

## Never Believe Educational Experts (or me)!

David Kristofferson from **The Highlands** · 6 Feb 2016

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This is (possibly) the last background piece (reread the title ;-) in this series before I make my controversial recommendations about AP math/science courses and then have to take incoming fire from all sides.

This article is also a warning to parents of young children, written in the hope that you may be able to gain from my experience and not have to relearn the same sad lesson repeatedly.

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“RESEARCH SAYS...” - (appeal to authority usually follows...).

Whenever you hear these words in a discussion about education, please realize that you are about to be silenced by an appeal to authority, not hear evidence supporting a logical conclusion.

If any phrase in educational discussions has done more harm and deserves to die a slow, painful death, it is “Research says” (along with “Sage on the stage” and “Drill and Kill”).

Why? Flashback to the early 1990s...

My wife and I moved to our house in the San Mateo Highlands in early 1987 when our oldest daughter was just shy of 1 year old, and, by the early 90s, we enrolled her in the local elementary school. Three years later, our youngest daughter joined her there, and they both made their way through the system from Highlands to Borel to Aragon, finally graduating in 2004 and 2007 respectively. As I mentioned in a previous article, my youngest was a valedictorian at Aragon in 2007, and they have now both successfully transitioned to adulthood, so I should be able to just sit back and relax...

\*\*\*Overall, let me say up front that they both received a pretty decent education.\*\*\*

BUT - it required constant vigilance on my part.

I am also the product of California public schools and universities.

I attended CA schools and universities from 1963 to 1975, although I went to elementary school prior to 5th grade in Massachusetts (which still has the best public schools in the country).

My father never had to devote the time to supervising my education that I had to devote to my children.

So let's return in memory to the first parent/student meeting for incoming kindergartener's just before the start of the school year. For nine years I held my little girls' hands and walked them each morning to school, but I

will never forget that day in particular.

The principal immediately impressed all of us by gathering the children around her on the floor and reading them a story from Chinese literature. Everyone was enthralled. Then she explained to the parents that, this school year, Highlands was adopting a new method of teaching reading called the “Whole Language” method. Many of the parents in the room worked in tech or science, so the initial part of the appeal to us was that this new approach was based on research which “showed” that Whole Language worked better than the traditional reading approaches like phonics, i.e., learning how to “sound out” words. In fact, teachers were no longer going to teach phonics... Instead they were going to immerse children in great literature, like the story that was just read, and this would be the key to learning.

Lesson #1 - when you hear an argument that doesn't make sense, ask immediately for the corroborating evidence. Don't wait until the damage has been done.

Move forward a few years...

Whole Language had been pretty much abandoned. Some teachers surreptitiously taught phonics during this time, but not enough to remedy the problems that resulted. I had to buy “Hooked on Phonics” to improve my daughter's reading skills, but she never afterwards spent the amount of time nor developed the love of reading that my younger daughter did who was not exposed to this program. And, yes, we read stories constantly to both of our children.

Moving right along - this next story would be hilarious/unbelievable if the impact on many of our children had not been so consequential.

As we continued our journey and went religiously to back-to-school night and other meetings, I couldn't help noticing that student papers, proudly displayed on the walls, were always full of bad grammar and copious spelling errors. I asked when teachers were going to start correcting the writing mistakes, and was told that the goal in the early grades was to encourage children to put their thoughts down on paper. Correcting them too early in the process would discourage them, research showed. Being a young, impressionable parent, I was willing to believe this and let the experts do their job! But I asked, nonetheless, when would they start learning how to write correctly. I was told that this would happen in middle school.

It is now the beginning of my oldest daughter's fifth grade year. At a classroom meeting early that year, her teacher informs the parents that “the San Mateo Foster City School District would no longer give grades for spelling because everyone had a spelling checker on their word processors, and this was no longer important.” The teacher was just a year or so from retirement, and I could tell from the sheepish and somewhat embarrassed look on her face that she did not agree with this policy.

So on we go to Borel, the place where the writing process is finally supposed to be improved. The kids papers ARE finally starting to be corrected!

By other kids!!!!!!!

I vaguely remember some saying about “The blind leading the ...”

And, once again, there are reasons why this peer editing method is superior, “Research says.”

I attend a back-to-school night. Our daughter’s teacher is head of the English department and explains the method of language instruction. The denigration of the importance of spelling continues, and the statement is made “Bill Clinton is president of the United States, and he may not have been a good speller.” I think to myself silently in disgust that Bill Clinton was a Rhodes scholar and wonder who thought up this half-baked example.

Still, throughout all of this time, I remained polite and agreeable to let the experts do their job. By the last year at Borel, however, I requested a one-on-one meeting with the English teacher. I politely expressed my concerns that grammar instruction was being neglected and was surprised to be told that this was intentional. They had research which showed that teaching grammar actually inhibited a student’s writing abilities.....

I replied that I respectfully disagreed. I said that I was willing to foot the bill for a supplemental grammar textbook for every child in her class. She responded, “That is very nice of you, but we would not use the books.” They wanted to focus on literature.

End of discussion, so I depart.

In high school, I had what some people would have called “an old battle axe” of an English teacher. This wonderful woman drilled us in grammar exercises regularly, AND she religiously corrected our papers HERSELF (gasp - but this no longer seemed to be part of the teaching job - the kids were doing it) . She ALSO taught us literature. My senior year we had to do a 25 page term paper analyzing five novels in English literature from a major author of our choice. I graduated as the top student in both science and English, and my gift from this teacher was a copy of War and Peace (which I read - sounding out the words as I did so ;-) !!

Needless to say, I was incredulous by the refusal to teach grammar at Borel. I met with the principal, and, of course, the principal backed up the teacher’s methodology with the statement, “Ms. X is our best English teacher. She could teach a rock to write.” Once again the subject of “research” came up, so I finally asked if there was any way that I could get the references to the research that was supporting this refusal to teach grammar. The principal said that she would find these and get back to me.

A week or so later, she was true to her word, and I stopped by to pick up a packet of papers that she requested from the San Mateo County Office of Education. I took them home and eagerly dove in.

It turned out that the “research” was a single study at a single school. “Traditional grammar” was taught to a small number of classes and the methods subsequently adopted at Borel were used in a small number of other classes. Results were assessed by examination scores.

I am not going to write a discourse on proper statistical methodology here, but it would have been obvious to

anyone even mildly familiar with experimentation that all proper statistical controls were totally lacking in this study. I spent about a decade doing scientific research in biochemistry, biophysics, and cell biology, but, even if you only read the daily newspapers, how many times have you seen medical advice completely overturned by later studies? The confusion is often due to uncontrolled variables, uncontrolled because it is difficult to do studies correctly involving humans. We are all different in some way. Doctors and drug companies try to use a method called a “double blind” study where neither the doctor nor patient know the treatment that is given the patient in an attempt to control for the “placebo effect.”

This is very difficult, and probably impossible, to do in an educational study because how can one control for, say, an enthusiastic teacher promoting a new method in one class versus doing “the same old thing...” in another. Regarding double-blind, if kids don’t know what or how they are being taught, that method would be sure to fail, but I wouldn’t be surprised to see such a paper somewhere in the educational research literature ;- )!! After all, people at departments of education also have to publish or perish, so I am sure that stuff keeps getting churned out...

But there is an even bigger problem...

\*\*\* Not infrequently, the research backing up a teaching methodology is performed by consultants or companies who are selling the methodology to school districts.\*\*\*

For example, I went to a 4-5 day course on group learning methodologies at the San Mateo County Office of Education while I was teaching physics. After instruction in the methodology, the teacher said that she would present the research behind the method at the next class so that we could take it back to our schools and present it to others.

I was really looking forward to this session, but when I arrived it consisted of a single, bulleted PowerPoint slide (with several spelling errors). The bullets usually began with the words “Research says..” followed by a platitude with no supporting references to publications anywhere. No one in the class questioned anything on the slide. When I asked for the references after class, I was referred to the website of the educational consulting company that developed the method, had copyrights on it, and was selling the material to schools. The research was all performed by the company.... In effect, my "teacher development" was in essence an unwitting promotion of that company's products.

\*\*\* As I mentioned briefly in an earlier article, California is the largest textbook market in the country. What our state adopts can also influence sales elsewhere. Somewhere a lot of money is changing hands when textbooks and teaching methods are adopted, and I fear that our children are the “beneficiaries” of this experimentation. \*\*\*

Returning to the Borel grammar story to wrap this up, it was my daughter’s last year there, and unfortunately I butted heads with “the system” and lost. My argument that the “research” was completely bogus did not sway opinions.

Finally, my daughter made it to Aragon. Her writing skills were poor, so I quickly made a point to seek out the

English teachers and ask about grammar instruction.

(Drum roll and suspense as we wait for the unforgettable answer...)

I was told that they didn't teach grammar at Aragon because it had already been taught at Borel!!!

I politely replied that they did not teach grammar at Borel, and asked if they ever met with the teachers at Borel. I was told that we lived in a union, not a unified, school district and that Borel was in a different district. They had occasional meetings, but that was all. The teacher then turned to one of her students who she liked and asked, "Didn't they teach you grammar at Bowditch?" The student replied, "What's that?"

I would have laughed, but inside I wanted to cry.

We went to yet another back-to-school night. One of the new AP U.S. history teachers had the integrity to inform us that he was spending a lot of time correcting mistakes in students papers, and came right out and said, "Your kids are illiterate." REMEMBER - these were Aragon's top AP students!!

I thought to myself, "Thank God that someone finally has the courage to speak the truth!" When I later brought this comment up in other meetings with "the system," unfortunately this teacher came under pressure and that ended that discussion.

However, there is a partial positive result to report. By the time my daughters were finishing up their time at Aragon in the mid 2000's, they were starting to bring home small paperback textbooks on grammar!! I sincerely hope that instruction has continued to improve since that time, but I am almost afraid to ask!

My younger daughter benefited from the change, but, once again, I had to get a grammar workbook and go through it with my older daughter as well as send her to a grammar class at CSM. I am proud to report that when I read her writing now, it is perfect AND expressive. The "drill" did NOT "kill."

When I applied to be a substitute teacher for SMUHSD, I picked up a packet of material at the front desk of the district office. The cover page had several grammatical and spelling errors, so clearly the computerized tools that "everyone has" were not being used.

I had a tutoring client from a local high school, not Aragon, whose assignments were posted on her teacher's website. When I went to the website, I looked at the teacher's profile story. She was a young woman, clearly excited about her teaching job and proudly announced that, not only was she a graduate of a local high school, but she was giving back to the community and was "pationat" about her students. This was only one of numerous errors in her writing. I am glad that we have such dedicated people in our local schools who want to help kids - I just wish that we had done right by them when they were in school because now our earlier omissions will propagate to other children.

I also want to emphasize that I am NOT a grammar nitpicker. I do not write letters to newspaper editors gloating about the improper use of commas. All of the examples that I described above were so bad that an

employer reading a document produced by any of these people probably would have been reluctant to hire them. I have been working on this article for about four hours in the middle of the night, and one can always find a mistake somewhere, no matter how careful one might be. The cases cited above were always egregious, not just single instances of problems.

If this were the 1950s, I might have wondered if this were a communist plot by subversive higher ups in the education system to destroy our kids. I couldn't have invented these stories in my wildest dreams! These days I just shake my head in incredulity and wonder why this kind of thing continues.

My latest controversy is with the CPM textbook in precalculus at Aragon. A lot of teachers swear by CPM. You can go to the [CPM.org](http://CPM.org) website where the company proudly touts their professional development program for teachers and provides supporting research that the company has performed in many cases.

In conclusion, after reading this article, hopefully now you will understand why I no longer accept the argument that parents should sit back and let the professional educators do their jobs without protest. Too often methods are hoisted on teachers who may not have questioned the research or who may not have even looked at the research that supposedly supports the method. I have been at teacher development days, and unfortunately they are usually short and inadequate. Teachers are usually overwhelmed with their own workload and often can't take the time to delve into educational research literature. Finally, many, if not most, educators do not come from a research background and may not be equipped to do a detailed evaluation of a research study.

My take-home lesson for everyone is this. If a teaching method can not be supported with logical arguments, be immediately suspicious. If research comes to conclusions that defy common sense, the first response should be to question the research, not just accept it because it comes from the Stanford School of Education ("all bow"). Sometimes research CAN come to surprising conclusions, but in this case the burden of proof is on the research. Extra care must be taken to provide convincing data!

I've seen a lot of bogus research conclusions during the course of my career. Education has no monopoly on this problem, but it has a tendency to blindly go where no man has gone before, strung along by special interests with dollar signs in their eyes.

Every time it is the kids who suffer. We don't experiment with new drugs on people without their consent. Since when has it been ethical to do this to our children??