

## THE POLICYMAKING PROCESS: A PATH TOWARD COLLABORATION IN READING EDUCATION

*Relentless reading wars call attention to how reading education policies are formed and transformed, and to the equity dimensions of literacy development. This historical review and analysis examine the trajectory of reading education policies within No Child Left Behind/Reading First, Race to the Top Fund, and the Every Student Succeeds Act. This analysis reveals unique dynamics that shape reading education policies (e.g., wide-ranging policy actors and media influences) from creation through enactment, implementation, and outcome. This analysis can also inform contentious public discourse surrounding reading achievement because regardless of policy design, research-based ideas vary widely in practice, and these variations significantly impact outcomes for diverse learners. This analysis aims to shed light on the reading education policymaking process and includes important implications for future directions grounded in collaboration and social justice, rather than conflict and competition.*

### Introduction

Literacy development is necessary for acquiring knowledge, for engaging culturally, for social mobility, and for workplace success. The ability to read is, arguably, the foundation of democracy (Castles et al., 2018). The inability to develop satisfactory literacy skills is costly socially and economically, and it contributes to inequality through increased likelihood of poor physical and mental health, involvement in crime, and welfare dependency (World Literacy Foundation, 2015). The gravity of the personal and societal consequences associated with low literacy levels calls attention to how reading education policies are formed and transformed, and to the equity dimensions of literacy development (Benavot, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021).

The field of literacy has endured a counterproductive, decades long pendulum swing between conflicting orientations to reading instruction (Goldberg & Goldenberg, 2022; Pearson & Cervetti, 2017). Opposing views have resurfaced under different names over the past seven decades (Alexander & Fox, 2019). Most recently, a movement toward a simple view of reading based in what has been termed the Science of Reading (SOR) has revived this conflict (Cervetti et al., 2020; Shanahan, 2020). This movement have been characterized as reigniting a “relentless drive for ideological domination” symptomatic of reading wars and it significantly influenced legislation related to reading education (Reinking et al.,

2023, p. 110).

Scholars of reading research contend that this movement is heavily influenced by non-expert media sources, and a few outspoken academics who misrepresent the certainty of scientific research used to support their ideology by asserting a direct connection between research and instructional practice that does not attend to variabilities in instructional context and student populations (MacPhee et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2021). These influencers are promoting an ideology which views learning to read as essentially a technical endeavor achievable almost entirely by mastering specific phonics skills while subordinating equally important aspects of learning to read including oral language development, vocabulary, fluency, motivation, and overall comprehension (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Bondie et. al., 2019). Thus, SOR advocates are promoting instructional imperatives and legislative mandates that contradict the corpus of reading research (Reinking et al., 2023).

The social justice implications of these developments should concern literacy researchers, teacher educators, educators, policy makers, parents, and the public. Namely, the instructional practices associated with the SOR have the potential to perpetuate inequities in reading education because they narrowly bound professional flexibility, teacher judgement, and the ability to differentiate for the needs of diverse learners (MacPhee, 2021; Milner, 2021). Instructional practices that do not adapt to the needs of diverse learners are particularly problematic because a disproportionate percentage of students who struggle with reading are culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023). Due to changing demographics, there are many more non-native speakers of English in U.S. classrooms (Avineri et al., 2015). Due to increasing economic disparities, there are also many more students affected by income and wealth inequality, a primary influencer of academic achievement (Berliner, 2013).

Additionally, students who struggle with reading tend to be from marginalized communities that are historically underserved, oftentimes attending underfunded schools with uncertified teachers (Shannon, 2014). For these students, it is particularly important that teachers implement culturally informed literacy practices (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Milner, 2021). Culturally informed practices require teachers to learn about students' unique cultures and intentionally craft instruction that is responsive to local conditions, but these practices are prone to oversimplification and not easily translated to large-scale, prepackaged curriculum characteristic of the SOR (Kelly et al., 2021; Paulick et al., 2023). Consequently, students from diverse backgrounds who tend to struggle with reading and who are most in need of differentiated literacy instruction are the very students most likely to receive governmentally mandated curriculum that is not

designed for differentiation, and not culturally informed (Kane & Savitz, 2022).

Another persistently misleading aspect of discourse surrounding the SOR movement is the vagueness of how reading proficiency is defined and discussed. Reading proficiency is evaluated primarily through the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Reinking et al., 2023). Rosenberg (2004) characterized NAEP's proficiency rating as aspirational and warned that there is no national standard for reading proficiency and no clear definition of what constitutes grade-level texts. Scholars of reading research have also argued that NAEP's proficient rating is a rigorous standard compared to the way grade level proficiency is represented in other state and district assessments, and that NAEP's basic rating more accurately represents grade level reading achievement (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023; Loveless, 2023). Thus, scoring below proficient on NAEP does not necessarily indicate an inability to read on grade level as is commonly asserted in public discourse surrounding reading achievement.

While a rigorous standard of proficiency should certainly be the goal of reading education, to manufacture a crisis by characterizing two-thirds of fourth graders as functionally illiterate based on this criterion is misleading and confusing (Loveless, 2023). Moreover, apart from a slight upward trend in the late 1990s, and a recent drop presumably due to COVID-19, NAEP reading scores have revealed minimal shifts in reading proficiency despite instructional interventions based on policy initiatives such as *A Nation at Risk* (1983), *No Child Left Behind/Reading First* (2001), and *SOR* (2013+) (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023; Thomas, 2022).

A plausible explanation for this confusion can be attributed to the misinformation propagated by journalists, media influencers, and SOR advocates who lack the expertise to interpret claims about reading achievement (MacPhee et al., 2021). Many of these influencers disseminate blogs, podcasts, documentaries, and news reports that reduce literacy development to phonetic decoding and recommend highly prescriptive, under-researched instructional approaches not supported by the corpus of reading research (e.g., see Goldstein, 2022; Hanford, 2018, 2022; Moats, 2020; Nanton, 2023; Paige, 2020; Spear-Swerling, 2019). Politicians, publishers, and parents who desperately seek definitive answers to children's reading difficulties can be enticed by these reductive syntheses because the complexity of reading development is inconvenient and not easily mandated, packaged, and sold (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023; Stark & Education Week, 2019).

Given these crucial concerns, scholars are calling for an end to reading wars in favor of non-legislative, developmentally informed policies and practices supported by the corpus of reading research and based on an understanding of the complex equity dimensions of literacy acquisition (Aukerman & Schudlt, 2021; Castles et al., 2018; Gabriel, 2018; Spence & Mitra, 2023). To this end, there is a need for greater understand-

ing of why and how ideas about reading education become part of policy initiatives embedded in legislation; why and how certain approaches and voices become influential in the policy crafting process; why and how certain bodies of research move in and through policy networks; and what forces facilitate change in policies over time (Gabriel, 2020; Torgerson et al., 2019).

To address this need, the following historical review and analysis examine three important areas in policy related to reading education: policy outcome studies, policy implementation studies, and studies on the dynamics of the policymaking process. Given the pressing need to examine equity dimensions of how reading education policies are formed and transformed, particular attention is paid to research on dynamics of the reading education policymaking process -- how issue networks form, how policies change over time, and how certain research and researchers become key in the policymaking process (Coburn et al., 2011).

Understanding this trajectory can inform public discourse surrounding reading achievement and overall academic attainment because reading education policies are shaped by unique dynamics (e.g., wide-ranging policy actors and media influences) of the processes and environments in which they develop (Alexander & Fox, 2019; Reinking et al., 2023). Additionally, regardless of policy design, ideas of what constitutes a research-base and the way research-based ideas are implemented always vary widely in practice (Gabriel, 2018). These are crucial concerns because influencers of reading education policies and policy outcomes significantly impact the educational trajectories of diverse learners (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). Thus, this analysis sheds light on the broad landscape of the reading education policymaking process and includes important implications for future directions that are grounded in collaboration rather than conflict.

### **An Overview of The Reading Wars**

Understanding the equity dimensions of literacy development requires analysis of the way reading education policies and practices have evolved. Thus, the following overview of the reading wars provides important context for the policy discussions that follow. A persistent debate known as the “reading wars” began in the 1800’s when Horace Mann questioned whether children should learn to read first through identifying sounds of letters or through recognition of words and their meaning (Alexander & Fox, 2019; Cremin, 1957). This mostly academic debate entered the public sphere in the mid-1950’s with Rudolph Flesch’s (1955) *Why Johnny Can’t Read*.

The pendulum in this debate swings back and forth between a skills-based model of reading and one focused on meaning-making. The skills-based model of reading instruction prioritizes decoding, listen-

ing comprehension, and assessed reading proficiency and conceptualizes reading development through a primarily cognitive lens (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Shanahan, 2020). As a result, skills-based reading instruction involves relatively limited attention to individual student needs, experiences, or cultural diversity (Afflerbach, 2022; Compton-Lilly et al., 2023). Most recently, proponents of skills-based instruction cite the SOR and argue that while the human brain is naturally wired for oral language, it is not naturally wired for written language (Shanahan, 2020). According to proponents of the SOR, young brains must be rewired through a strong focus on explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness to connect sounds heard to letters representing sounds in text (Cervetti et al., 2020; Shanahan 2020).

Conversely, the meaning-making model is empirically grounded in decades of reading research and conceptualizes reading as a complex, idiosyncratic process involving multiple dimensions (Afflerbach, 2022; Spence & Mitra, 2023). The meaning-making model of reading education is grounded in sociocultural theory and situates literacy development in a cognitive, social, cultural, historical, and institutional context wherein meaning is negotiated between the person, the text, and the tools of one's environment (Perry, 2012). Importantly, scholars who advocate for a meaning-making model are not anti-phonics, nor do they diminish the cognitive aspects of literacy development supported by the SOR. Proponents of the meaning-making model maintain that basic-skills instruction is necessary – but not sufficient – for a comprehensive approach to reading education integrating the five pillars of effective literacy instruction (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary) (National Reading Panel, 2000) necessary for continued reading and writing success in the upper grades (Afflerbach, 2022; Duke et al., 2021).

For example, neuroscientific research emphasizes the importance of reading instruction that nurtures neural networks crucial for efficient, automatic, and ultimately fluent reading (Spence & Mitra, 2023). This research finds that phonological, visual word form, and semantic processing networks are distributed across brain regions. When readers encounter unknown words in unfamiliar contexts, phonological processing regions are activated. However, when a word is familiar, visual word form and semantic areas are activated simultaneously (Spence & Mitra, 2023). As students develop into skilled readers, neuroscientific research has found that neural networks across brain regions interact and reciprocate to produce the most efficient processes for reading particular texts (Yu et al., 2018). Thus, phonics instruction is most effective when embedded in a comprehensive program of literacy instruction that adapts to individual student needs and nurtures development of the neural networks that support the habits and dispositions characteristic of skilled readers (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

Apart from the findings of neuroscience, proponents of the mean-

ing-making model contend that phonics instruction can be effective when conceptualized more expansively than the relatively narrow, synthetic approach promoted by SOR advocates (Reinking et al., 2023). It has also been argued that SOR advocates have failed to establish a causal relationship to show that a lack of phonics instruction in classrooms has resulted in a national reading crisis (Reinking et al., 2023). Finally, given what is known about the strong influence of out-of-school factors on academic achievement, it is highly unlikely any one in-school factor or one instructional variable such as phonics could account for a dominant share of variation in reading achievement (Berliner, 2013; Shannon, 2014).

Ultimately, the diversity of learners, complexity of the reading process, and importance of prioritizing overall comprehension render it impossible to effectively apply a simple, or universal, approach to reading instruction (Castles et al., 2018). The corpus of reading research promotes a robust and more socially just science of reading to help students from diverse backgrounds learn to decode, comprehend, apply, and critique text while also nurturing literate dispositions such as reading engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Duke et al., 2021; Elleman & Oslund, 2019). Literacy scholars agree that these conflicting views are complementary parts of a complex whole, yet the controversy has persisted across decades and policy environments (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). The resulting climate precludes innovation and collaboration and impedes productive relationships with the potential to disrupt this polarization (Elleman & Oslund, 2019; Torgerson et al., 2019).

### Policy Outcome Studies

The following analysis aims, in part, to disrupt this counterproductive cycle by examining dynamics of the literacy policymaking process. The first level of analysis examines policy outcome studies. Policy outcome studies systematically evaluate the impact of policies on student achievement. Considering the significant level of funding allocated for reading education, one would expect policy outcomes to be an active area of study. For example, \$1 billion was allocated annually for No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) Reading First (RF) program (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, 2015). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the eighth reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which replaced NCLB, federally mandates comprehensive literacy instruction for P-12 reading education with an annual budget of \$190 million (ESSA, 2015a, 2015b; ESSA Federal Funding Guide, 2018).

Individual states also prioritize significant funding for reading education. For example, the state of Tennessee devoted \$100 million to an initiative aimed at helping students develop strong phonics-based reading skills, and many states prioritized generous Covid-related American Res-



cue Plan funds for early reading instruction (Schwartz, 2021; TDOE Announces \$100 Million Initiative, 2021).

Despite this considerable investment, reading education policy outcome studies represent a relatively small body of knowledge (Coburn et al., 2011; Torgerson et al., 2019). Evaluation studies of reading education policies rarely have the resources necessary to answer the questions they ask, and reallocation of resources is needed to garner a better understanding of the impacts of policy on student achievement (Castles et al., 2018). This is a significant concern for all who endeavor to improve reading education. Without thorough evaluation of policy outcomes, information is lacking on the efficacy of policy initiatives. This lack of knowledge limits the field in its ability to interrupt counterproductive patterns in favor of more robust, socially just perspectives on reading education policy and practice (Gabriel, 2018; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022).

### *The Reading Excellence Act and Race to the Top Fund*

The Reading Excellence Act (1998) is an example of a major piece of federal legislation with inadequate resources devoted to evaluating outcomes (Coburn et al., 2011). Similarly, Race to the Top fund (RTT) was allocated \$4.35 billion, making it the largest competitive grant program in the history of U.S. education (RTT Publications and Resources, n.d.). RTT functioned as powerful de facto policy, yet there were no funds reserved for an outcome study, nor is there a mechanism in place by which to evaluate the U.S. Department of Education's claims that RTT inspired long-term initiative and creativity (Leonardatos & Zahedi, 2014; U.S. Department of Education 2015a, 2015b). For example, RTT's final report "Fundamental Change, Innovation in America's Schools Under Race to the Top" (2015) framed its success as something that must be measured based on RTT's long-term impact on students. The report cited increases in student performance on reading tests through programs such as "The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative," but neither of these legislative initiatives offer evidence consistent with an outcome study. Considering All the Evidence

### *Reading First*

Conversely, NCLB's RF program provides a rare example of an official policy outcome study. Federal funding was allocated for in-depth analysis of RF using rigorous, quasi-experimental studies including the Reading First Impact Study Final Report (Gamse et al., 2008) and the National Evaluation of Early Reading First (Jackson et al., 2007). These studies yielded parallel findings, such as strong effects on measures of program implementation (e.g., time spent on reading, professional development, focus on the big five components, deployment of reading coach-

es) and weak effects on student outcomes with no statistically significant impact on students' reading comprehension (Calfee, 2014; Dee & Jacobs, 2009; The Reading First Impact Study, n.d.).

RF findings demonstrate how outcome studies can provide crucial insight on conflicting orientations to reading education. For example, NCLB demonstrated important progress for reading education because to receive competitive grants, states were required to develop plans for increasing teachers' use of instructional approaches integrating the five pillars of effective literacy instruction (Allington, 2006). However, literacy scholars found a disturbing trend in RF implementation. Professional development and adequate yearly progress (AYP) assessments in urban schools at the K–3 level convinced teachers that reading instruction in the early grades was fundamentally about learning phonological awareness, decoding, and fluency. This variation in implementation resulted in a curriculum gap in which comprehension instruction focused on developing children's knowledge of the world and writing instruction were insufficient for the kind of balanced literacy necessary for continued reading and writing success in the upper grades (Meier & Wood, 2004; Pearson, 2006; Yatvin, 2002, 2003). This variation in implementation might explain why RF outcome studies found strong effects on measures of program implementation and weak effects on student outcomes as noted above.

### *Every Student Succeeds Act*

Author (2020) examined dynamics of literacy policy within the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015a). Author found ESSA comprehensive literacy policy came into being under the guidance of relatively few policy actors, through a competitive grant program that was outside of Congressional purview and not required to satisfy the traditional equity agenda of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (ESSA, 2015b; Heitin, 2016). Led mainly by former pre-school teacher and Democratic Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), ESSA's comprehensive literacy policy was developed and enacted under the "Literacy Education for All, Results for a Nation" (LEARN) Act between 2009 and 2015, within a discretionary grant program known as Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) (Murray, 2011, 2015; Striving Reader Comprehensive Literacy Resource, n.d.).

Despite being exempt from ESEA's equity agenda, Author (2020) contends that the ESSA mandate for comprehensive literacy instruction is a remarkable accomplishment for the field of literacy because it integrates the cognitive, linguistic, social, motivational, and affective factors essential for a developmental theory of reading. However, Author also found comprehensive literacy policy under ESSA to be potentially vulnerable when implemented due to its expansive conceptualization, potentially inadequate funding, and continued reliance on standardized assessments.



Specifically, ESSA promotes an expansive approach by incorporating the continuum of literacy development (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). This presents an enormous undertaking for implementation because effectively balancing and measuring all components of comprehensive literacy instruction requires tremendous skill in planning, execution, and assessment (Afflerbach, 2022; Gabriel, 2018). This complexity is particularly relevant given that the policy is potentially underfunded. Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) program (ESSA's pilot program) received \$200 million (FY 2010) and \$190 million (FY 2016) to be allocated across programs in six states (Heitin, 2016; Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy State Profiles, n.d.). ESSA comprehensive literacy policy's national budget is \$190 million annually, amounting to less than one-fifth of the \$1 billion funding for NCLB's Reading First program (ESSA Federal Funding Guide, 2018; Heitin, 2016).

Additionally, ESSA comprehensive literacy policy continues to rely on standardized assessments. While ESSA encourages multiple and varied assessments, the policy does not provide specific guidance on how to measure progress and communicate the program's unique value to students, families, and policy makers. The primary means of measuring and reporting progress on student achievement remains the NAEP and state-level standardized assessments (Sharp, 2016). This reliance reinforces the importance of an ESSA policy outcome study because standardized assessments are not designed to thoroughly evaluate and communicate the complexities of comprehensive literacy instruction (ESSA, 2015a; Moss et al., 2005).

Author (2020) also identified relevant changes in the policy environment surrounding ESSA literacy policy. Due to considerable objection from members of Congress, the civil rights community, and teachers' unions (e.g., see Opportunity to Learn Campaign, 2010) to the perceived overreach of past policies (e.g., NCLB and RTT), the final version of ESSA was fundamentally altered and federal involvement in education policy and practice significantly reduced (Leonardatos & Zahedi, 2014). For example, ESSA allows state education agencies (SEA) and local education agencies (LEA) greater discretion in the use of federal funds, and in their handling of underperforming schools. States are still required to submit accountability plans to the Department of Education to secure federal funding for school improvement, but responsibility for choosing goals, establishing timelines, and intervening in low-performing schools has been returned to the purview of SEA's and LEA's (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b).

Finally, ESSA withdraws what had been a major tenet of the equity stance under RTT, i.e., federal involvement in teacher evaluation and tenure policies as means of accountability through teacher effectiveness and student growth, and ESSA explicitly removes federal incentives for

the adoption of common standards (Leonardatos & Zahedi, 2014). The potential vulnerabilities and changes in environment identified here are crucially important because the mandate for comprehensive literacy instruction represents one of the few measures with the potential to productively influence reading education and student success (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022).

Initial ESSA state education departments' implementation plans were due during the 2017–2018 school year, but after four years, ESSA had not fully commenced, and Covid-related teaching and learning conditions further hindered its implementation (Blad & Ujifusa, 2019; Luscombe, 2022). Although an evaluation of the program's effectiveness is not available, federal funds have been reserved under section 2222(b)(1) for the Director of the Institute of Education Sciences to conduct an outcome study of ESSA's comprehensive literacy policy (ESSA, 2015a, p. 1944).

The potential importance of the ESSA outcome study on comprehensive literacy policy cannot be overstated. The policy explicitly mandates a developmental orientation combining cognitive, linguistic, social, and motivational aspects of reading development (Afflerbach, 2022). In this way, ESSA answers the call for a robust, socially just perspective that integrates the conflicting orientations to reading instruction that have fueled the reading wars. However, the policy continues to rely on standardized assessments which cannot effectively evaluate or communicate the complexities of comprehensive literacy instruction (Elleman & Oslund, 2019; Moss et al., 2005). Consequently, if comprehensive literacy instruction is implemented according to ESSA's policy mandate, then an outcome study detailing its impact on student achievement could offer historically meaningful insight for the field of reading education specifically and P–12 education broadly.

## Policy Implementation Studies

Compared to outcome studies, reading education policy implementation studies represent a larger existing body of knowledge (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2016). Implementation studies open the “black box” zone between enactment and outcomes by examining the ways in which policy implementation varies from policy enactment as policies move into schools (Coburn et al., 2011; Levinson et al., 2009). Research examining this zone is crucial to interpreting contentious public discourse on reading achievement because regardless of policy design, research-based ideas vary widely in practice and these variations can significantly impact outcomes for diverse learners (Coburn, 2016; Gabriel, 2018, 2020).

Education implementation studies generally address two questions: 1.) How are teachers responding to policy initiatives? 2.) What factors influence the implementation process or the ability and inclination of

teachers to change their practice in response to policy demands (Coburn et al., 2011; Moss, 2012)? Policy implementation research based in the cognitive approach contends that policies are reconstructed as they move into schools not due to lack of skill or will on teachers' part. Rather, policy reconstruction is a normal part of the social process of teacher learning and change (Spillane et al., 2002). Policies are implemented differently in different contexts because teachers interpret policy ideas through the lens of personal identities, pre-existing knowledge, professional judgement of students' needs, and through interactions with colleagues and school leaders (Coburn et al., 2009; Moss, 2012).

### *Sensemaking Theory Research*

Implementation studies based on sensemaking theory investigate how cultural ideas within social structures influence policy implementation (Coburn, 2016; Spillane et al., 2002). In this line of research, Coburn (2004) emphasized three ways principals influence teachers' adaptation and transformation of instructional policies through sensemaking processes: 1.) by focusing attention on some aspects of policy ideas and not others, 2.) by creating technical limits that frame the boundaries within which teachers' sensemaking can unfold, 3.) by providing a framework that teachers adopt in constructing their understanding of specific policy initiatives.

For example, Coburn (2005b) found principals significantly influenced how teachers adapted, adopted, and transformed reading education policy in two California elementary schools. Principals' preexisting understandings of what constituted effective reading instruction were found to cause teachers in different schools to encounter the same policy very differently. Acting as sense makers, principals drew on their own conceptions of reading instruction when making decisions about what to emphasize in policy discussions with teachers and in the opportunities they chose to provide for teacher learning. In one instance, a principal and a small group of teachers were given first access to professional development representing different ideologies on reading instruction. This small group of school leaders acted as policy gatekeepers by choosing which ideologies to present to the wider faculty. In another instance, a principal took the initiative to recruit university professors who provided professional development aligned with the principal's understanding of reading instruction to supplement the state-adopted reading series.

According to Coburn (2005b), both teachers and principals gravitated toward aspects of policy ideas that reinforced preexisting understandings and focused less on aspects that challenged preexisting epistemological and pedagogical assumptions. These examples of sensemaking theory research illustrate the importance of school leaders' work as instructional leaders in reading education, yet their impactful roles in policy implemen-

tation are often ignored (Coburn, 2005b, 2016). In the absence of content-specific professional learning opportunities, school leaders have been known to depend on pre-existing knowledge and generic leadership strategies (Coburn, 2005b; Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018). Consequently, when called on to act as knowledgeable instructional leaders, school leaders' decisions about what policy messages to emphasize and what messages to buffer can shape implementation significantly (Coburn, 2005b; Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018).

### *Structure-Agency Theory Research*

Implementation studies based on structure-agency theory are used to investigate how individual policy actors make choices maximizing personal interests and how such choices produce intended and unintended consequences (Coburn, 2016). For example, Coburn and Woulfin (2012) examined how instructional coaching as a policy initiative influenced classroom practice. Their study found that literacy coaches helped reading teachers learn and integrate new approaches to learning, but coaches also pressured teachers, shaping their perceptions of reading education policy based on personal objectives as opposed to policy design. Subsequently, teachers were encouraged to make substantial changes as policies moved into classrooms. This example of structure-agency theory research demonstrated the way in which teachers were influenced by policy actors who sought to implement instructional practices that are often inconsistent with policy design. Thus, like school leaders, teachers can be placed in circumstances in which they lack the content-specific expertise to assert themselves as knowledgeable instructional leaders and implement policy initiatives that are consistent with policy design (Coburn, 2005b; Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018).

### *Teacher Autonomy Research*

Despite the powerful influence of policy actors, teachers have also been known to act autonomously in the policy implementation process. Implementation studies surrounding responses to high stakes accountability have indicated that teachers exert agency by shifting, narrowing, and expanding instruction based on the nature of assessments. Policies that promote overly ambitious or unfamiliar approaches to assessment have tended to result in superficial change (Diamond, 2007). Teachers also resist implementing policies that require instructional approaches they do not support (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Williamson, 2017).

Williamson (2017) examined how teachers adapted to what they perceived as decontextualized English language arts (ELA) instruction in the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The teachers exerted agency by preparing students for what they perceived as

inauthentic testing requirements while simultaneously designing individualized instruction according to their professional standards. The teachers in Williamson's (2017) study intentionally resisted the predetermined nature of standardized assessment by balancing instruction between the STAAR writing genre (a 26-line timed essay responding to a prompt) and a writing workshop incorporating student choice and independent work time. During the writing workshops, students chose texts on topics of personal interest, were given flexibility to create their own writing prompts, and practiced writing stories from their own perspectives (Williamson, 2017). This is an example of how teachers acted autonomously and advocated for a vision of ELA instruction consistent with their professional standards and pre-existing knowledge.

The implementation studies discussed above shed light on the inherently subjective zone between policy enactment and policy outcomes. As policies move into schools, variability in policy implementation creates an interdependence between policy implementation and outcome studies (Coburn, 2016). To be effective, implementation and outcome studies must be based on understanding of this variability (Levinson et al., 2009). In other words, variations in implementation must be identified to analyze the efficacy of policy initiatives and to examine how variations in policy implementation impact diverse learners (Gabriel, 2020; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022).

### Polymaking Process Studies

Compared to outcome and implementation studies, research on the dynamics of the reading education polymaking process represents a growing – but incomplete – body of knowledge (Alexander & Fox, 2019). Given persistent conflict surrounding reading education, this line of research is of timely importance because it explores the complex, nuanced process of how some ideas about reading instruction (and some researchers) become part of policy initiatives embedded in legislation (Castles et al., 2018). This line of research also explores the processes by which some ideas about reading instruction (and some researchers) become part of policy initiatives embedded in legislation, thereby revealing how particular agendas become prominent in reading education policy agendas (Coburn et al., 2011).

### Issue Networks

Dynamics of the reading education polymaking process involve continuously shifting voices and forces. Issue networks involving policy entrepreneurs from professional organizations, teachers' unions, the business and medical communities, political elites, and special interest advocates are integral to the reading education polymaking process (Calfee,

2014; Coburn, 2005a). These powerful actors influence education policy by investing their time, energy, reputation, and money in return for anticipated future gain (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). Similarly, membership in the reading community is historically interdisciplinary and fluid, including researchers and policy actors from linguistics, developmental psychology, cognitive science, and special education, in addition to powerful media influencers (Alexander & Fox, 2019; Pearson & Cervetti, 2017).

Currently, these voices and forces are contributing to a revival of the reading wars and substantially influenced legislation related to reading education. As such, this line of research provides timely insight on why and how certain forces facilitate change in reading education policies over time. This insight is needed to support productive relationships between researchers, policy makers and practitioners that can interrupt counterproductive patterns of disinformation and distrust (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022).

### *Social Network Analysis, Document Analysis, and Interview Findings*

Existing research in the reading education policymaking process was conducted in an exceptionally active period leading up to implementation of RF using social network analysis, document analysis, and interviews with key policy informants (Coburn et al., 2011). Social network analysis research revealed how issue networks influence the reading education policymaking process through professional organizations, teachers' unions, and a host of government and community actors. For example, Coburn (2005a) explored shifts in California's reading policy between 1983 and 1999. She found tremendous change in the network of actors – and the positions being advocated for – between policy eras. The influence of state-level issue networks on reading education policy, however, revealed a key difference. Government actors at the state level were more influential than professional organizations or interest groups because they focused on education policy generally rather than reading as a content area. State-level issue networks were also more focused on policy implementation than the policymaking process (Song & Miskel, 2005). McDaniel et al. (2001), Miskel and Song (2004), and Song and Miskel (2005) found an unusual expansion of the issue network influencing reading education policy in the late 1990's. Their studies identified 131 organizations (e.g., reading professional organizations and teachers unions) actively involved in shaping policy at the national level, but new actors from the business, medical and special education communities, and advocates for children living in poverty were also becoming involved. Of these 131 organizations, the researchers identified 18 organizations and five individuals who were most influential in policy debates (e.g. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, American Federation of Teachers, International Reading Association, Reid Lyon, and Congressman Bill Goodling). Interview data identified this group as



highly influential due to their collaboration skills, formal and informal contacts, ability to disseminate research promoting their viewpoint, and their appearance to policy makers as objective (McDaniel et al., 2001).

Furthermore, Calfee (2014) identified similarly sharp shifts in reading education policy through Reid Lyon's (2006) position as an influential psychologist with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Lyon significantly shaped policy and practice surrounding the NRP, NCLB, and RF. Lyon was chief architect of these policies in which controlled experiments were determined to be the gold standard in education research, and phonological awareness and phonics were essential foundations for reading acquisition. Based on Lyon's guidance, the NRP Report devoted 170 pages to phonological awareness and phonics versus 99 pages to vocabulary and comprehension. In response, the federal government implemented NCLB's \$1 billion annual RF program, and the Lyon model was reflected in the 2010 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) early reading foundational skills (Calfee, 2014).

Similar research revealed how policy entrepreneurs influenced education policy by investing their resources in return for anticipated future gain. Availability and perceived usefulness of research and intentions for using alternative justifications (e.g., constituent preferences and political ideology) were found to influence decisions about whether and how to use research-based evidence in the policymaking process. Additionally, factors shaping research use varied because political agendas and policy goals changed as policies developed (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). Despite calls for research-based policy, McDonnell and Weatherford (2013) found political elites integrated personal experience, professional expertise, and normative values with other types of evidence in different stages of developing the mathematics and English-language arts (ELA) CCSS.

Thus, research-based evidence is only one resource policy entrepreneurs draw upon in the policymaking process. Even in areas with solid research bases such as early literacy acquisition, the complexity of the policymaking process allows for variable interpretation of findings. The way that problems are defined shapes the solutions proposed, and policy entrepreneurs have been found to select evidence enabling them to define policy problems with preplanned solutions (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013).

Bertrand et al. (2015) examined dynamics of the education policymaking process by investigating how policy insiders' discursive strategies maintain systemic racism and classism. Through interviews with 50 state policy makers, the authors found three sometimes veiled discourses used to explain educational gaps: 1) social structural inequity, 2) family and community deficits, and 3) teachers' unions and teacher seniority. The structural inequity discourse challenged systemic inequity

by naming factors (e.g., class and economic structure) as having influence on achievement. However, policy insiders used deficit discourses covertly to minimize structural issues, and to advance racist and classist ideas. For example, the family and community deficits discourse maintained the status quo by framing families, communities, and cultures as responsible for inhibiting their own academic achievement. Discourses related to teachers' unions and teacher seniority were used to blame tenured, more experienced teachers' ability to choose school placements in white, middle-class neighborhoods rather than lower socioeconomic status neighborhoods (Bertrand et al., 2015).

Policy insiders who used deficit discourses asserted that the families and communities impacted by inequity caused the inequity. They also used discursive strategies to make inequity appear natural by using substrategies such as obscuring the identity of those negatively impacted by inequity. Despite their typically limited interaction with non-elites, Bertrand et al. (2015) found policy insiders to be highly influential in shaping public opinion through these discourses. They also found a strong socially reproductive influence of public discourse on concrete policy and social structures in the study's main implication that: "policy insiders' discourses and discursive strategies either limit or expand possibilities for policy changes supportive of educational equity agendas" (Bertrand et al., 2015, p. 23).

In a study on the influence of media on policy making, Welner (2011) analyzed how policy insiders' media ties – and their ideologies – influenced the school choice and accountability movements. This research uncovered a highly influential network of state-level, market-oriented think tanks funded predominately by benefactors with strong media ties (e.g., the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Sarah Scaife Foundation, and the John M. Olin Foundation) that induced major shifts in education policy discussions. While university scholars produce the most research, Welner (2011) found that publications of private think tanks were disproportionately represented in major national newspaper reports, producing a high level of activity influencing the education policymaking process.

### *The Tennessee Literacy Success Act*

Still, powerful issue networks are influencing reading education policy and practice through the SOR movement (MacPhee et al., 2021). Journalists, media influencers, and SOR advocates who lack the expertise to interpret claims about reading achievement are interfering with the teaching of reading by misrepresenting the state of reading education as being in a state of crisis that necessitates legislative action (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023). Since 2015, 145 bills addressing reading instruction in public schools have been initiated, as this legislative process is used to sup-

port political agendas that define and mandate a single science of reading as opposed to evidence-based sciences of reading (Reinking et al., 2023).

The Tennessee Literacy Success Act (2021) is a representative example of how issue networks who advocate for the SOR substantially impacted the reading education policymaking process at the state level. In this instance, the Tennessee Department of Education (DOE) initiated a reading instruction program aimed at expanding the state's improved scores on national measures of reading achievement that was not created or implemented through legislation. The original, unlegislated initiative included multiple approaches to teaching phonics within a comprehensive curriculum including language and vocabulary development, background knowledge, and comprehension strategies. The original initiative also included literacy coaches for each elementary school and integrated professional development materials in early literacy instruction. Additionally, as part of the original initiative the DOE consulted with literacy professors and researchers in teacher education to develop tools to differentiate for the needs of individual learners (Reinking et al., 2023).

However, when political leadership changed in the state of Tennessee, the initiative underwent a dramatic about-face. As a result, the Act's final, legislated form cites non-expert media influencers to support its aim of promoting foundational literacy skills, a term that is often a code for a phonics-first ideology associated with the SOR ("TDOE Announces \$100 Million Initiative," 2021). In its final form, the Act has been critiqued by scholars of reading research as promoting an overly simplified view of phonics and as subordinating the importance of oral language development, vocabulary, fluency, and motivation (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

This research on the policymaking process illustrates how different people from different political and professional backgrounds generated sharp shifts in reading education policy in relatively short periods of time. Additionally, policy actors identified in this research represent a wide area of expertise, many of which are not related to reading education. These dynamics are an important consideration because they involve voices and forces that influenced public discourse surrounding reading achievement and informed policy makers and practitioners on reading education. If educators are to interrupt counterproductive debates between conflicting orientations to reading education, it is important to distinguish which influential voices and forces are rooted in knowledge and expertise from those which are not (Morrell, 2017; Reinking et al., 2023).

## Discussion and Implications

The teaching of reading is, and has always been, a political endeavor (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023; Cremin, 1957). The current resurgence is what literacy scholars have predicted, continued oversimplifications and rival camps symptomatic of reading wars (Reinking et al., 2023;

Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). The resulting distrust and disinformation have diminished meaningful integration of ideas and practices within the field of reading education (Gabriel, 2018). This is not for lack of knowledge. Theory and research over the past half century have been in broad agreement that the goal of literacy development and reading education should always be comprehension, and that stages of learning to read and reading to learn are intertwined throughout reading development (Afflerbach, 2022; Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Spence & Mitra, 2023).

Nevertheless, conflict and confusion have been exacerbated. At the policy level, current federal and state mandates on reading instruction conflict. Federal literacy policy under ESSA demonstrates important progress through its mandate of culturally informed, comprehensive literacy instruction. However, many states are concurrently adopting the SOR in direct conflict with a comprehensive approach (Reinking et al., 2023; Smylie, 2023). Similarly, Covid-related emergency education stabilization funds followed federal Title I-A equity formulas designed to close opportunity gaps, yet many states prioritized these funds for early reading instruction based on SOR, which does not align with the federal equity agenda (ESAA, 2015a; Schwartz, 2021).

These contradictions illustrate the confusing and counterproductive effects of reading wars. Under ESSA, states are required to submit accountability plans to the Department of Education to secure federal funding for school improvement that articulate a plan for comprehensive literacy instruction, which by design adapts to learners' social and cultural needs and balances components of effective reading instruction (Sharp, 2016). States, however, are moving toward literacy plans that focus heavily on SOR, an approach that has been critiqued for not addressing the individual needs of diverse learners (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Reinking et al., 2023). Furthermore, SOR does not incorporate disciplinary literacies or balance components of effective literacy instruction necessary for continued reading and writing success in the upper grades (Afflerbach, 2022; Shanahan, 2020).

Resultantly, evidence-based practices mandated by ESSA are not making their way into practitioners' classrooms (Elleman and Oslund, 2019; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). This should be concerning not only to literacy researchers but also to policy makers, parents, and the public. The ESSA mandate was achieved through a hard fought, years-long policy-making process resulting in an integrated program of historical significance (Heitin, 2016; Murray, 2011, 2015). Fortunately, ESSA reserved funds for an eventual outcome study (ESSA, 2015a). If an ESSA outcome study is conducted in contexts that implement comprehensive literacy instruction with fidelity to the policy mandate, its effects on student achievement could offer historically meaningful insight into assessment and instruction that addresses the complexity of the reading process and meets the needs of all learners. This potential is particularly timely given chang-

es in the policy environment. ESSA's scaled back federal role places increased responsibility on state policies for influencing reading education in productive ways (Sharp, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Today's unique conditions underscore the importance of making the policymaking process understandable and transparent for stakeholders to impact implementation and practice.

## Implications

Given the detrimental effects of prolonged conflict, it is incumbent upon all who endeavor to improve reading education to nurture productive relationships between researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the public and to ensure governmental groups act based on the best available knowledge (Auckerman & Schuldt, 2021; Goodman, 2014). There exists a significant body of knowledge on how literacy policies move into schools through variations in implementation, and how these variations impact policy outcomes (Coburn, 2016). There are outcome studies on some, but not all, major pieces of reading legislation, and there is a need for more information on dynamics of the policymaking process that occur throughout all stages of policy development (Alexander & Fox, 2019; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022).

First, as existing implementation research indicates, education policies are experienced differently in different contexts in part due to the impactful role of school leaders and the willingness of teachers to act autonomously. Research indicates teachers do exert agency in policy implementation based on their professional judgement of students' needs (Williamson, 2017). However, small groups of school leaders, principals, and university professors also act as gatekeepers by buffering policy messages based on ideology, pre-existing understandings of instructional approaches, and personal agendas that are inconsistent with policy design (Coburn, 2016). As a result, teachers need the content-specific expertise to identify policies and practices that are inconsistent with policy design and not supported by the corpus of reading research. To this end, teacher preparation programs need to integrate literacy coursework that is empirically grounded in the corpus of reading research and acknowledges the inconvenient complexity of reading development, particularly for diverse learners (Elleman & Oslund, 2019; Milner, 2021). Additionally, school systems need to provide school leaders and teachers with increased, and continuing, content-specific professional learning opportunities to act knowledgeably when they are tasked with understanding and disseminating policy ideas (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012).

Second, existing research on dynamics of the policymaking process reveals how policy trajectories can be guided by relatively few powerful actors who may or may not have expertise in reading education (Caffee, 2014; MacPhee et al., 2021). Similarly, non-expert media influencers

and policy insiders shape public perception of education and influence legislative agendas through their connections, collaboration skills, ability to promote their viewpoint, and their appearance to policy makers as objective (McDonnel & Weatherford, 2013; Bertrand, 2015).

As a result, educators need to be armed with knowledge of how educational policy agendas form, who the influential policy actors are and how they become informed on literacy instruction and assessment, and how contextual forces shape policies (Alexander & Fox, 2019). To this end, teacher preparation programs need to integrate coursework in education policy that will enable educators to inform themselves on the state and federal policies that directly impact their classroom practices and their ability to differentiate for the needs of diverse learners (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). Educators also need to be prepared, and willing, to effectively resist policies which are not created in the best interests of their students, and to object when policies are implemented in ways that are inconsistent with policy design (Goodman, 2014; Paulick et al., 2023).

Third, this research underscores the urgent need for experts in reading instruction to develop the media presence and political engagement necessary to communicate their expertise to teachers, teacher educators, administrators, policy makers, parents, and the public. Yetta Goodman (2014) argued similarly that literacy scholars have an obligation to ensure knowledge from research is being counted, but this will require political sophistication and action to communicate beyond our professional communities and to demand governmental and policy groups act based on the best available knowledge. The equity dimensions of literacy development render it crucial that all parties understand what is at stake when journalists, special interest groups, and policy entrepreneurs contradict the corpus of reading research and interfere with the teaching of reading for personal, political, and financial gain (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023). Experts in reading instruction cannot deny a measure of complicity in prolonged reading wars if non-experts are allowed to misinterpret and disseminate their research, as these matters in fields such as medicine and law are the responsibility of certified professionals (Reinking et al., 2023).

These implications emphasize the critical need for educators, teacher educators, and experts in reading education to exert their influence in the literacy policymaking process. These are broad implications which will necessitate organized initiatives, persistence, and cooperation on the part of educators, teacher educators, school systems, policy makers and others who endeavor to improve reading education. The importance of these implications cannot be overstated given the grave personal and societal consequences of low literacy levels, and the timeliness of these implications for the field of reading education.



## Conclusion

Literacy policies and their outcomes directly impact public perception of reading education, practitioners' instructional choices, and students' academic achievement and attainment. Thus, understanding the dynamics of the literacy policymaking process, and the equity dimensions therein, is of the utmost importance for all who endeavor to improve reading education. At this critical juncture in the field of literacy, policy has unique potential to transform reading education in a forward-thinking way that acknowledges the deeply complex nature of literacy development (Avineri et al., 2015; Morrell, 2017).

Scholars from multiple domains reinforce this call for deeper analyses of achievement patterns by all educational stakeholders to examine which actions, by whom, and in what situations impact children's academic attainment (Pollock, 2008; Shannon, 2014; Benavot, 2015). Increasing cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity also demand this more robust and socially just perspective on reading education policy and practice (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021). Most crucially, these demands require increased intellectual awareness, political activism, and media engagement in a collaborative effort to improve the life trajectories of all learners (Milner, 2021; Morrell, 2017).

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### **Appendix A – Policy Documents**

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**Susan Foster is an assistant professor at Southern Illinois Edwardsville.**