

## Toward a Good or Better Understanding of Best Practices

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This commentary argues that seeking best practices in literacy instruction is not a good pursuit for the field. Instead, it argues that it would be better for the field to identify good practice, better practice, and malpractice. Further, it discusses the possible meanings of best practice and why each meaning is inadequate, relatively meaningless, or potentially misleading when compared to the concepts of good and better practice. These possible meanings include best practice as relatively good practice, as what most or expert teachers do, as achievement of valued outcomes, and as scientific evidence. Lastly, this commentary discusses why focusing on good and better practice would be better for the field and suggests some implications of that shift in perspective.

### Introduction

In this commentary I argue that thinking about *good* or *better* practices in literacy instruction is better than thinking about *best* practices. Abandoning a quest for the best would be good, I believe, for the field. It would better our practice and better our understanding of how research can inform our practice. Perhaps a good way to start is to think about the words *good*, *better*, and *best*. As we know, they are grammatical companions for making judgments about the value of anything that can be assessed or compared. Here are some examples of the three comparative forms applied to practices in literacy instruction.

A statement in the absolute comparative form would be “Engaging children in critical reading is *good* practice.” In other words there isn’t any claim that critical reading is better practice than any other practice and certainly no claim that it is best of all practices. Nonetheless, there is a quiet dignity and subtle power in knowing that something is inherently good. It is a foundation upon which many things can be built. It provides confidence that we are on firm footing when engaging in practice that is aimed at achieving important and valued instructional goals.

Now for a statement that illustrates the comparative form: “Teaching literacy skills in meaningful contexts is *better* practice than using worksheets that teach skills isolated from meaningful contexts.” In that case, there is an assertion that one practice is better than another. However, logically speaking, that assertion does not mean necessarily that using worksheets is always bad, nor does it rule out a situation in which worksheets might actually be good or even better than something else. In other words, the implication of the comparative form suggests that skills in context may be better *in general* or *in specific situations*. Although there may be a risk, when better is asserted unequivocally, that some may construe it to mean that one thing is *always better* (e.g., that meaningful contexts are always better and should always be used), and even that the lesser of the pair being compared is bad (i.e., that worksheets are always bad and should never be used). But importantly, for the argument here, there is no implication that either practice is the *best* (or worst) practice.

Using the comparative may help give us direction or provide a starting point for making decisions about our practice. So, *better* is a more action-oriented, decision-making cousin to the quiet but firm dignity and subtle power of *good*. But, asserting that one thing is better than another in general doesn't automatically abdicate us from our responsibility to make informed professional judgments, nor does it offer a warranty for success or an insurance policy against failure. It implies decision-making and informed choice and is implicitly relative. It is still open to interpretation in context and to other possibilities.

On the other hand, *best*, the superlative member of this comparative family of words, is the boastful big brother to good and better. It makes little room for doubt, for alternatives, for contingencies, and for qualification. In short, there is no room for ifs, ands, or buts. Thus, it paints a veneer of confidence over nuance and equivocation. It gives comfort to those who are attracted to or feel a need for absolutes, but it also naturally inspires arguments. Which is the best team in baseball or football? Whose statistics carry the most weight? Did the best team really win the World Series or the Super Bowl? Or, to choose a more volatile and controversial example: What is the best religion? *Best* seems inherently subjective even when it is asserted objectively.

Now, we all know at this point how we might construct an example of the superlative form using *best*, but I've tried unsuccessfully to come up with a good (would it be presumptuous to reach for the best?) example related to literacy practices. That is, I tried to come up with an example that would be substantive and that, despite the subjective, argumentative nature of *best*, would create virtually no disagreement among literacy educators and researchers. So, I ask you, the reader, to pause here and to provide your own example, for surely there must be at least one good, if not best, example of best practices, or perhaps one that is better than most, especially given how often such best practices are asserted, of late, to exist. To make things easier, here is a template that you can use to develop your own example:

*Considering all the possible instructional practices for  
teaching/developing/instilling [choose one]  
[insert your favorite aspect of literacy here],  
[insert a practice here]  
is the best practice of all.*

If you had difficulty filling in the blanks, you may be starting to think that I'm making a good point; but better points, I hope, are in the offing. Please read on.

Nonetheless, those readers who believe they have a good or perhaps an outstanding example of best practices, or at least one that is better than most, are invited to email it to me at: reinkin@clemson.edu. I will select the best example among all those submitted and use it whenever I can as the best

example of best practices, and thus moderate, if not abandon, my argument here. I won't be sure which is the better choice (i.e., moderating or abandoning), of course, until I see if there are some good examples, and perhaps one best example that silences my argument completely.

### **Best Practice as Relatively Good Practice**

But, maybe I'm being too literal. Maybe *best practice* in literacy instruction means something different? Maybe it means simply the higher end on a scale of quality, like buying a mattress: this mattress is *good* quality, this one is *better*, and this one is our *best*. I know this is a tired example, but it was the best I could think of. Try as I might, the examples from literacy instruction I conjured using this view seemed lame, at best (or at worst?). For example, we might say something like "discussion after students have read a story is *good practice*, encouraging inferential, not just literal thinking during the discussion is *better practice*, and encouraging divergent thinking and student-to-student interaction is *best practice*."

At least viewing *good*, *better*, and *best* in this way I could generate some potentially useful (i.e., good) examples of what best practice might be. Such a distinction between *good*, *better*, and *best* might even be useful to characterize the escalating competence over the career of a teacher who, for example, moves from student teacher, to classroom teacher with several years experience, to a literacy coach with a master's degree. In other words, a teacher's practice presumably goes from *good*, to *better*, to *best*, at least when compared to her or his own expertise and levels of success over time.

But, viewing best practice that way leads to the humble recognition that none of us can ever attain *the* best practice. That is, there is no best practice nirvana where there is no room for more improvement. There is no ultimate level of highest quality practice that can be achieved. In that sense, *good*, *better*, and *best* are only arbitrary points on a never-ending scale of increasing competence and success.

Of course, there is another problem with this approach. The scale of competence may work both ways depending on one's perspective. For example, we could extrapolate the scale downward so that some instructional practices might start at the *worst* possible level, progress to a level that is only notably *worse* than just the ordinarily *bad*. In such instances, would bad, be the best practice? So, using arbitrary points on a relative scale doesn't provide much specificity about what we mean by *best practice*.

Further, I wonder if it's any easier, or even possible, to define *good*, *better*, and *best* if we cannot define *bad*, *worse*, and *worst*. Should it be easier to identify best practice than it is worst practice? Think about it. What would the set of the worst practices include? In fact, thinking in those terms suggests that there is a

dark side to best practice: malpractice. Cunningham (1999) has argued that we need to know what malpractice is in literacy instruction. According to Cunningham, we can't consider ourselves members of a profession until we do. So, before we induct the idea of best practice unabashedly into our professional discourse, maybe we should tackle the more fundamental, more consequential, and perhaps more attainable, goal of defining malpractice (i.e., a line below which we might identify bad, if not worse, and worst practice). That is, knowing the nadir of practice might be easier and more useful than defining best practice. In any event, why should we expect to know what best practice is if we cannot first agree about what bad, if not the worst, practice is?

There is another way of looking at *best* as being relative. But, some may reject it because it implies at least occasional failure, which some may consider to be defeatist. It can be captured in the following sentence "That's the best I (or we, they, he, she, it) can do." There is even an insulting dimension to this usage: "This is the best restaurant you can find in this godforsaken town." Or "This is the best looking date you can expect to get." In other words, my practice isn't perfect, just the best that can be expected given certain limitations and the circumstances. Is that what we mean by best practice in literacy instruction? I don't think so, but considering that possibility might reveal a reality that we sometimes deny or overlook, or worse, that we don't confront when others impose unreasonable standards on our practice. (I'm thinking here of the unreasonable assumptions behind the No Child Left Behind legislation.)

Does best practice mean infallible with no chance of failure? Is best practice bullet proof? Does best practice mean that all children exposed to it will learn to read, become highly engaged and motivated readers? Comprehend fully what they read? That all children will become at least average (i.e., good?) readers? Most of us would not accept that as a reasonable standard. Certainly no other professions do. Doctors' patients sometimes die, despite their best efforts. Some diseases are incurable. Some of the clients that lawyers defend go to jail. Is it legitimate for reading teachers to say that "Johnny didn't learn to read, but I did the best I could?" That is, I used all the best practices available, however defined, but nothing worked. In the language of the newly re-invented field of special education (Reinking & Alverman, 2006) the patient didn't respond to reading instruction after tier 1, tier 2, tier 3, tier x<sup>y</sup> treatments and ultimately failed to learn to read. Does our view of best practice accommodate occasional failure despite our best efforts? If it does, could those efforts still be considered best practice?

In some sense this best-without-success view is inherent to the teaching of reading or developing literacy in general. Doctors and lawyers are confronted with highly visible evidence of success or failure in their work: life and death, guilty and not guilty. But, teaching reading is rarely that clear-cut, at least in terms of our ultimate, most important goals.

As Paris (2005) pointed out, some skills such as learning the alphabet come close to an either-or world, because they are typically learned quickly and completely. It's usually pretty clear whether our practice has been successful (even if it wasn't the best, and thus perhaps took a little longer) or not in teaching what he called constrained skills like learning the alphabet. But teachers cannot say, "Ah, today, thanks to my best practice, Jane can finally comprehend. My work is done." Even doctors work routinely in this more open-ended realm: "Bill is reasonably healthy. He'd be healthier if he'd stop smoking and go on a diet, but he won't despite my best efforts to persuade him." As Paris has pointed out, comprehension and many other reading skills are unconstrained skills, and thus they are like health in the sense that they are never fully achieved. Or, put another way, they exist in the realm of good and better, not in the realm of best, except in an arbitrarily relative sense. By what standards do we identify best practices if literate people are always becoming more literate?

### **Best Practice as What Experts or Most Teachers Do**

Maybe we could define best practices as what expert practitioners are inclined to do. Of course, that too would beg some important questions. Are experts those with the most experience? The most success? On what basis would we determine success? Those whose practices most consistently follow the most sound (best?) pedagogical principles? The most training? Some combination of these characteristics?

But even if these questions could be answered, this approach, too, has problems. Could novices engage in best practice? Only when they emulate experts? Is it acceptable if their practice is only good, or better than most? Is that best for them at that stage? Further, even if we could agree on who the experts are, their determination of what students need and thus their practices often vary considerably (Vinsonhaler, Weinshank, Wagner & Polin, 1983).

So, are all the practices of experts what we mean by best practices, or are some practices used by some experts better than other practices used by other experts? Is there a best of the best?

A related way to look at best practices, one that begs the issue of expertise, might be to consider it to be what most practitioners do—a type of Darwinian approach or perhaps a democratic one that is respectful of practitioners' knowledge in practice. Presumably, the majority of practitioners in the field would not be using only ordinarily good practices if there were practices that worked better for them and their students, and collectively these might be considered best practices. That view is no more unreasonable than saying that the best cars are those that most people choose to buy and drive. Or, it might be akin to the way figure skating competitions are judged. The winning figure skater doesn't necessarily get the highest marks in every category, but simply the best overall score across several relevant categories.

However, if we talk about cars, that doesn't mean that the car that most people drive is the best one for everyone. When it comes to cars, if you are looking for a babe magnet, styling counts more. If you are the outdoor, off-road type, traction is key. If you are a scrooge, upkeep and maintenance costs are most important. For a reading teacher, if you teach mostly unmotivated students, you will gravitate toward practices that emphasize motivation. If you teach students who have solid decoding skills, but don't comprehend, you'll gravitate toward different practices than teachers with students who have difficulty decoding. If you don't have ready access to materials or technologies for one kind of practice, you look for another. If you are a teacher who believes that decodable texts are important, you'll use that type of text, while your good colleague down the hall might believe that trade books meet her or his goals for students. Can both practices be considered good? Why or why not? Is one better? Is one the best of all conceivable alternatives? On what basis would we decide?

These are difficult, and maybe answerable questions, which may be good for us to remind ourselves, because they reveal that it is foolish to say that there might be one best practice in all of these instances. Who in these situations is using best practice? Is best practice decidedly situational? If so, can we specify it generally and in advance or separate it from circumstances? It might be argued that once we know what good (and bad) and sometimes better practices are, the best practices are the ones that work well for us and for our students in a particular context. In other words, the pursuit of best practice may be an issue for an individual teacher, not for the field as a whole. Collectively, as a field, in this view of best practice, we might be better (best?) engaged in defining good and often better practices after perhaps we have clearly identified malpractice. Best practice, on the other hand, might be better left to individual teachers struggling to contend with the complexly interacting variables inherent to teaching. Focusing on best in any other way devalues, I believe, the skill of teaching and the professional knowledge of those who engage in it.

Thus, one advantage of defining best practice as what practitioners do is that it would be far less condescending or dismissive of the role that practitioners play in determining best practice, which is an idea firmly embedded in the literature about teaching practice (Schön, 1987). It might also counter the unfounded perception that our practices overall are in desperate need of upgrading from good to better to best. In fact, the tacit reasons for defining best practice as something that can only be obtained in the abstract and separate from the day-to-day complexity of teaching should be troubling, I believe, to our professional integrity. It assumes tacitly that what most teachers are doing isn't working well, that they don't know any better, or worse, that they are confused or being duped.

That perspective is more than a misguided besmirching of our collective reputations. It is contrary to the evidence. Despite what is likely to appear in newspapers, grant proposals, and various governmental reports, there is evidence that in the U.S. our current practices are at least good, and probably getting better because they have produced at least a modicum of success under increasingly challenging circumstances. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data show moderate increases overall and a trend toward closing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged learners (Bracey, 2004).

Those trends are noteworthy, and something we should take pride in achieving, particularly in light of dramatically changing demographics in the U.S. For example, for trend lines to be on an upward slope, no matter how slight, or for gaps to be closing, given the influx of non-English speaking students in U.S. schools, we might argue more convincingly for the idea that best practice is what many teachers must be doing, instead of seeking some elusive holy grail of best practice that is supposed to save us from perceived disaster. However, that does not mean that we should rest on our laurels or not seek glimpses of relatively better practices on the horizon. That is what professional development is all about--not seeking best practices, but seeking even better practices. The difference may be subtle, but one that has potentially profound effects on how we view our work.

However, few would advocate identifying *best* practices in any field based solely on popularity or frequency of use at any one time. Things change. New knowledge and insights emerge. Best practices today, whatever they are, are not necessarily the best practices tomorrow. That raises another problematic issue. Of what value is identifying best practice if it is always changing? Put another way, the good practices of today are replaced by the better practices of tomorrow in a cycle that makes the concept of *best* potentially stagnating. Why look further if we know absolutely what are the best practices? The best car of the year is only the best for that year. It may be better than last year's best, but may not be as good as next year's best. There is no better example (does that make it the best example?) than the changes brought about by digital technologies in the way literacy is constituted today. Can best practice happen if digital forms of communication are ignored? Thirty years ago the answer might have been yes. Today, it could be argued that ignoring digital literacies in one's practice is malpractice.

### **Best practice as achieving valued outcomes**

Considering digital literacies provides an example that opens up another possibility for determining what *best practice* is. Should best practice be defined solely in terms of effectiveness in producing demonstrable outcomes? If so, is an absolutely wonderful instructional practice that produces high (even the highest?) achievement in locating books in a library card catalog a legitimate candidate for

best practice status? Are best practices only means to any end? Where does the goal of our practice fit into what's best? For example, we all probably recoil a little when someone tells us "I know what's best for you." Shouldn't we have the same reservations when someone tells us, "I know what's best instructional practice for you?" Should we be asking first, what are the best outcomes we hope to achieve in literacy instruction, or is that implicit in identifying best practices?

Shouldn't the nomination for an instructional practice to be considered the best in some category of literacy instruction be accompanied by an explanation of why the category itself is important? Trying to find best practices tends, I think, to assume that there is widespread agreement about what the best outcomes are and cuts short important discussions about our goals. Is there such agreement in our field about the most important goals of our practice? In society? Are best practices all those that produce readers who can decode well? Are best practices those that produce readers who comprehend factual information well, but who may not be able to synthesize, interpret, or evaluate what they read? Are best practices those that produce good readers even if those readers never choose to read? Are best practices those that produce readers who can compete in the global marketplace, or, alternatively, those that produce an educated democratic citizenry? Or are best practices some set or configuration of practices that accomplish all of these things to some degree? What are the best outcomes that we should be striving for when identifying best practices?

Seeking best practices without considering the goals of practice may distract our attention from why we are engaging in some practices in the first place. The antidote, I believe, is focusing our attention on what is good practice. Asking what is good is a more philosophical question that puts us naturally into the realm of values. And, knowing clearly what we value restores a healthy balance between outcomes (i.e., ends) and practices (i.e., means). In short, focusing on good practice is a better starting point for considering our practice than focusing on best practice.

I believe there is an important point to be made here as a transition between viewing best practice as what many teachers do (the previous section), best practice as achieving valued goals (this section), and best practice as scientific evidence (the subsequent section). The point has to do with the role of research if we move away from thinking about best practice to thinking more about good and better practice. If we do make that move, I believe research will take on a more useful, realistic, beneficial, and therefore better, role in informing our practice. If we respect teachers' professional judgment to know what is best for them and their students, research plays an advisory, not a dictatorial role in informing practice. Its function would be not to establish best practice, but to provide insights about what *might* be better practice. It would be respectful of practice along the lines of the following quote from Duffy (1994),

Viewing research findings as something to be handed down as technical information ignores the reality that teachers must make strategic decisions about when to apply findings, how to adapt them to certain situations and even when it might be appropriate to ignore the findings altogether (p. 19).

Instructional research would focus on forging promising and innovative instructional practices in the crucible of actual practice, not on making head-to-head comparisons to determine which one is still standing in a tournament of elimination aimed at determining the best. Happily, there are emerging research methodologies that fit this important shift in perspective and emphasis (Reinking & Bradley, 2004).

### **Best practice as scientific evidence**

Clearly some people would take issue with the latter point of view, because they see evidence from scientific research (used here to mean the scientific method) as the answer to defining best practice. Best practices shouldn't be arbitrary, relative, less than perfectly successful, or simply what most successful teachers do. Science, they say, if done strategically and rigorously will lead us to the best practices. People, including teachers working with particular students in particular contexts, they argue, shouldn't decide what is best practice; scientific research should, although, of course, people who do science make decisions about what's important to study.

Is science the best way to get to best practice? Maybe, although I think it is important to remind ourselves that the scientific method wasn't created as a means to determine what best practice is. It was created to help us find highly predictable relations (ideally causes and effects) originally among physical (as opposed to behavioral) phenomena. The scientific method was not created specifically to help us to get things done in the world, but to understand the world in a detailed why, although certainly clearer understandings of the world might help us get things done in better ways. It is worth noting too that many great scientific discoveries have not been the result of the scientific method, but from a desire to accomplish something useful and important. The work of Pasteur, Edison, and the Wright brothers come to mind. The scientific method certainly isn't very useful in helping us make judgments about what we value, how we treat people, what makes them happy, what helps them live more fulfilling lives, and so forth. The information that the scientific method generates might inform practice, but it is not that useful for settling arguments about what best practice is, unless we attempt pathetically to turn classrooms into laboratories where everything is neatly controlled and drained of all humanity. Science is about controlling variables. Social activities like teaching are aimed at managing them to achieve a complex array of good outcomes.

For example, an engineer uses much scientific knowledge to build many different kinds of bridges. Each bridge *might* be the best bridge for its location

and purpose. But, different engineers using the same scientific principles are likely to come up with much different designs for a bridge in the same location. All of the designs might be considered good, in part because they all use the same sound scientific principles. Science also doesn't have much to say about the aesthetics or economics of a bridge, which is arguably a part of its potential goodness. Wouldn't the best bridge not only support unfailingly the weight of those who cross it, but would be particularly pleasing to the eye as well? Wouldn't it have a low cost-to-benefit ratio for those who funded its construction? Likewise, wouldn't best practices in literacy instruction not only be effective in reaching instructional goals, but also gratifying to teachers and students, and affordable and manageable from an administrative perspective?

It's hard to imagine engineers using science alone to decide what is the best bridge. So why should we think science should be the final arbiter of what are the best teaching practices, particularly because teachers must orchestrate their practice within a symphony of unpredictable variation? I doubt too that engineers spend much time thinking about whether their bridge is *the* best of all bridges that could be built. But, they may be highly motivated to insure that their bridge is a good bridge, and maybe better than the last one they built. Why should teachers expect any more or less of their own practice? I think that is one reason that a Vygotskian-inspired engineering metaphor, the scaffold, has had such wide appeal among teachers. We know that in the end our best practices are the ones that meet the needs of individual learners, scaffolding their learning from point A to point B toward desirable ends.

So, science might be useful in helping us decide that a practice is sound (i.e., based on scientific knowledge) and thus in some sense good. It may even help us determine that in general one practice seems better than another. But, it seems foolhardy to suggest that science can define what best practice is once and for all, or what works in all cases, despite government-sponsored clearing houses compiling information suggesting precisely that sentiment. That is, it might be best once in some set of circumstances, but not necessarily in all instances or circumstances.

Science helps people make good decisions, but it can't make those decisions for them. People decide what's good, better, and best for them, and they decide how scientific information will be used to make good (or sometimes bad) things happen. Knowing the physiological effects of a drug, a good doctor can use it to heal a patient maybe even using the drug to treat symptoms for which it was not specifically designed, but the same knowledge can assist an evil doctor (or some might argue, a courageously benevolent one) to kill another patient. Science might be said to have produced best practice in both instances, but only if we ignore a discussion about the goodness of our goals and the need for professional, ethical judgment. In the end, science doesn't produce a best by itself, only information that might be useful to accomplishing what some people think is good or better for themselves and others.

### **So, why are *good* and *better* better than *best*?**

One answer, as I hope this commentary has made clear, is that the concept of *best* when applied to teaching practice in general is difficult to define meaningfully and usefully. Best practice is an elusive ideal never identifiable or achievable in any meaningful sense. Best is always open to interpretation and debate, and always changing. Best is conditional, relative, contingent, contextual, and individualized. Best, as a definitive, indisputable, and stable state of knowledge or practice just isn't possible to identify, and trying to do so distracts us from more important work and gives a false impression of our work as educators.

Instead, best practice, to the extent that it is a useful concept at all, is always local and contextualized, which makes it unbecoming for the field to seek best practices across contexts and in advance of particular practice. Given that perspective, it is also unbecoming of literacy researchers to employ the scientific method in an effort to identify best practice. The long-lamented gap between research and practice is the legacy of efforts to do so (Lagemann, 2000). In short, seeking best practice isn't good for the field in the realm of research or in the realm of practice. In fact, the one reason these realms are so disjointed is a belief that best practice is attainable.

Best practice, as it is typically used in our current discourse, suggests that there are recipes for success and that teachers are cooks who should follow them. The reality is that successful teachers are more like the iron chefs of TV fame who are handed raw ingredients and who must draw on their professional knowledge and experience to blend them on the spot into dishes that are appetizing, tasty, pleasing to the eye, positively impressive to the judges, and fundamentally nutritious and safe to eat. Their knowledge and experience includes knowing a good ingredient that, for example, has lots of possibilities and what combination of ingredients is likely to produce better results than other combinations. Teachers, like the iron chef (and like engineers, to use a previous example), manage contingencies in a world where good and better are the operative ideas. *Best*, when it is relevant at all, is not an externally imposed starting point of their work, but only a highly relative and changing consequence of managing variation and contingency toward accomplishing what is good and selecting what might be better this time than another time. And, the best dish on a particular day may pale in comparison to one on another day, not to mention that the chefs who finish second or third create dishes that are much better than most.

A second response, then, is that it is better for the field to establish consensus first about what good practice is. Consensus about good practice is a useful and important foundation for practice. It establishes what we value and what our goals for practice should be. Unlike best practice, I believe that developing consensus about what good practices are can be concrete and

achievable. Who would disagree, for example, that teachers teaching young children to read must be engaged in practices aimed at helping them to become fluent in reading texts, to become readers who comprehend and think critically about what they read, and to become readers who enjoy reading. In fact, might we already have consensus that these are fundamental areas of good practice and that complete neglect of any one of them is malpractice? Are we sometimes too busy debating what best practices are that we overlook the considerable consensus about good practices that bring unity and harmony to our field and help us establish a strong sense of professionalism?

A third response is that focusing on better practices keeps us moving forward but without the finality, certainty, false security or endless debates inspired by the belief that there are best practices. It fosters innovation (e.g., "Might there be a better way?") and leaves room for reflection, discussion and dialogue. It also inspires research that is based on the conditional and contingent rather than on the scientific absolutes of cause and effect. Acknowledging, for example, multiple avenues for instantiating good practices, while acknowledging that some may be better in certain, but not all, circumstances would be, I believe, a healthy shift in the field's thinking and in the way we conceptualize, conduct, and interpret research findings. Better is more in tune with the reality that all good practice is exercised conditionally and that conditional knowledge is most essential to professional practice. In short, focusing on better practices is better than focusing on best practices.

I believe that distinguishing between *good*, *better*, and *best* is more than an exercise in semantics or clever deconstructions of how those terms might or might not apply to practices in literacy education. The distinctions have potentially substantive and far reaching implications for literacy education as a field. Adopting the perspectives implicit in seeking to identify good and better practices, while rejecting the concept of best practice, suggests a subtle, but consequential, shift of thinking in the field.

For example, it has implications for the role and direction of our professional organizations (e.g., facilitating consensus about good practice, stoking the fires of innovation for discovering better practice, and countering the misconceptions implicit in seeking best practice); for how we create or respond to policy (e.g., What is the role of policy and what would it look like if it were recognized that best practice is always local and contingent?); for our sense of professionalism as educators (e.g., Might we be less defensive, more confident, in our practice if we knew that we were engaged in good practice and that better, let alone best, practice requires informed decision making and professional judgment?); for the goals, expectations, and methods we adopt in preparing literacy educators (How would we frame our undergraduate teaching methods courses if we focused on defining good practice, and malpractice, and communicating that better practices are always relative and conditional?); and for our research agendas, and what methods we use to address those agendas

(e.g., What approaches and methods for research might authentically acknowledge the contingencies of practice and provide more useful information than the scientific method?) (Dillon, O'Brien & Heilman, 2000).

There is another reason to reject the concept of best practice. It is a term that originated around the campfires of those who often take an adversarial stance toward our field and our professionalism. The idea of best practices has been inserted into our discourse like a Trojan horse. Its intuitive appeal plays upon our professional insecurities and our failure to adequately respond to our critics. To adopt it uncritically advances the agenda of those who have ideological and political agendas that often devalue, if not denigrate, our practice. A more effective response would be to focus on what we know is good practice, how our good practice has been reasonably effective, and how we are continuously trying to make our practice better.

So, I end this commentary where I began. Quoting myself, "I argue in this commentary that thinking about what are *good* or *better* practices in literacy instruction is better than thinking about *best* practices. Abandoning a quest for the best would be good for the field. It would better our practice and better our understanding of how research can inform our practice." I hope the commentary in between has led to a good, and perhaps a better, understanding of best practices. But, maybe the best is yet to come.

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