The evolution of an adolescent literacy program: A foundation’s journey

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Carnegie Corporation of New York has had a long history of funding literacy efforts. Indeed, to many people, the name Carnegie Corporation is associated with the very foundations of literacy going all the way back to the philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie himself and of the Corporation in its early years. Andrew Carnegie’s legacy includes over 2,500 free public libraries that he saw as a link “bridging ignorance and education.” In fact, Carnegie, the man, quickly became known as the “Patron Saint of Libraries” (Wall, 1970).

The Corporation’s current literacy agenda has been shaped and framed by its reading initiatives over the last 93 years.

A brief history of Carnegie Corporation’s literacy work

Access to books and the explicit teaching of reading are two ways in which literacy is fostered. The teaching of reading became an intensely debated national issue in 1955 when Rudolf Flesch’s Why Johnny Can’t Read: And What You Can Do About It moved surprisingly onto the national bestseller list. According to Flesch, the neglect of phonics instruction caused a national crisis in literacy and its demise was brought about by a “whole language” approach that required children to memorize words and guess how to pronounce a word they did not know instead of sounding out the word. The “look-say,” or whole-word, method had swept the textbook market, despite the fact, Flesch alleged, that it had no support in research.

In 1959, Carnegie Corporation President John Gardner saw the debate about reading as central to the foundation’s interests and stated in the corporation’s annual report:

The question of whether Johnny can or cannot read—if so why, if not why not—has probably given rise to more hue and cry throughout the land than any other single educational issue. There are those who claim that today’s youngsters cannot read as well as their parents did at their age; others state that the situation is actually reversed. Proponents of one or another method of reading argue vociferously for their method and heap scorn upon other methods. Wherever the truth lies, it’s not yet obvious, and any research which may shed light on this complicated problem will be to the good. (pp. 41–42)

Following this logic, the Corporation soon funded a key grantee, Jeanne Chall of the City College of New York, to help “settle” the reading debate.

After spending three years visiting classrooms, analyzing research studies, examining textbooks, and interviewing authors, reading specialists, and teachers, Chall found substantial and consistent advantages for programs that included systematic phonics instruction. She found that this approach was particularly advantageous for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Chall, 1967). In 1967, Chall collected her corporation-supported research and published Learning to Read: The Great Debate, which became an instant classic. Later, after moving to Harvard University, Chall developed a conceptual framework for identifying the stages of reading that extend from the prereading stage of very young children to the highly sophisticated interpretations of educated adults. Chall’s reading stages clearly distinguished “learning to read” from “reading to learn.”

In 1967, the same year Chall’s book was published, Carnegie Corporation Vice President Lloyd Morrison read an exploratory paper written by Joan Ganz Cooney. Titled “The Potential Uses of Television in Preschool Education,” the paper envisioned a television show “chock-full of entertaining, quick catchy themes while teaching language and math skills” and was originally conceptualized to introduce inner-city children to preliteracy and basic number skills. With the backing of the Carnegie Corporation and other funders, Sesame Street aired...
its first show on November 10, 1969, and began delighting young children all across the United States. It became an international phenomenon airing in a number of countries, and it spawned a number of books and magazines. During this same period, Carnegie Corporation helped establish and give credence to the important policy issues of early childhood education and care and funded groundbreaking institutions and research in the area.

Vartan Gregorian was appointed president of Carnegie Corporation of New York in 1997 and has continued the foundation’s concern with access to books, the search for better methods of teaching reading, and building a body of knowledge associated with adolescence and literacy. Under Gregorian’s stewardship, the Corporation has moved to strengthen reading by providing initial support for the Emmy Award-winning Public Broadcasting System series *Between the Lions*, and for the efforts of Carnegie’s International Development Division in strengthening libraries in sub-Saharan countries in Africa. Thus, Carnegie Corporation comes to its current focus on adolescent literacy with enormous comparative advantage.

The Corporation’s new subprogram, Advancing Literacy, is building research, practice, and policies for adolescent literacy that will benefit students in grades 4 through 12, with a particular emphasis on reading to learn and disciplinary literacy. The staff at Carnegie Corporation, following its traditional procedures, conducted a thorough review of literacy practices that included consulting leading researchers and practitioners. These deliberations brought into clear focus that the teaching of reading in grades K–3 was well supported with research, practice, and policy, but that the knowledge base for grades beyond this point was not as robust.

### Levels of involvement between foundations and researchers

In the process of developing a framework for a program, foundations often work with and seek the advice of researchers. There are four common ways that foundations collaborate with researchers: (1) working with research-based universities and think tanks, (2) working with intermediary organizations, (3) working with researchers in an advisory capacity to foundations, and (4) supporting researchers working in partnership with school districts to implement “best practices.”

#### Research-based universities and think tanks

Research-based universities and think tanks are often consulted to assist foundations in mapping out research agendas and taking on large-scale research and evaluation projects. Carnegie Corporation recently funded the Center for Research and Learning at the University of Kansas (www.ku-crl.org) to build a computerized assessment tool for measuring adolescents’ reading comprehension. For a number of reasons, this university-based research will need a fairly long gestation period before the tool is fully developed and adopted by middle and high schools. First, even though technology is now ubiquitous in schools, broad use and adoption of technological applications have often been a struggle. In addition, there is not yet the demand for computer-based comprehension models in middle and high schools. However, in deciding to fund this work, Carnegie Corporation anticipated increased demand for these kinds of tools as policymakers focus more on high schools and improving student graduation rates.

Early lessons from the Schools for a New Society, a five-year high school reform initiative begun in 2001 by Carnegie Corporation in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, demonstrated that adolescent literacy needs to be embedded in any secondary school reform effort (deLeón, 2002). One of the serendipitous findings of the initiative was that almost half of the students entering ninth grade are reading several years below grade level. This is confirmed by findings that 70% of entering ninth graders can be considered to be reading below grade level (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

There has been some federal response to this crisis. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) will be expanded to include high schools. In addition, the U.S. Congress recently approved US$24.8 million for a Striving Readers Initiative designed to assist the large number of students entering ninth grade who have serious reading deficits. The project at the University of Kansas will provide assessment tools that should be able to dovetail with the Striving Readers Initiative.

#### Working with intermediary organizations

Foundations often work with researchers as intermediary organizations (usually nonprofit organizations that are independent of a school district’s administration) who work closely with districts or states to provide technical assistance, research and
develop model programs, provide teacher training, and bridge the research-to-practice gap. They can often quickly implement promising practices in schools that are desperate for solutions. For example, the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) was funded by the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations to bring to maturity a model for language acquisition and academic literacy for middle and high school English-language learners called Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). A quasi-experimental study of the model is presently taking place in four middle schools and two high schools to determine the program’s effect on students’ academic performance under the instruction of SIOP-trained teachers and coaches.

Given the large influx of English-language learners into middle and high schools, the SIOP research is timely and could assist the large number of schools struggling to teach subject matter content to second-language learners. As an intermediary organization, CAL has worked with a number of school districts to provide the necessary training and technical assistance they need to deal with English-language learners, but much of its prior work has targeted elementary and middle school students. If the results of this trial are favorable, CAL will be able to provide the content, training, and support for teachers and coaches that could greatly increase middle and high school students’ language acquisition and discipline-specific comprehension.

Researchers as advisors

Researchers also play an important role in working with foundations as advisors in a formal capacity to help seed and frame the development of an emerging field. This role is best exemplified in Carnegie Corporation’s recently formed Advisory Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy. The council is composed of scholars, practitioners, and public representatives who serve as advisors to Carnegie’s program officers. The Corporation is working with the panel of experts to support research, develop policy, bridge the research-to-practice gap, inform the field at large, and infuse classrooms with “best practices” research.

Partnership research

A very promising and still-evolving role for researchers lies in long-term partnerships between intermediary groups with a strong research capacity and school districts who work together over an extended period of time. Combining the expertise of teachers and administrators with researchers concerned with scientific evidence can yield powerful results. Partnership research is perhaps best exemplified by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago (www.consortium-chicago.org), which has worked with the Chicago Public Schools over the last 15 years, and the work of the Center for Children and Technology (www2.edc.org/CCT), a technology and school reform research group that has worked with the Union City, New Jersey, School District for over 13 years. Both groups have built trust with local school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and community groups. Over the years, the groups have researched, documented, surveyed, and built assessment tools, and are often involved with teacher development for the districts. These kinds of ongoing, long-range partnerships are often fruitful for districts and researchers and have helped the larger educational community of researchers and policymakers understand the complexity of school reform through the lens of teachers and researchers as critical friends.

The National Academy of Sciences has taken note of these partnerships and has started the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP). SERP’s mission is to promote a research enterprise that offers teachers, school administrators, and policymakers a well-organized knowledge base improving K–12 education. SERP has a not-for-profit status and plans to work in a distributed network across the country with researchers and school districts to share and implement best practices in school systems (www.serpinstitute.org). Given the slow pace and impact of school reform as well as the significant resources that have been invested in education to date, it is likely that research-based practices of the kind advocated by SERP could accelerate.

Consequences of current interest in scaling up

Many foundations hope their programs proceed from small successful projects to the kind of larger interventions that can have a substantial impact on society. Within the foundation community, this is called “going to scale.” Foundation officers often look favorably at proposals that will have a broad impact, although it is difficult to scale up an initiative or a concept based on a single proposal. Often, a number of strategic grants are made that have a variety of entry points that will move a concept forward over a period of time. For example, it is unlikely that
a major foundation would fund a particular school interested in developing an adolescent literacy program. It is more likely, however, that grants in support of a number of professional organizations (e.g., International Reading Association, National Governors Association, Alliance for Excellent Education) could help educate the public and policymakers about the importance of the issue of adolescent literacy. Increased demand often grabs the attention of local community groups and state and federal policymakers and, in turn, stimulates funding at the local level. In preparation for this increased demand, well-validated instructional models are supported to scale up their efforts (often from working within a single school to entire districts).

Interest in scaling up has also increased as foundations are held more accountable by board members who are assessing the impact of their investments. In order to ensure that a project is on track, foundations are looking for clear ways to measure a project’s short-term progress. To understand the long-term impact of a program they often evaluate a cluster of projects targeted at the same objective to gain insight on the larger program strategy and goals. Having a project go to scale is certainly an indicator of success, but scaling up in the order of magnitude of a Sesame Street or the creation of public libraries may take many years before the benefit to mainstream society can be validated. Short-term and long-term program evaluations can gauge the impact of a program and put it on a trajectory that will be embraced by the larger public.

Thoughts for the independent researcher

The issue of scale is often not the first thing that comes to mind for the independent researcher who may want to pursue an original idea. It is important that independent researchers believe in their ideas and continue down a path that they are most interested in. There may be opportunities to fund and scale up some pieces of this work, but given the limited and focused resources of foundations versus the larger amount of resources specifically targeted for research (including those in the U.S.-based Spencer and the National Science Foundation), support from foundations may be hard to come by. Young researchers should read a foundation’s program guidelines to see if their interests fit with those of the foundation. In addition, their ideas can often be enhanced with guidance from program staff before submitting a proposal. Program officers could offer some guidance and point researchers toward an appropriate funding source. Occasionally, an unsolicited proposal appearing on a program officer’s desk is aligned with program priorities and can become an excellent candidate for funding. A recent Carnegie grant was given to a young scholar from a small liberal arts college to reexamine a data set, National Educational Longitudinal Studies (NELS), to assess which pedagogical strategies most effectively contribute to the education of language-minority students in middle and high schools. Independent researchers can also benefit from collaborations with ongoing projects at their universities, with likely intermediary organizations, and with contacts made at major educational and research conferences, which are attended by many program officers.

Conclusion

As we move into the 21st century, greater demands are being placed on students. What we define as a literate citizen is more demanding today than it was a generation ago. Researchers working with different organizations (research universities, intermediary organizations, and research groups that spend extensive time in a school district) are recognizing the need to build research, policy, and literacy practices to improve student achievement in middle schools and high schools.

Researchers in the emerging field of adolescent literacy can make good use of the U. S. Department of Education’s call for evidence-based research. The “gold standard” established by the Department is characterized by rigorous research using random assignment, large numbers of students, and experimental versus control groups. Adherence to these norms will produce much needed persuasive evidence. Like all empirical research, however, it can neither answer all questions nor provide its useful answers on the timetable we need to have them. Because we cannot afford to lose time searching for exactly the right intervention, “gold standard” research results will inevitably have to be supplemented with interventions supported by credible but less tightly controlled observations. Thus, we should be able to begin immediately delivering effective interventions to children who have never had access to them.

There is a great need and interest in the field of adolescent learning and an equally great interest for rigorous investigations and plausible approaches and practices that can be implemented in schools. A re-
port to Carnegie Corporation from the Alliance for Excellent Education, Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004), outlines a balanced vision for effecting immediate change for current students and building the literacy field’s knowledge base in adolescent literacy (www.all4ed.org). It is the role of foundations to provide support and stewardship for these efforts in order to maximize their positive effects on our society.

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