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Missing Pieces and Voices: Steps for Teachers to Engage in Science of Reading Policy and Practice

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Cover Page Footnote

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Missing Pieces and Voices: Steps for Teachers to Engage in Science of Reading Policy and Practice

by Kathleen Howe
and Teddy Roop

Ideological influences on literacy policies are not new. Today the conversation is dominated by legislation related to dyslexia and the science of reading. However, one can trace back literacy initiatives and policy papers across decades. Edmondson (2004) highlights several examples and the ideologies behind them beginning in 1965 to 2001. Some examples shared by Edmondson (2004) include *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (liberalism), America Reads (neoliberalism), Reading Excellence Act (neoconservatism), and Reading First (conservatism). Others beyond 2001 exist (i.e., *Striving Readers* and *Race to the Top*) and the ideology of a dominant, rarely bipartisan, group seems to be the constant that brings about various policy initiatives or their undoing (i.e., Common Core). The current wave of dyslexia legislation backed by the science of reading is just the latest literacy policy added to a long list. The discourse used by advocates to encourage lawmakers to enact the current dyslexia legislation suggests teachers' practices are out of date with what is known from the science of reading and that consensus now exists around a definition, characteristics, and interventions for students with dyslexia (Worthy, Villarreal, Godfrey, DeJulio, S., Stefanski, Leitze, & Cooper, 2017).

Toll (2001/2002) cautions that competing discourses often exist when talking about the need for change and change initiatives. Within current dyslexia legislation, the voices of teachers and teacher educators are largely silenced. (Worthy, Salmerón, Long, Lammert & Godfrey, 2018). As a result, allegations about teachers and their current understanding of dyslexia and the science of reading were never discussed between those with potentially different understandings. Although policy initiatives impact the work of teachers, many teachers may only see policy as something they need to comply



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with or that has been done to them. As a result, teachers largely do not take time to understand how a policy came about or understand why they should consciously choose to engage in policies and political change.

The purpose of this article is not to argue for or against the widespread interest in the science of reading and dyslexia policy and practice. The authors recognize the importance and role of the science of reading and support ongoing advances in the field to help all readers learn, including those diagnosed as dyslexic. Instead, the authors hope to convince teachers that they have an important role to play in shaping the public's understanding of literacy policy and practices moving forward, using this most current policy initiative to make our point. Teaching reading is more than a science (Paige, Young, Rasinski, Rupley, Nichols & Valerio, 2021) and understanding reading challenges requires knowledge of distinct reader profiles (Spear-Swerling, 2015; Stanovich, 1988; Valencia & Riddle-Buly, 2004), not a vague definition and catch-all label. Teachers are well-suited to inform policymakers about the complexities of teaching and of readers who struggle, including those diagnosed with dyslexia. Their voices should not be left out of the conversation. This article includes suggestions for ways teachers can ensure their voices are included in current and future literacy policy initiatives.

Science of Reading

One factor contributing to the silencing of teachers' voices within the current discourse related to dyslexia legislation has to do with the predominance of one collective voice being heard and what is being said. Research on reading has been around for over 200 years (Shanahan, 2020), and is continually evolving. Science, in terms of reading, represents a vast body of multi-disciplinary research translating theoretical frameworks to practical classroom applications for meeting the needs of all children. The current take on the science of reading is being promoted by dyslexia advocates who are largely influencing state legislation across the country. Their message is spreading rapidly across blogs and social media, represents a narrow view of reading known as the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) that posits reading comprehension is reduced to the product of decoding and listening comprehension. This over simplistic message is fueling a debate on what is science when it comes to reading, and questioning, if not accusing, educators at every level of harmful practices and lack of competence in teaching reading (Hanford, 2019). The science of reading is not a "settled science" (Johnston & Scanlon, 2021) with a narrow scope focusing only on decoding or word recognition. This term has been used as the only evidence-based body of research applicable to reading instruction and assessment for all readers, regardless of their reader profile strengths and areas of need. The science of reading is a more inclusive body of research articulating the complex nature of reading and becoming literate. However, "it is essential to understand that it is not the science of reading that is the problem. Rather, it is the misrepresentation and even weaponization of that term to serve some personal, pedagogical, or political agenda" (Alexander, 2020, p. 3).

Transfer of Science of Reading into Practice

Teachers and teaching (instruction) are key components of the science of reading about which not enough positive attention is paid within the current dyslexia policy discussions. Important strides have been made over centuries of reading research to guide reading

instruction, including a synthesis of the "big five" (NRP, 2000) reading domains (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension), the RAND Report on Comprehension (RAND, 2002), and decades of research studying exemplary literacy teachers (Allington, 2002; Morrow, Gambrell & Pressley, 2003; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block & Morrow, 2001). Work needs to continue, including ways to ensure what is known from research is translated more widely into practice. However, seeking to understand the why and how of implementation in collaboration with teachers, rather than shaming and blaming these key stakeholders is needed. Paige et al. (2021) aptly note that teaching is both an art and a science and that research or policy attention on one without the other is not sufficient. Those who have spent time and continue to do so in the classroom understand the complexities of teaching best. Their voices should be included in literacy policy discussions to help expedite the translation of policy into practice.

Educational professionals are immersed in the application of theoretical knowledge; they are concerned with the practical relevance in light of evidence supporting theory application. In other words, evidence of what is effective instruction is expressed in positive outcomes for students' performance and abilities. Biesta (2013) refers to Aristotle to explain that in education *techne* (how something is to be done) and *phronesis* (what is to be done) "coincide with the difference between deliberation and judgement about the *means* of education and deliberation and judgement about the *ends* of education" (pp. 687-688). He further states that,

The rise of top-down prescription of both the content and the form of education has significantly diminished the opportunities for teachers to exert judgement – both individually and collectively – and has rather put them under a regime of the constant measurement of educational 'outcomes'. (p. 690)

While educational standards mandate *what* is to be taught in schools, these do not impose specific prescriptive practices for *how* the content should be taught. Input from educators on *phronesis* is typically

dismal, if present at all. Unfortunately, the voices of those with *techné*, educators working directly with students or professionals in teacher education programs, have been silenced on this matter as well. Paige et al. (2021) advocate for teachers with a firm understanding of science of reading to be allowed to continue to innovate within their classrooms to move reading instruction forward. For example, Paige et al. (2001) note that Readers Theatre is an instructional practice that grew out of teachers' "interpretation of the science" (p. S346) and that a research base to support this practice did not exist until years later. Teachers and scholars of reading have the knowledge, skills, and professional judgement to address what is prescribed beyond the standards—they have the ability to discern between instructional practices and approaches to address individual student's needs. These include administering assessments, analyzing and interpreting data, and selecting appropriate instructional interventions suited for diverse reader profiles.

Dyslexia and Reader Profiles

The current issue with drafting legislation on dyslexia is not whether or not dyslexia exists, but rather it is the lack of "empirical basis for the use of the term *dyslexic* to distinguish a group of children who are different from others experiencing difficulty acquiring literacy" (ILA, 2016, p. 8). This is a pressing issue because so many diverse reader profiles exist, including those identified as dyslexic. The construct of dyslexia is difficult to establish given the arbitrary cut off point determining if a student is dyslexic and distinguishing them from a struggling reader. The IQ discrepancy model has certainly been discredited as a determining score (Stanovich & Siegel, 1994); however, several studies have formulated and expanded upon the existence of distinct reader profiles (Spear-Swerling, 2015; Stanovich, 1988; Valencia & Riddle Buly, 2004). Determining the strength and needs of readers to establish a reader profile begins with assessment through which data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted (Spear-Swerling, 2015; Valencia, 2011). Valencia and Riddle Buly's (2004) description is one of the most specific categorizations for six types of reader profiles, which they refer to as clusters (see Figure 1). Each reader profile exhibits

strengths and needs in a particular area of reading skills, according to the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) that are critical for reading acquisition and development—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Needs are primarily centered around word identification, fluency, or comprehension and instruction should focus on the particular needs evidenced in the data. Some areas, such as word identification may require further diagnostic data. These clusters are worth considering when employing responsive and appropriate educational practices and interventions, including the what to teach and how to teach it, for struggling readers and those identified as dyslexic.

Moving Beyond "Either-Or" to "And"

Science of reading and dyslexia are just the current focus of literacy policy trending in a long list of existing initiatives. Each shares the same goal of improving reading instruction to better serve all students. Suggesting teachers' practices are out-of-date with what is known about the science of reading is a gross oversimplification of the important issues at hand within current dyslexia policy proposals. The science of reading is not a "settled science" (Johnson & Scanlon, 2021) and should not just be concerned with decoding or word recognition. Teaching is both a science and art and attention to both areas is needed to realize full scale implementation of research into practice (Paige et al., 2021). The definition for dyslexia as used in current and pending legislation does not adequately distinguish a dyslexic reader from other learners who struggle to read. However, existing research that describes diverse reader profiles does provide teachers with information that can be used to help all students learn to read, including those diagnosed with dyslexia (Spear-Swerling, 2015; Stanovich, 1988; Valencia & Riddle Buly, 2004).

Teachers are key stakeholders within all literacy policy initiatives, including recent dyslexia legislation. Their voices should be included and they should strive to get involved in this and future policy initiatives. Mandates and narrow definitions for the science of reading would create another impossible initiative for teachers. It tasks them to bridge theoretical and practical knowl-

Cluster	Need	Intervention
Automatic Word Callers	Decoding quickly but not reading for meaning.	Explicit instruction for comprehension; teacher modeling and think-alouds.
Struggling Word Callers	Decoding and word meaning.	Instruction in self-monitoring and decoding while reading connected text.
Word Stumblers	Slow reading rate and difficulty decoding but good comprehension.	Systematic instruction in decoding and reading connected text for meaning at grade level.
Slow Comprehenders	Slow reading rate but accurate decoding and good comprehension.	Fluency building activities and multisyllabic word decoding.
Slow Word Callers	Accurate but slow decoding and difficulty with comprehension.	Explicit instruction for word learning, vocabulary, fluency and meaning.
Disabled Readers	Difficulties in all three areas--word identification, fluency, and comprehension.	Intensive intervention instruction in decoding.

Figure 1. Reader Profiles

Note: The six reader profile clusters define the targeted area for reading development and the possible targeted instructional approach (from Valencia & Riddle Buly, 2004)

edge that has significantly evolved from the simplistic model of reading privileged within current and pending legislation. This is especially problematic because laws are easier to enact than they are to reverse and may or may not reflect progress in scientific discovery and application made by literacy scholars, scientists, and practitioners. Edmondson (2004) encourages reading teachers to get involved in order to help the public understand education policy issues. She suggests these three areas of focus: (a) engage in policy study; (b) work locally; and (c) embrace alternative positions (p. 424). The following list builds on Edmondson's call for action for teachers' consideration:

1. Know the names and contact information of your state and local legislators, including your local school board members. Get to know them

and let them get to know you by sending emails, letters and scheduling visits to their offices. Help educate them on matters related to education. Share resources and practical information from your professional experiences as a classroom teacher. Become a valuable resource and perceived as helpful in matters related to K-12 education, including reading instruction, dyslexia and more. When they get something "right" be sure to let them know and thank them for their service.

2. Know the names and contact information of your state department of education administrators and literacy coordinators. Volunteer to help when they are looking for teachers to serve on curriculum, assessment, standards, and other

committees. Access, review and use free resources they post on their website. Share other resources that you know about with your state-level contact for their use. Make sure they consider important matters related to literacy assessment and instruction through multiple lenses.

3. Seek out professional organizations with an interest in literacy to join. Get involved with their advocacy and legislation committees. Share useful resources and information you receive from professional organizations with your colleagues and encourage them to consider getting involved too.
4. Commit to a professional learning routine in order to stay current. Seek out and attend professional learning opportunities (conferences, workshops, book studies and more). Make time to read professional books and journals. Set and stick to goals, such as to attend at least one professional conference (online or in person) each year and read an article or chapter each week.
5. Engage in policy study. Book studies are a common professional learning practice teachers enjoy. Typically, teachers select titles related to a specific content area or pedagogy. Why not read and discuss position papers, draft legislation, or unpack an existing policy?
6. Broaden the literacy groups and thought leaders you currently follow on social media and on the internet. Follow a wide range of individuals and groups who focus on literacy on Facebook, Twitter, podcasts, and blogs. Find out what is important to them, who they follow or are influenced by, and what they are advocating. Be sure to like, reshare, comment and post literacy-related information and resources. Be respectful of different views. Seek to understand and build bridges.
7. Collaborate with parents and community members to develop and deliver literacy outreach programs. Host a book study on a current literacy issue or trend. Enlist their help seeking donations for new and lightly used books to add to classroom libraries. Take the lead and share useful information with them so they view you as a valuable literacy resource and partner. Invite them into your classroom to see the important work you do or ask them to serve as a guest reader or speaker.
8. Find professional journals and newsletters that are seeking submissions from classroom teachers for teaching tips, book reviews, practitioner-friendly articles on literacy matters, and more. Write. Submit. Or, consider presenting at a professional conference or for your building or district colleagues.
9. Create a parent newsletter or add a column to an existing newsletter that includes a weekly or monthly “spotlight” on literacy. Avoid use of educationese and jargon that parents do not understand. Share current research, trends and issues in parent-friendly language. Simplify complex issues and define key terms and concepts to help parents avoid consumption of misinformation.
10. Listen to student and parent concerns with both ears open. Seek to understand their issues so you can better address them. It is easier to address issues and problem-solve in the beginning before too much time, emotions and miscommunication occurs. It’s even easier when relationships have already been established and mutual trust and respect exists. See #6 and #7 to proactively assist with creating positive relationships with parents.
11. Help add to the much-needed emerging body of literature on the science of reading instruction. Reach out to a local university literacy teacher educator to explore how you might be able to assist with current or future research projects. Or, consider engaging in an action research study in your classroom to learn more about some aspect of your current literacy instructional practices.

Remember, we will all benefit from a broader definition of the science of reading along with accurate definitions of key terms and concepts associated with it.

What else should be done moving forward given legislation is pending or already in place in many states, regardless of whether or not K-12 teachers' voices were included in the conversation? In addition to participating in professional learning sessions and taking time to read widely about the science of reading and dyslexia, teachers should take steps to stay informed and knowledgeable of current literacy research and practices. Professional standards from organizations with an interest in literacy and dyslexia are readily available (ILA, 2017; IDA, 2018). Reviewing such standards and engaging in discussions about their similarities, differences, and use in practice is a great professional learning activity that teachers can do for free. Overlap exists as undoubtedly is the case with current assessment and instructional practices in use in classrooms, and with dyslexia proposals and mandates. Complying with dyslexia laws does not need to be an "either or" situation. Rather, teachers should reframe and think about the mandates using "and" so that all students are better served. Additionally, consider implementing one or more of the above suggested action steps to ensure advocacy efforts do not leave out the wealth of information teachers know about reading instruction and the realities of implementing research into practice within today's diverse classroom. Teachers are key stakeholders in any reading initiative or legislation. Including their voices now and in the future will help ensure misinformation does not result from "ideology trumping evidence" (Allington, 2005).

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