a 'liberal-humanist' discourse towards a 'managerial' discourse. Examining the links between the changing narratives in public debate over literacy, Soler traces inquiries into primary education from the 1992 Report on Primary School Teaching Methods to the 1998 National Literacy Strategy, and the more recent Rose report, named after Jim Rose, the Chief Primary Inspector in the Schools Inspectorate. Soler's discussion foreshadows themes that recur in public debates throughout the book, e.g., standards setting, testing, the commonsense and overly simplistic one-size-fits all mentality, and the education-centered electoral platforms of aspiring elected officials. Soler asserts that the public debate over literacy in the early 1990s helped facilitate a "commonsense consensus that literacy standards were low and a notion that the purposes of schooling were changing" (p. 50). In turn, this led to the replacement of a child-centered vision of primary teachers with a technicist view that stressed basic skills, controlled by market mechanisms and specific and prescribed methods. Thus, the dominant liberal-humanist narrative in England

has given way to a managerial discourse that advocates for a systemic phonics approach in general and the synthetic phonics approach in particular.

The synthetic approach to phonics where emphasis is placed on letter-by-letter phonological decoding, as opposed to an analytic approach where emphasis is placed on phonological units and spelling patterns, is further explained in chapter 3 by Hall. She describes the Rose report as framing policies in such a way that the solution would lead naturally to a synthetic phonics-based, one-size fits all instructional program. Relevant to the Rose Report, Hall argues that a policy text that is rhetorical and persuasive, seeks "not merely to describe a reality but to do so in a way that legitimates a particular course of action" (p. 60). For Hall, the important point is "that synthetic and analytic phonics are linked—they are not dichotomous, 'either-or' teaching approaches" (p. 58). As Hall explains, both large and small phonological units are necessary for reading; therefore, comparing the effectiveness of analytic and synthetic phonics methods of teaching is neither useful nor appropriate. Moreover, it is unwise to suggest that teachers should privilege one method of developing phonics knowledge for readers of English. Why? Because "a consistent orthography (e.g., German) lends itself to a more systematic teaching by a synthetic phonics method, whereas an inconsistent orthography like English demands more varied and complex methods of teaching" (p. 59). Consequently, more than one method of teaching decoding will be helpful in England's classrooms.

Hall uses the discussion of the synthetic-analytic phonics debate to contextualize her discussion of policies that are treated in the second part of the book. By demonstrating the connection between literacy policy and policy literacy, a double entendre that is captured by the title of her article, "Literacy Policy and Policy Literacy," Hall is able to explain both the process of making literacy policies and steps needed to become policy literate. Simply put: "[p]olicymaking is at least as much about the construction and foregrounding of problems in a way that captivates the public imagination so that the public is unaware of other problems or that other problems, if identified, are less urgent ones and do not merit prominence at the level of the state" (p. 64). She cautions us that "it is a mistake to assume that problems necessarily precede policy" (p. 63). Chronologically, the solution may come first and then the problem follows as was the case in the Clackmanshire study, which made the reading pedagogy salient for the British public by claiming to show the merits of synthetic phonics. Thus, in the case of reading approaches, synthetic phonics was a simple solution and a problem was quickly constructed to fit it. The important point here is that synthetic and analytic phonics are linked, rather than dichotomous, and that political solutions often precede, rather than follow, the construction of problems.

Herein lies the discursive role of policy and, in turn, the need for those who are interested in “shaping literacy policy and practice to be increasingly policy literate” (p. 64). A first step toward becoming policy literate, proposes Hall, is “to recognize the complexity and nonlinearity of the policy process, and specifically recognize that a society’s problems are not always or necessarily the initial focus of policymaking. “While government is always likely to make decisions about education on a political basis,” warns Hall, “academics and professionals individually and collectively within their learned societies and with the voting public have to do their utmost to at least temper what they see as misguided decisions and, if possible, change them” (p. 65).

Not to be overlooked is Hall’s foreshadowing of recurring themes about the economic benefits associated with large scale mandates for particular methods of teaching reading: many of the people who were intimately involved in shaping policy mandates for synthetic phonics were “heavily oriented toward synthetic phonics and some of those who offered opinions, referred to as evidence in the report, had commercial interests in synthetic phonics materials” (p. 62). Directly put: “Phonics is ‘big business’ with financial rewards awaiting anyone who invents the best scheme or programme for teaching it” (p. 62). What can be gleaned, then, from the introductory chapters in part one of the book is that the policy rhetoric remains the same across international boundaries: the dominant political view shapes public perceptions and greatly influences schooling practice, regardless of what educational professions, including teachers, know and what students need.

Part two shifts the focus from the ‘macropolitics’ of national debates to ways that policies impact teachers and children. The three articles in part two cross the international boundaries of the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. A common theme that runs through the chapters in part two is that teachers are drawn into the reading wars as foot servants, serving largely to make externally mandated curricula work in the classroom.

In chapter five, Ylimaki and McClain report on their research on teacher and administrators’ responses to national mandates for improving academic achievement in reading/literacy in the United States. Their findings indicate that teachers and administrators in California remain highly committed to exemplary holistic literacy reforms and practices. However, they admit being under enormous political pressures to conform to ideological processes inherent in mandated state and national policies, such as No Child Left Behind which favors phonics approaches to teaching reading. Facing disparate ideological viewpoints and requirements, teachers and administrators in this study seem to have developed a sophisticated code-switching strategy in order to silence their real

pedagogical views while conforming to the demands of a dominant, conservative ideology. According to Ylimaki and McClain, the local curriculum language is coded with the terms from the dominant discourse, but underlying this coded language are educators' own ideologies. And so, the coding of language to conceal one's true pedagogical beliefs represents one of the important impacts of policies on practices. Another perceived impact, based on this study, is the view that services to low-achieving and ESL students are qualitatively diminished. Under the banner of closing achievement gaps, the children most likely to be left behind are those who have been well documented as being at risk of school failure. Ylimaki and McClain conclude that the disconnect between reading practices and policies implies that "these current policies are, at least in part, more about the dominance of conservative ideology in the United States" (p. 82).

Following the release of the results of an international study of the literacy performance of 15 year olds, Australia's Ministry of Education initiated a study of the literacy performance of its students, the results of which were reported in the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy report. In chapter six, Comber and Cormack report on responses to this report, based on their critical discourse analysis of the press releases and related media events of the Federal Minister. Using their results, Comber and Cormack outline the policy context of recent federal government literary interventions in Australia. Solutions offered in the National Inquiry report, note Comber and Cormack, represent a radical shift from constitutionally sanctioned authority at the state level to nationally controlled authority over what happens in classrooms on a day-to-day basis. Emphasizing the science, rather than the art, of teaching, the national inquiry report inadvertently elevated the role of researchers to curriculum experts, leaving the classroom teacher to become "a cipher for applying expertly designed techniques and tests" (p. 106).

Interestingly, though, Comber and Cormack carefully explain that the inquiry process avoided directly blaming teachers, but instead placed the blame on teaching, thereby implicating teacher education programs as the key culprits. By focusing on teaching rather than teachers, the report established a rationale for radical interventions in teacher education. The problem, they assert, is that the solutions offered by the national inquiry were shaped by committee members who were biased in favor of phonics. The overall impact, they argue, is that the teacher is "denied any agency in the process of teaching beyond selecting from strategies authorized by scientific researchers and guided by approved assessment data, once again provided by scientifically proven diagnostic tools" (p. 102).

Chapter seven describes the impact of national policies on teachers in New Zealand. Cullen provides an analysis of theoretical, systemic, and sector-based issues that impact literacy education. Recall that the mandated teaching practices

were already aligned theoretically with sociocultural theories and pedagogically with the constructivist teaching framework. One of the key impacts of policies on teaching came with criticisms of the failures of the schools to remove the gaps in achievement. According to Cullen, the New Zealand Ministry of Education moved from a 'Closing the Gap view,' which came to be associated with deficit-oriented teaching, to a 'Credit view,' in which teachers are expected "to make a difference by acknowledging cultural meanings and practices" (p. 112). Regarding solutions, Cullen implies that the solution rests with neither the credit view nor the closing the gap view, but with a balance between the two. As he put it, successful implementation would involve a stronger articulation of what it actually means to acknowledge cultural meanings in practice. Cullen concludes that if entrenched teaching practices are to change, both sides must "revisit their approaches to skills, taking into consideration the increasingly robust evidence that supports the significance of competencies such as phonemic awareness…" (p. 125). This proposed solution is reminiscent of the Balanced Approach that was offered as a solution to the reading wars in the United States.

Part three treats the question of what literacies are relevant in today's increasingly multicultural and multimodal world, a question that is often ignored in the media and by national literacy initiatives. The chapters in part three present different types of literacy that need to be considered in today's society: literacy beyond the boundaries of traditional print media, evolving cultural literacy programs, and beyond the boundaries of what has come to be called basic home and school-based literacies. As such, this final section of the book calls attention to the sum of social practices related to social, institutional, and cultural relationships and to the ways that multiple types of literacies are affecting schooling and societal patterns in today's increasingly multicultural and multimodal world.

In chapter seven, LaSpina frames his discussion of literacy beyond the boundaries of traditional print media around three trends that are shaping the form and content of K-8 instructional textbooks: "the revolutionary impact of digital technology on the design of textbooks; the political standardization wrought by an 'English-only' core curriculum; and …a global diaspora of immigrant English learners into the state public schools" (p. 131). Drawing from his analysis of textbook adoption processes, LaSpina paints a picture of not only the technological, but also the political and pedagogical dimensions of what has become a complex set of textbook selection procedures. Along the way, he identifies caveats that evolved in the selection of social studies textbooks.

In examining the debates over the adoption of social science textbooks, LaSpina reports concerns expressed over how technology has affected the literary quality of digital text, a decline that precipitated the shift from words to images, and later from page to screen. One caveat was that the textbook offerings

approved for classroom use reflected not only the transition from page to screen, but choice dictated less by "the patterns of pedagogical consumption than the diktat[e] of political necessity and the forces of cultural reaction" (p. 142).

Looking specifically at the second and third trends, both of which deal with English Language Learners, LaSpina explains connections between English-Only legislation and two political events in California –Proposition 227 and the establishment of content and performance standards. Arguing that the debates were really about who would dominate and determine education policy, LaSpina goes on to note that the policies were shaped by the dominant conservative ideology that pervaded all aspects of instruction, including the design and selection of textbooks. Obviously the replacement of whole language with phonics based approaches to reading and of bilingual programs with monolingual, English-Only programs profoundly affected the content of instructional materials. Less obvious is that even with the visual learning strategies already present in textbooks, features in social studies textbooks, "like graphic organizers and visual/verbal dictionaries that were specifically designed to make the text more accessible for English Language Learners," suggests LaSpinza, "became more of a burden than a boon" (p. 141). Indeed, elementary schools in major school districts, pressed to meet the legislated mandates, began to devote the time usually spent on social studies to teaching programs phonics-centered reading programs. Middle schools, pressed to raise standards, selected textbooks with high readability levels. "Even with all the visuals and graphics, the texts designed for an era of excellence were now barely accessible to English learners" (p. 144). Two caveats are noted: visual learning returned to textbooks with the aid of reading specialists, but "it was largely superficial and gimmicky"; and the most common graphic devices "appeared more as a selling device, used to engage the eye of potential buyers, than one used for learning" (p. 144).

Consistently, LaSpina seeks balance in the way he presents his arguments. Thus, on the positive side, LaSpina describes some of the ways that the technologies used in textbooks enabled English Language Learners (ELLs) to gain greater access to the information presented in social studies textbooks. For example, in the social studies-history textbooks adopted in 2005, the audio student text allowed ELLs to "model their pronunciation of words and text on a precisely articulated computer-generated voice of the text in view on screen. Any section of the text could be listened to as much as needed. And, vocabulary covered in the content of a lesson could also be listened to and reviewed as needed."

Though not exhaustive, this description gives the reader a sense of the wealth of knowledge that LaSpina provides on the ways that technology has influenced the form and the content of textbooks. It is easy to see that while he focuses primarily on social studies textbooks, similar features are found in other

textbooks. Also valuable are his descriptions of textbook adoption processes. The complexities of adopting textbooks and the many factors that influence textbook selections foster a better understanding of how teachers can manage textbooks, rather than being managed by them. Clearly, multimodal and multicultural literacies are among the most important developments in instruction today, as they mirror some of the most challenging aspects of life in a world that is becoming more multicultural in its make-up and more multimodal in its ways of communicating and getting things done.

A different aspect of multicultural understandings is treated in chapter nine, which calls attention to a growing interest in developing cultural literacy programs, what we might call reading beyond the boundaries of cultural literacy. Nozaki focuses her discussion on what she calls Asia literacy, "the knowledge held by people… about the history, culture, and people of Asian nations" (p. 155). Her discussion moves us from Asia literacy to Critical Asia literacy. To explain this move, Nozaki draws on her study of U.S. middle school students' writing on Japan. In this research she uses discourse analysis to analyze the students' writing. As she puts it: discourse analysis assumes that "a discourse speaks through an individual, not that an individual speaks a discourse" (p. 157). Accordingly, discourse analyses require a critical reading of the data, rather than an interpretive reading of the subjective meanings, intentions, and contexts of individuals. She therefore bases her findings and conclusions on how students speak through their discourse in developing Asia literacy.

Nozaki found two prevalent patterns in her data: one she calls "the discourse of othering' and the other 'orientalism'. " The discourse of othering is represented by rigid binary distinctions in the form of "us versus "them" (p. 158). Orientalism is defined as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western existence" (p. 161); therefore, Orientalist discourse represents the Orient's special place in European Western existence as if these special places in the Orient and European West were mutually exclusive entities. Whereas the disourse of Otherness constructs a distinct and infereior Other, Orientalism functions "as a Western style for domination, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 162). She concluded that these two qualities made for a well defined but misguided understanding of Asian culture, resulting in a deficient Asia literacy and therefore distorted understandings of the history, culture, and people of Asian nations. From this perspective, she uses hegemony, "a domination that is achieved not by direct use of force but through everyday social, cultural and ideological practices" (p. 156) to explain the features of the discourse of otherness and orientalism found in students' writing.

Nozaki maintains that the discourses of Otherness and Orientalism both challenge and extend our understandings of what constitutes Asia Literacy. Because of the results of her critical examination of what constitutes Asia literacy in the minds of these American students, Nozaki warns us that cultural literacy programs could reinforce stereotypes reflective of a hegemonic stance towards other nations. Accordingly, she emphasizes the need for educators to move from the development of Asia literacy to Critical Asia literacy in ways that enable cultural literacy programs to become part of a counter hegemonic stance. Nozaki therefore outlines critical classroom strategies that emphasize cultural hybridity, fluidity, and the complexity of power relationships within and across nations. A powerful aspect of the strategies offered is their applicability to developing cultural literacies of other groups, whether defined by culture, ethnicity, gender, age or other categories subject to the phenomenon of 'Othering' and '-isms'.

In the final chapter of *Reading across International Boundaries,* Jackie Marsh, reminds us to "mind the gaps" between home and school literacy practices. This chapter focuses on home and school-based literacies beyond those typically found in the literature on home-school discontinuities. Marsh draws on two studies conducted in England that required over 1,800 parents to complete a questionnaire detailing their children's use of popular culture, media, and new technologies in the home, followed by interviews with six parents. In this article, Marsh reports on three areas that emerged as most significant in her analysis of data: "the range of texts accessed in homes and schools, individual and shared reading, and reading spaces and places" (p. 172).

Marsh found that the range of texts that students read outside of school is much richer than that read in school. Outside of school, children's reading included computer games, websites, chat rooms, and text messages. Regarding individual and shared reading in homes, she found prevalent patterns of reading as an individual activity, while in school, the prevalent patterns of reading were found in whole and small group reading. Regarding space and place, she found that in homes, bedrooms were significant social spaces for children engaged in individual reading activities, while shared spaces, e.g., family rooms and kitchens, were used most frequently with media activities. In schools, few opportunities exist for children to find quiet spaces for individual reading, and media type reading takes place in special spaces such as corners of classrooms.

Marsh concludes that reading in homes is undergoing a transformation "due to technological advances and changing social practices around reading" (p. 183). She ends the article with a discussion of implications of her research for removing discontinuities between home and school reading practices. In essence, then, she reminds us that 'minding the textual gap' between home and school-based literacies continues to be one of the most important tasks for educators in

the current educational climate. And of course, this would involve expanding our home and school-based literacies to include knowledge about how media and popular culture can be more highly valued and better integrated into children's in-school experiences.

In this review, I have tried to highlight the recurring themes that bind the content of these ten chapters into a whole book. Three super-themes of the book are a) the interconnections across boundaries of English speaking nations, b) the similarities and differences in experiences with reading/literacy wars, and c) the debates over the efficacy of whole language vs phonics approaches to reading. In support of the super-themes are the recurring supportive themes for the reading/literacy wars are three sub-themes: a) the consistent use of research to interrogate different dimensions of so-called literacy crises; b) legislated policies to solve the literacy crises that results in c) external national and locally controlled mandates for literacy curriculum and instruction.

In support of the super theme of similarities and difference in experiences of different English speaking nations, the sub-themes are best represented by similar sequencing of patterns in the policy debates: reports that create literacy crises, followed by legislation to solve the crises, resulting in external national and locally controlled mandates for improving curriculum and instruction.

Finally, three sub-themes that support debates over the efficacy of holistic vs. phonics-based approaches are a) the call for scientific-based instructional practices; b) the reduction of teachers as agency in pedagogical decisions; and c) the call for extending the dialogue of literacy to include multicultural and multimodal literacies that prepare students better for the world of the 21st century.

In this review, I have tried to make explicit the ties that create cohesive links across the ten chapters of the book. The chapters are organized so that the reader first gets a sense of the context in which the content of the book is presented. Thus, chapters in part one of the book foreshadow the issues that the reader will encounter in the remaining parts of the book. Part two makes explicit much of the implicit knowledge that the intended audiences for the book bring to the reading of the text. Having made implicit knowledge more explicit, part three taps into what will be many readers' unconscious knowledge of multicultural and multimodal literacies, thereby bringing the reader to a more conscious awareness of mulitliteracies that are either present or coming soon to schools in the 21st century. In short, the organization of the content of *Reading across International Boundaries: History, Policy, and Politics* around policy, literacy pedagogy, and critical literacy pedagogy creates the cohesive ties that allow the reader to experience the book as an enjoyable reading experience where the whole literally becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

If I had one wish for this book, it would be for an author index and a subject index. I believe that indexes greatly improve the accessibility of information. If I had the opportunity to offer one suggestion to readers, it would be to follow the reading of this book with *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's schools* by David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle. I believe that their book helped me, an American educator/linguist put much of what was discussed in this book in proper perspective. Another book that helps to put the issues in perspective for me is in press, *Affirming Students' Rights to their Language: Meeting the Challenges of Bridging Language Policies and Language Practices,* edited by Jerrie C. Scott, Dolores Straker, and Laurie Katz. Like *Reading across International Boundaries,* this latter book extends the boundaries beyond English speaking nations to European, Asian, and African nations.

Evidence that the Reading Wars of old are continuing today on both familiar and newly evolving battlegrounds is ever present in this book. The old battlegrounds continue to keep warriors with specific political agendas on the frontlines, while new battlegrounds are being established as the new realities of our multimodal and multicultural world beg for transformative actions in the pedagogical world of preparing the young for the challenges that come with growth in the 21st century. In the continuing battles of the reading/literacy wars, professional educators will not be the only ones on the frontlines, but so will those who make the policies and negotiate the ways that policies will be carried out.

As this collection of essays shows, the political divide cannot be neatly bridged between conservation and liberal political ideologies. Nor can the pedagogical divide be explained simply by dichotomies like skill-based vs. holistic approaches to reading or print vs. digital literacies. It is up to all of us, to all warriors, including politicians, political entrepreneurs, educators and children, to replace discord and confusion with hybridity and fluidity both within and across national boundaries. In the words of a popular song from the 1960s, one might pose the question—"War, War, what is it good for?" And like the response in the song suggests—absolutely nothing. Rather, the time is ripe for warring factions to come together in an honest effort to conserve our energy and direct it toward more productive efforts to save the children, as well as the teachers, parents, professional educators, and political leaders who, like it or not, are now their keepers, and who must take responsibility for the time when the children will become the keepers.

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