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Examining Representations of Reading Education in Images and Headlines Accompanying *Education Week* Articles on the Science of Reading

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Abstract: This study examined how *Education Week*, an education news magazine, represented reading, students, and educators in headlines and images accompanying articles on the Science of Reading. This study drew from multimodal content analysis, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis methods to analyze 87 images from 62 unique articles, opinion pieces, or special reports on the Science of Reading. The authors examined who the images featured and analyzed how these images depicted reading and reading education. The multilayered data analysis resulted in the construction of five themes: (1) the Science of Reading model was presented in uninterrupted ways; (2) reading was depicted as mysterious and goal-less and also as (3) a process in pieces; (4) the wholeness of

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students and teachers was not recognized; and (5) the images offered narrow representations of education expertise. Ultimately, education journalism enacts powerful public pedagogy that shapes and is shaped by audiences that include policymakers. When literacy education news reporting does not represent the nuance, divergence, and full breadth of conversations about reading instruction, education news risks becoming more aligned with advocacy than with the deep communication of significant issues.
Keywords: science of reading; reading education; literacy policy; education journalism; multimodal content analysis

Examinando las representaciones de la enseñanza de la lectura en imágenes y titulares que acompañan los artículos de *Education Week* sobre la ciencia de la lectura
Resumen: Este estudio examinó cómo *Education Week*, una revista de noticias educativas, representó la lectura, a los estudiantes y a los educadores en titulares e imágenes que acompañaban artículos sobre la Ciencia de la Lectura. El estudio se basó en métodos de análisis de contenido multimodal, análisis temático y análisis del discurso para analizar 87 imágenes de 62 artículos, columnas de opinión o informes especiales sobre la Ciencia de la Lectura. Los autores examinaron a quiénes mostraban las imágenes y analizaron cómo éstas representaban la lectura y la enseñanza de la lectura. El análisis multilayered de los datos resultó en la construcción de cinco temas: (1) el modelo de la Ciencia de la Lectura se presentó de manera ininterrumpida; (2) la lectura se representó como misteriosa y carente de objetivos, y también como (3) un proceso fragmentado; (4) no se reconoció la integralidad de estudiantes y docentes; y (5) las imágenes ofrecieron representaciones limitadas de la pericia educativa. En última instancia, el periodismo educativo ejerce una poderosa pedagogía pública que forma y es formada por audiencias que incluyen a los responsables de políticas. Cuando la cobertura noticiosa sobre la enseñanza de la lectura no representa los matices, divergencias y amplitud de las conversaciones sobre la instrucción lectora, las noticias educativas corren el riesgo de alinearse más con la defensa de intereses que con la comunicación profunda de cuestiones significativas.
Palabras clave: ciencia de la lectura; enseñanza de la lectura; política de alfabetización; periodismo educativo; análisis de contenido multimodal

Examinando as representações do ensino da leitura em imagens e manchetes que acompanham artigos da *Education Week* sobre a ciência da leitura
Resumo: Este estudo examinou como a *Education Week*, uma revista de notícias educacionais, representou a leitura, os estudantes e os educadores em manchetes e imagens que acompanhavam artigos sobre a Ciência da Leitura. O estudo baseou-se em métodos de análise de conteúdo multimodal, análise temática e análise do discurso para analisar 87 imagens de 62 artigos, artigos de opinião ou relatórios especiais sobre a Ciência da Leitura. Os autores examinaram quem aparecia nas imagens e analisaram como essas imagens retratavam a leitura e o ensino da leitura. A análise multilayered dos dados resultou na construção de cinco temas: (1) o modelo da Ciência da Leitura foi apresentado de maneira ininterrupta; (2) a leitura foi representada como misteriosa e sem objetivos, e também como (3) um processo fragmentado; (4) a integralidade de estudantes e professores não foi reconhecida; e (5) as imagens ofereceram representações limitadas da expertise educacional. Em última instância, o jornalismo educacional exerce uma poderosa pedagogia pública que molda e é moldada por audiências que incluem formuladores de políticas. Quando a cobertura jornalística da educação em leitura não representa as nuances, divergências e a amplitude das conversas sobre a instrução leitora, o

noticiário educacional corre o risco de alinhar-se mais com a defesa de interesses do que com a comunicação aprofundada de questões significativas.
Palavras-chave: ciência da leitura; ensino da leitura; política de alfabetização; jornalismo educacional; análise de conteúdo multimodal

Examining Representations of Reading Education in Images and Headlines Accompanying *Education Week* Articles on the Science of Reading

The purpose of our study was to examine how *Education Week*, a popular weekly education news magazine available online and in print, represented reading and literacy instruction in images, headlines, and captions accompanying articles on the Science of Reading. On its website, *EducationWeek* (*EdWeek*) is described as "America's most trusted resource for K-12 education news and information" with a reach of over 1.6 million readers (Education Week, n.d.). Furthermore, *EdWeek* marketing materials list "Reading and Literacy" as their most popular topic, promising to help readers "maintain [their] subject matter expertise" (email communication, February 12, 2024). It is also important to note that Tierney and Pearson (2024) list *EdWeek* as one of the media outlets contributing to Science of Reading advocacy and promoting the idea that reading science is settled (see Schwartz, December 3, 2019). As MacPhee et al. (2021) made clear, examining media representations of reading education is essential because education journalism plays a critical role in shaping how the public perceives and understands reading and reading education.

We designed this research to understand the stories *EdWeek* presents to its audiences and examine the messages that *EdWeek*'s (n.d.) named audiences—educators, policymakers, and businesspeople—receive and consume. One overarching research question guided this inquiry: What stories about reading and reading instruction are disseminated through images and headlines accompanying *EdWeek* articles advocating for the Science of Reading? Three additional sub-questions also helped focus our analysis: (a) How is the act of reading represented in headlines and images accompanying online *EdWeek* articles dedicated to the Science of Reading? (b) How is reading and writing instruction represented in headlines and images accompanying online *EdWeek* articles dedicated to the Science of Reading? (c) Who is visible in headlines and images accompanying *EdWeek* articles dedicated to the Science of Reading? What are they doing?

This research is significant because our study interrogates how reading education research is being framed, reported, represented, and circulated by an influential education news outlet. With the current national and political climate, as well as the new reading mandates shaping education in U.S. public schools, the information (both visual and verbal) that the public encounters and consumes must be scrutinized. Such encounters may be brief because social media provides users with opportunities to consume headlines and images at speed without even reading the article. Furthermore, education journalists are not reading researchers, so media reporting on reading might fall short and must be examined (Aukerman, 2022). Our study also aligns with Kachorsky et al.'s (2020) call to critically analyze media representations of school and schooling more generally.

To be clear, we consider media reports to be constructions of reality, not reality itself (Carvalho, 2007; Janks, 2010). Information packaged as news can be understood as a form of invisible power, as it influences how people perceive and act upon the world (Veneklasen & Miller, 2002). Following Hall (1997), it is our right as educators, literacy researchers, and members of the U.S. public to decide whether we accept, partially accept, or reject how education journalists represent teachers, students, and reading education in the media.

Theoretical Framework

We strive to be transparent about the theories and perspectives that shape how we understand reading, literacy, and education. In this section, we describe literacy as situated sociocultural practice and then share how reading discourses might be understood as figured worlds (Gee, 2014). We conclude by discussing how multimodal texts and images circulate in powerful ways through our social worlds. These perspectives shaped how we approached this study, the questions we asked, and the analysis we designed.

Literacy as Situated Sociocultural Practice

First, both authors research multimodal approaches to literacy and learning. We view human representational work and communication as inherently multimodal: spoken and written language are significant modes, but humans also share ideas and connect through (for example) image, gesture, movement, music, and numbers (Kress, 2010). We understand multimodality from a social semiotic perspective, viewing all meaning-making practices (e.g., reading and writing) as situated and contextual. We perceive text-makers and interpreters as agentive, acting upon their interest and motivation to represent and communicate their ideas to their chosen audience (Kress, 2010). Readers encounter texts within specific contexts, bringing their unique histories and knowledges to their reading. Meaning is never transferred wholesale from one person to another; each person makes meaning in unique and personal ways. Importantly, all communication is part of a semiotic chain where people create, disseminate, receive, and interpret texts (Kress, 2010; Newfield, 2015).

Second, we also view literacy through a critical sociocultural lens, understanding that literacy skills are not neutral and are always contextual and connected to power (Lewis et al., 2007; Street, 1984). Who people are and the communities within which they enact literacy practices matter. The texts and literacy practices valued within one distinct community of practice may not be valued to the same degree by other communities or groups of people (Gee, 2014). Thus, we do not purchase the idea that education should rely solely on a single understanding of literacy (e.g., a strict Science of Reading-aligned approach) at the exclusion of additional perspectives and research. We are acutely aware of the ideas and research that are lost when a single version of what counts as reading or literacy prevails.

Ideas about what counts as reading and how reading is defined are central to this study. Tierney and Pearson's (2024) discussion of multiple definitions of reading highlights the nuance and complexity that are lost when particular understandings of reading become preferred or dominant explanations. For example, Gough and Tunmer (1986) represented reading as two interdependent processes: word recognition/decoding and language comprehension. When considering this *Simple View of Reading*, Tierney and Pearson (2024) suggested that "simple" modifies "view," not the reading process itself (pp. 43-44). Thus, interpretations of Gough and Tunmer's (1986) representation of reading often obscure the complexity of teaching and learning reading, simplifying reading and comprehension processes into more easily marketable, circulatable, and digestible forms.

Tierney and Pearson (2024) also discussed how Rayner et al. (2001) distinguished between *reading*, a child's ability to "identify and understand printed words" (p. 34), from *literacy*, "the achievement of a broad range of skills embedded in cultural and technological contexts" (p. 34). Unfortunately, Rayner et al.'s (2001) definition of reading conceals the broader purposes for reading and writing, as well as the wide range of social contexts in which people engage in meaning-making activities. When this narrow definition of reading becomes re-rendered in legislative form, politicians risk making decontextualized or autonomous reading and writing the norm (Street, 1984) instead of enacting historically and culturally responsive approaches that center students, their identities, and their communities (e.g., Muhammad, 2023). As Tierney and Pearson (2024) argued, Rayner's (2001)

definition of reading fails to address how learning to read interacts with institutional and societal inequities. Ultimately, such definitions isolate reading from broader conversations about teaching, learning, equity, and justice.

Reading Discourses and Figured Worlds

Furthermore, Gee (2014) warned against establishing universal meanings and broad generalizations, as they can dissolve the nuanced specificity of local contexts and situated practices. Gee argued that all theories—even scientific ones—are simplifications: they are useful in their applicability to certain aspects of life, but they cannot account for the complexity and nuance of specific persons in specific contexts. Such universals also simplify reality because they limit possibilities and change (Holland, 1998). These theories (or figured worlds) shape how we think, act, and interact with others, but they also limit our understanding of and engagement with people who think and believe differently.

For Gee (2014), a figured world is a simplified, prototypical simulation. Figured worlds are stories or theories about how the world works. When people hold specific models to be true, they may isolate themselves (and their community) from alternate perspectives grounded in contexts and realities different from their own. While figured world theory can illuminate human creativity and humanity's ability to world-build, these ideas can show how people can break down and destroy things already built (Gee, 2014). Gee's theory highlights the human construction of meaning and the figured worlds that hold those meanings. He advises that we examine the texts, media, experiences, interactions, and institutions that help establish any given perspective on the world.

Just as Street (1984) linked literacy to matters of power, so too does Gee (2014) link figured worlds to politics and the distribution of social goods, items or things (physical or conceptual) that people want and value. The science of reading movement can be considered in light of this theory. While one social good—the ability to read—has taken precedence in current conversations about reading instruction, other social goods can potentially be made out, too: renown (e.g., the fame earned through media products and the resulting public attention), status (e.g., the prominence of selected researchers and voices over others), knowledge (e.g., the need for consultants and education journalists external to schools and teacher preparation programs), and particular resources (e.g., expensive curriculum packages created by publishers and mandated by legislation).

Importantly, people can take and use isolated aspects of figured worlds to promote different figured worlds and political interests. Recognizing figured worlds as inherently political helps to acknowledge the political nature of current debates about reading. There is more to these conversations about reading than science and the desire to help all students learn to read.

Multimodal Texts, Visual Culture, and Image Circulation

We recognize the *EdWeek* articles in our data corpus as multimodal texts constructed from written language and images (Kress, 2010). From a social semiotic perspective on multimodality, both modes offer interpretive possibilities and have "distinct potential to contribute equally" to meaning-making activity (Kress, 2010, p. 96). Thus, readers must pay attention to the meaning potentials offered through each mode, as well as to how combined modes interact or modify the meanings made possible through the other mode (Unsworth & Clerigh, 2017). Authors choose, sequence, and organize words into texts for particular audiences and purposes; image-makers and publishers select, frame, and compose visuals in alignment with their communication goals (Kress, 2010). Published images mean someone chose a particular image over others (Collier & Collier, 1986). When interpreting a web article that contains images and words, readers are also viewers who construct their interpretations across both modes of representation and communication.

Although language is often privileged as the most significant mode of representation and communication, particularly in formal school settings (Gee & Hayes, 2011), Sturken and Cartwright (2001) noted the role of images and visual texts in producing, reproducing, and shaping hegemonic ideologies. Viewers can state what they perceive in an image and summarize ideational details (Barthes, 1977; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), such as who is shown, what activity or event is occurring, and the location of any activity. However, images also share and circulate connotative information—cultural and ideological messages that shape and are shaped by people's thoughts, beliefs, and actions (Barthes, 1977). Viewers must learn to *look* and engage with images by interpreting, interrogating, and challenging the images or visual texts they encounter (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). As Berger (1972) stated, "We only see what we look at" (p. 8). Only when reader-viewers pause to critically and consciously consider images can they decide to accept, reject, or partially accept visual or multimodal representational work (Hall, 1997).

However, while images represent the world, they can never reflect reality itself (Janks, 2010). Any reproduction of the natural world is representational work (Pauwels, 2011). Our dataset includes graphics, photographs of named people or specific objects, and stock photographs. Graphics are art, illustrations, or diagrams published with articles. The obvious human-made nature of these artworks means their modality is low; they do not claim a close representational reality with our natural world (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). In contrast, natural or real photographs feature particular people, places, and unique artifacts. These images are often associated with truthfulness, realness, and authenticity (Zagonel et al., 2023). Stock photographs or graphics are housed in image banks and tagged with relevant keywords. Although the stock images in our dataset accompany articles distributed as education news, these images also support advertising and marketing industries (Frosh, 2001). As visual forms of communication, all three image types in our dataset both shape and are shaped by cultural discourses around reading and reading pedagogy (Aiello et al., 2023).

Stock photographs present an interesting dilemma. As a photograph, they may give the impression that they reference a specific person, event, time, or place. However, stock photographs are part of an image ecology that generates billions of dollars (Frosh, 2001). They need to be generic enough to be used by multiple people and businesses for various purposes (Aiello et al., 2023) and able to be recontextualized into different texts (Frosh, 2001). Machin (2004) observed that stock photographs do not document or bear witness to our world; instead, they tend to be stylized and posed. They are designed to be timeless, generic, and decontextualized (Machin, 2004). However, recognizing the non-specific nature of these stock images does not mean neglecting the meaning potential of these visuals. As Machin (2004) and Aiello et al. (2023) argued, they still convey connotative and ideological messages—even though stock images lack particular social and political contexts.

It is not lost on us that current Science of Reading legislation often fails to account for the centrality of multimodal and visual texts within our increasingly digital world. Even discussing images in picturebooks has become devalued due to its association with (mis)interpretations of the three-cueing system and divergence from strictly decoding practices (see Bailey, 2024). While reading and composing visual and multimodal texts are not generally prioritized by Science of Reading advocates, other professional organizations, such as the International Literacy Association (2024), have published position statements advocating for visual, multimodal, and digital reading and writing opportunities for students in school spaces. Our students exist in social worlds (analog and digital) that are saturated with visuals and image-based texts. We hope this study and article also testify to the importance of critical visual and multimodal reading practices.

Methods

For this qualitative study, we drew from several approaches to data collection and analysis. First, Serafini and Reid's (2023) multimodal content analysis informed our work. We identified our area of interest (images accompanying *EdWeek* articles on the Science of Reading), developed our research questions, and constructed our data corpus using explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. However, while the first iteration of our data analysis aligned with multimodal content analysis procedures, consequent cycles of analysis (Saldaña, 2016) drew from thematic analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Wolgemuth et al., 2024) and Gee's (2014) discourse analysis toolkit, particularly the Figured Worlds tool. Below, we detail our data generation methods and explain how we engaged with the data to construct our findings. We intend to be transparent and clear about our qualitative processes.

Data Sources

For this study, we did not exhaustively search for every online *EdWeek* article that mentioned the Science of Reading. Instead, we relied on *EdWeek*'s search algorithms to establish our data corpus using the reading pathways offered to curious readers who might search for articles using the term, "Science of Reading." We clicked on every link suggested for 10 search results pages. We followed additional links included within the articles we read. We subscribed to *EdWeek* and opened any relevant emails and article links we received. Both authors also use social media, so we also curated articles disseminated through platforms such as LinkedIn and X.

To be included in our data corpus, an article had to meet the following inclusion criteria. First, the article title, subheading, or body must mention the phrase, *Science of Reading*. We included articles by *EdWeek* journalists, opinion pieces by literacy stakeholders, and longer special reports. Thus, we excluded more general or differently focused articles on reading. For example, we excluded Heubeck's (2024) article, *Make Time for the Read-Aloud*. This article did not mention the Science of Reading. We also excluded web pages that were landing pages for links to articles about reading. For example, we excluded the *Teaching Kids How to Read During COVID-19* webpage because it introduced a special report on reading during the pandemic and shared links to five *EdWeek* articles.

Our research questions focused on visual representations of reading and reading education. Therefore, any article, opinion piece, or special report we included needed to contain at least one still image. We counted as images: (1) Stock photographs or graphics; (2) Photographs of named people or specific places or objects; and (3) Graphics designed for *EdWeek*. We excluded from our data corpus any articles without images (e.g., letters to the editors) or with unrelated images (e.g., navigational icons, decorative graphics, or advertisements). We also excluded pages dedicated solely to videos (e.g., webinars or related videos). When a page included both images and videos, we included only the still images. Video analysis is beyond the scope of this study.

The final data corpus contained 87 images from 62 unique articles, opinion pieces, or special reports. Some articles and reports contained multiple images. For example, one report (Schwartz, July 20, 2022) added 12 images to our dataset. Thirty-six stock photographs or graphics (Appendix A), 46 images of named people or specific things or places (Appendix B), and five graphics created for *EdWeek* (Appendix C) comprised our final data corpus. Although we did not set any parameters regarding publication date, our search methods produced articles published between 2019 and 2024. This timeframe made sense: most U.S. state-level Science of Reading legislation occurred between 2019 and 2024 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2024), with very few U.S. states enacting Science of Reading legislation before 2019. Please see Appendices A, B, and C for a complete list of images, headlines, and article weblinks.

Data Analysis

We engaged with our dataset in analytical ways immediately we began searching, locating, and verifying *EdWeek* articles and images that fit our inclusion criteria (Miles et al., 2019). Our cataloging system became the foundation for these initial interactions. We designed a table that allowed us to (a) organize and catalog each image and (b) focus our attention on specific aspects of each data source in the corpus. We documented the article's publication, the title and subtitle (when applicable), the author and photographer/artist, the *EdWeek* section (e.g., Reading and Literacy), and the web link to the article. To begin building our understanding of national coverage and representation across headlines and images, we also tracked U.S. states and schools named in headlines or captions and/or represented in photographs. We wrote short descriptions of the image in the final column. We organized the images by each article's publication date. Our analysis did not address the body of the article itself, although we did check the text to see if images were referenced.

Following Serafini and Reid (2023), we then created an analytical template to help us familiarize ourselves with the 87 images in our data corpus. This second template documented the ideational components of the images. We noted who or what the image depicted. We summarized what was happening in the image, noting the settings where any activity occurred. We recorded any captions included with the 46 photographs that depict named individuals, specific objects, or locations. This time, we included descriptive phrases as a concise way to capture what we were seeing in the image. Specific descriptive phrases became more salient than others because we used them repeatedly for multiple phrases. Examples of these repeated phrases included, *teachers learn SoR*, *teacher read-aloud*, and *students read silently and alone*.

We maintained our image collection and analytical templates in an online repository, which allowed both researchers to collaborate on data collection and analysis from their respective locations. From the outset of our data collection, we utilized the comments feature to annotate images and analytical templates. We reserved comments for interpretive asides, brief reactions or responses, questions, or links to scholarship or theory. As Shelton and Coogler (2024) argued, our annotations show how we assigned meaning to the data corpus. For example, one annotation recorded a design feature that we termed a *comprehension bubble*, a visual feature resembling a speech or thought bubble that depicted a reader's understanding of a text. Other times, our annotations noted textual disconnects, such as instances where the image and headline seemed misaligned. A notable example annotation documented how the named teacher in the photograph was not the educator quoted in the article's headline (Heubeck, September 15, 2023). The article did not mention the photographed teacher at all.

This single instance of annotated discord between the visual and verbal elements prompted us to question our initial assumption that the images (especially the real or natural photographs of named people) would be related to the headline or even anchored by it (Barthes, 1977). We drew from picturebook scholarship (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000) in identifying headline-image relationships as *reflective* (instances where words and images offer similar information) or *complementary* (when the images and words offer different but connected information). We also adapted McCloud's (1993) use of *non-sequitur* to describe illogical transitions between images in a comics sequence to fit our analysis needs. Although McCloud used this to describe the transitions between images in sequence, we used this to help us identify when no connection between the headline and image was immediately apparent. In these non-sequitur instances, establishing connections required significant interpretive commitment from us. The notion of non-sequitur disrupts assumed relationships and demands more mindful consumption of texts.

Finally, through the data collection and analysis process, we wrote more detailed analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016) that linked the images in our dataset and connected our analysis to published

theory, scholarship, and education journalism. Like Mihas (2024), we believed that our memo writing was an essential analytic strategy. Sometimes, our memo writing felt spontaneous, and we explored connections that were salient to us through writing. We wrote and thought in an unfettered way. However, at other times, we worked more deductively. In particular, we applied Gee's (2014) Figured World Tool to analyze and interpret the images. We asked the following questions of the data corpus (adapted for interpreting our visual data corpus): (1) What typical stories are represented? What are viewers asked to assume? (2) What participants, activities, ways of interacting, objects, institutions, and environments take precedence in these images? (3) What do people (behind the camera or written headline or in the picture) feel, value, and/or believe about reading? (4) What texts, media, and institutions have supported this version of reading? We became deeply familiar with the data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2022) through our memos and our ongoing conversations. Our memos became significant data sources in their own right because our writing contained repeated ideas and discussions of salient tensions.

While we did not explicitly code our dataset or memos beyond the above analysis, we read through our memos and annotations. We looked for repeated ideas and started constructing patterns. We distilled these repeated ideas into short phrases, which we then organized into five thematic clusters or groups of phrases. We then wrote a theme statement for each cluster, describing the essence or character of each group of ideas (Saldaña, 2024). For example, one cluster of repeated ideas contained the following short phrases: *letter work, sound work, word work, writing fragments, writing into worksheets*. The theme statement developed for the cluster representing these ideas read: *EdWeek* images tend to show pieces of foundational reading and writing processes without representing how students read or construct whole texts for important purposes or audiences. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance, we revisited each theme statement and data sources repeatedly, iteratively discussing the nuances and parameters of each theme before establishing the five themes reported in the findings section of this article.

Findings

In this section, we first provide a general overview of the data corpus we analyzed. We wanted to communicate the overall character of this multimodal dataset. We share the following characteristics for the stock images (n = 36), real photographs (n = 46), and graphics designed for *EdWeek* (n = 5): (a) The publication year; (b) The number of authors and image-makers, (c) The *EdWeek* sections represented across the dataset; (d) The number of states and named schools in headlines, image captions, or articles; and (e) Our determination of headline-image relationships. This general and numerical overview provides important foundational context for understanding our constructed themes.

Second, we present the five themes that tell our overall story of this dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The titles of each theme-based subsection are shortened versions of our theme statement, inspired by Braun & Clarke's (2022) request for concise and informative theme names. These themes were constructed by and mediated through us. We do not claim that the themes we present here are the only ways to interpret the *EdWeek* images in our dataset. All *EdWeek* articles discussed in this findings section are cited in Appendices A, B, and C.

General Overview of the EdWeek Data Corpus

First, it is notable that the number of *EdWeek* journalists contributing to the Science of Reading articles in our dataset is relatively small (see Table 1). For example, only six individual writers were associated with 26 images in our stock image dataset, and only seven *EdWeek* journalists were associated with the 46 photographs in the real image data corpus. A closer look at the

journalists' names shows that one journalist, Sarah Schwartz, wrote 30 of the 62 unique articles identified in our data corpus. These 30 articles contained 47 images (more than 50% of the images in our data corpus). Similarly, one photographer, Kate Medley, supplied 17 photographs across four articles. The next closest contributor was Cheryl Gerber, who contributed five photographs to one article.

Table 1

Numerical Overview of our EdWeek Science of Reading Image Dataset

Analysis Dimension	Stock	Real	Art
Publication Years			
2019	4	11	1
2020	5	3	0
2021	5	0	0
2022	2	18	0
2023	12	5	3
2024	8	9	1
Authors & Named Image-Makers			
Number of *EdWeek* Journalists represented	6	7	1
Number of Opinion Writers represented	10	0	7
Named Photographers | Artists	0	8	4
Associated Press Photographs	0	7	0
Image supplied by Featured People/Companies	0	3	0
EdWeek Section Distribution			
Reading & Literacy	18	28	0
Reading & Literacy: Explainer	2	0	0
Reading & Literacy Opinion	6	0	2
Reading & Literacy: Research Center	2	2	0
Reading & Literacy: Project	0	13	0
Reading & Literacy Q&A or Reader Quiz	2	2	0
English Learners	1	0	0
Teacher Preparation	2	0	0
Curriculum	1	0	0
Curriculum Opinion	0	0	1
Special Education Opinion	0	0	1
School & District Management	0	1	1
Industry Insight	2	0	0
Named States & Schools			
States Named in Headlines	2	1	0
States Featured in Images or Captions	0	13	0

Analysis Dimension	Stock	Real	Art
Schools Named in Captions	0	9	0
Named Research / Higher Ed Institutes in Captions	0	2	0
Headline-Image Relationships			
Reflective (Very Similar Information)	2	8	0
Complementary (Related / Additional Information)	2	6	0
Non-Sequitur (Connection Not Clear; Takes Work)	32	32	5

Second, *EdWeek* published Science of Reading articles predominantly within the broad "Reading and Literacy" category. However, some articles received an additional Reading and Literacy label (e.g., explainers, research or project reports, Q&A pieces). Reading and Literacy journalists occasionally published Science of Reading articles in other *EdWeek* sections. Elizabeth Heubeck (February 16, 2024) and Schwartz (January 23, 2024) each wrote an article for the Teacher Preparation section of *EdWeek*. Sarah Schwartz (March 6, 2024) also published under the English Learners category, and Catherine Gewertz (February 3, 2020) contributed an article to the Curriculum section. *EdWeek* published these articles written for the other sections with stock images only. An article written for the School and District Management section and published with an image supplied by an education consultancy firm was authored by a journalist specializing in school leadership who did not contribute to the Reading and Literacy section (Banerji, May 29, 2024).

Additionally, within the parameters of our data corpus, no real or stock photograph images were published with any Reading and Literacy Opinion articles. Instead, stock art images or *EdWeek* graphics accompany these articles in our data corpus. Visually, these images are cartoon-like and thus appear further from our perception of truth and reality than a stock photograph (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). While *EdWeek*'s core Reading and Literacy journalists tend to write alone, the opinion pieces are often co-authored. There were 16 unique contributors to the 10 opinion pieces One contributor (Claude Goldenberg) authored two articles. The authors of these pieces were education professors (n = 4), school district administrators (n = 3), professors from other disciplines (n = 2), district/school reading specialists (n = 2), one public school teacher, one private school administrator, one state-level administrator, one graduate student, and one mother who is also a dyslexia advocate.

Our overview also suggests that the scope of *EdWeek*'s reporting is narrow. Only three specific headlines named particular states (California, Tennessee, and New York). The visual data corpus also showed a limited range of states and schools. Only 12 states were featured across the 46 real photographs. North Carolina was the state context for 14 images, with Mississippi, Michigan, Ohio, and New York being represented six, five, three, and two times, respectively. The remaining states—California, Colorado, Indiana, Maryland, Missouri, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee—were each featured in just one photograph. Furthermore, across all 46 images, only nine unique schools were featured. Eight of the schools were elementary schools, and one photograph featuring a stack of photocopied novels was taken in a named middle school (Schwartz, Jan 15, 2024). Photographs from just three North Carolina elementary schools represented more than 50% of the images featuring classrooms from named schools. Two photographs featuring students from named elementary schools were also recontextualized and re-used in other articles. For example, an image of a male student of Color standing before a flipchart containing practice for learning the

"tricky Y" spelling rule was included in a report focused on the challenges of putting the Science of Reading into practice (Schwartz, July 20, 2022a) and then again in an article offering "5 Insights on Getting the 'Science of Reading' Into Classrooms" (Schwartz, July 27, 2022).

Even though these photographs depicted real students, schools, activities, and (sometimes) teachers, we often deemed the relationship between the photographs and the heading to be a non-sequitur relationship. This final piece of our more numerically driven overview convinced us of the importance of our thematic analysis of the images and the visual stories they convey. If these *EdWeek* images are not generally being used to reflect or contribute to the information communicated by the headline (and, thus, the body of the article), then what possible stories about reading and reading instruction are they communicating to a public that might well be consuming them unquestioningly and at-speed, likely through social media?

Below, we present our account of the following five themes: (1) Science of Reading Uninterrupted; (2) Reading as a Mysterious and Goal-Less Endeavor; (3) Reading and Writing as Processes in Pieces; (4) Partial Humanity and People in Pieces; and (5) Narrow Representations of Reading Education Expertise.

Theme One: Science of Reading Uninterrupted

We wanted to open our account of the story conveyed through *EdWeek*'s Science of Reading images by addressing the smoothness of *EdWeek*'s reporting on the Science of Reading. Our theme statement reads: *EdWeek*'s images do not distract from or interfere with the overarching message that implementing the Science of Reading in schools is the correct decision for all schools everywhere. Amplifying the idea that reading science is settled (e.g., Schwartz, 2019) means promoting the message that this approach will be universally successful. The images in our data corpus do not generally evoke feelings of concern or discomfort. The classrooms depicted resemble traditional school classrooms. There are globes, desks in rows, whiteboards, worksheets, and textbooks. Students appear obedient and well-behaved. Class size also appears very manageable. The largest number of students shown in a classroom is six (stock photographs) and 13 (real photographs).

EdWeek's use of stock photos (nearly 50% of the image corpus) and reliance on photographs from so few schools and classrooms suggests that the specific students and teachers in the photographs and images do not matter. Even the natural photographs of real teachers and students were used in generic ways. On one notable occasion, the image of a named teacher accompanies an article titled, "I Literally Cried:' Teachers Describe Their Transition to Science-Based Reading" (Heubeck, September 15, 2023). We assumed the image would show one of the teachers mentioned in the article or even the teacher quoted in the title. We were mistaken. The teacher in the photograph is not mentioned in the article. The image of the named teacher effectively functions as a stock photograph assigned to an article that does not feature the teacher depicted at all.

Furthermore, articles containing photographs that feature real classrooms or people often failed to provide detailed discussions of what is happening in the images. For example, an article reporting on state-level reading legislation across the country included a photograph from a classroom in a named school in North Carolina (Schwartz, July 20, 2022). The photograph shows phonics work on a whiteboard. The article does not talk about this school at all, and North Carolina's efforts are mentioned in a cursory way within one sentence. This authentic and specific classroom image functions, again, as a stock photograph, ultimately serving as weakly established visual evidence for broader Science of Reading messaging.

We also found it significant that the opinion pieces in our data corpus were assigned stock art images or *EdWeek* graphics. For us, this had two notable effects. First, these cartoon-like images

helped distance the opinion pieces from truth and reality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Second, these graphics hid and negated the arguments articulated in the opinion pieces. For example, Seidenberg's (December 14, 2023) opinion piece expressed concern about recent Science of Reading legislation. However, this article is cordoned into the Opinion section of the Reading and Literacy section and hidden behind a cartoon-like image. In this image, a human hand waters a healthy plant. Next to this healthy plant, three other plants are dying, shriveled and undernourished. This image relates to the broad concept of education as a form of nurture and sustenance but does not advance, reveal, or help disseminate Seidenberg's critique or concerns about Science of Reading policy and legislated reading mandates. This image is another example of a non-sequitur relationship between image and headline.

Theme Two: Reading as a Mysterious and Goal-Less Endeavor

As reading definitions have been central to Science of Reading conversations (e.g., Raynor et al., 2001; Tierney & Pearson, 2024), the theme that continues our account of *EdWeek's* images and headlines focuses on how reading is represented and conceptualized. Significantly, only one headline and image directly indicated that books contain stories, content, and information. Accompanying an article connecting the importance of background knowledge to the Science of Reading movement (*Education Week*, January 30, 2023), a cartoon stock image of an open book shows astronauts and a moonscape emerging from the book. There are two unique stock images and one real image showing adults reading aloud to young children with their books facing outward and the pages visible (Heubeck, December 27, 2023; Schwartz, January 23. 2024; Schwartz, January 25, 2024). However, the picturebooks' words and images are blurred. The actual stories being shared with young readers have no prominence in these pictures.

A picturebook page is only visible in one photograph of a North Carolina teacher reading aloud to a small group of second graders (Schwartz, July 20, 2022a). Another notable aspect of this read-aloud image is that this is the only photograph (stock or real) where a student is visibly reacting to a text. Her mouth is open as if surprised or delighted, and her joy and engagement are palpable. The caption reminds readers that read-alouds introduce content knowledge and initiate talk between students who have yet to master reading fundamentals. However, unaddressed in the caption or headline is the pleasure involved in reading and sharing stories. She is engaged in the story and invested in this read-aloud experience, yet the student's joyful reaction feels remote from the Science of Reading and knowledge-centered messaging in the caption.

Furthermore, the representation of reading in the stock illustrations struck us as noteworthy. Books were the preferred text format depicted, and the pages of the books shown were almost always empty of language, images, and content. One image showed an adult male in a gray suit standing before a house-sized open book (Lovette & Alden, December 16, 2019). The book has empty, yellow pages and a keyhole. The man holds a human-sized key in his right hand, clearly preparing to unlock the book's mystery. The keyhole motif repeats in another image showing two hikers with backpacks traveling a path that takes them through a keyhole in the large book blocking their path (Goldenberg, May 3, 2021). These images advance the notion that books and reading can be unlocked. Readers only need to find the right key to gain access. Meaning is in the book—not made by readers.

In two other images, books offer almost otherworldly magical and mysterious experiences. One image shows a person standing on clouds holding a lantern-like object from which hundreds of glowing orbs flow out (Yates et al., March 23, 2021), and the other image shows a young girl opening a large book with blue pages and stars flowing out (Hahn & Hood, Jul 29, 2022). These images feel inspirational, but they are abstract and vague. These romantic renderings of reading

accompanied Reading and Literacy Opinion articles, which *EdWeek* journalists did not write and which sometimes offer dissenting perspectives. Again, these graphics may distract readers from the opinions expressed because they represent non-sequitur relationships between heading and images.

Theme Three: Reading and Writing as a Process in Pieces

When examining how the images presented reading and writing, we noticed a heavy emphasis on the pieces of reading. Our theme statement reads: *EdWeek* images tend to show pieces of foundational reading and writing processes without representing how students read or construct whole texts for important purposes or audiences. This theme is closely related to the preceding theme because the larger reasons for reading and writing are obscured. The whole texts that students might read and write are not visible across our data corpus.

The representation of reading and writing as processes in pieces was particularly evident in the natural photographs taken in school contexts. In one photograph (Gewertz, December 3, 2019), an elementary student picks the letter "o" from a display of letters on the left side of the whiteboard. On the right side of the whiteboard, a collection of glued or welded sound cards (e.g., *ang*, *ank, ing*) are fixed to the whiteboard. The caption informs readers that the child is doing a spelling exercise in front of the rest of the class. In another photograph (Gewertz, March 3, 2020), a female teacher holds two flashcards with capital and lowercase letters. An image of an animal or object whose name contains that letter accompanies each letter (e.g., a fox for Xx).

This emphasis on pieces of reading or linguistic knowledge is also evident in the classroom display boards. Some of the featured noticeboards served the adults more than the students. For example, beginning readers would be unable to read the laminated handouts pinned to a Letterland display board (Schwartz, July 20, 2022). Another image shows a complex display board focused on nasals and glides (these terms are included in the display) with mouth, teeth, and tongue images shown (Schwartz, January 15, 2024). This information is similar to the linguistics knowledge the adult educators learned during their LETRS training session (Will, December 3, 2019). Only one educator board contained more than pieces of words. In this image, a teacher models writing story endings using their digital whiteboard (Schwartz, January 15, 2024). Even then, this display contained exactly 1.5 sentences.

The readers of *EdWeek* see these pieces of reading but are not provided with insight into what kinds of reading practices these pieces build towards. We see pictures of students reading—often alone and almost always silently—in both the stock and real photographs, but the texts they are reading, their purposes for reading, or their responses to the text are not visible to viewers (see Gewertz, December 3, 2019; Sawchuk, March 28, 2024). Similarly, we see students writing into worksheets (Schwartz, January 25, 2024) or sorting printed sentence strips into an "opinions and reasons T-chart" (Schwartz, July 20, 2022a). Regarding the sentence sorting image, we wish to note that the sentences students are organizing are reasons for and against squishing ants. One sentence strip contains printed text that states ants should be squished because it does not hurt them; other sentence strips present reasons for not squishing ants, such as that ants have a home and family. Only in one photograph does a student seemingly have a blank, unstructured space to write a personal story (Schwartz, July 20, 2022a).

Theme Four: Partial Humanity and People in Pieces

Through multiple reviews of the images in the data corpus, we noticed a repeated occurrence of partially represented bodies in some of the real photographs. Our theme statement reads: *EdWeek* images often presented limited views of the bodies belonging to teachers and students engaged in the teaching and learning of reading. In these images, only their hands or legs might be depicted. This disruption to students' and teachers' full humanity and agency is demonstrated in the data

corpus through these partial views of the human body. These limiting representations of people paralleled the fragmented view of the reading process through the pictures accompanying *EdWeek's* articles.

Within the collection of real photos, there are multiple pictures of people shown only in terms of their body parts. In the data corpus, seven photographs depicted partial accounts of teachers' bodies. For example, a group of teachers was shown as legs and feet standing for group work and as a hand pointing to a sound card in photographs from a LETRS training session (Will, December 3, 2019). Another image (Schwartz, May 10, 2023) shows students on the carpet participating in a whole-group activity, yet the teacher is only partially visible with just her knees, dress, and feet showing. This partial depiction positions the teacher in this image, who we assume is a Black female, as a prop. This teacher is neither depicted as an agent of change nor portrayed as vital within the education system. The learning activity is prioritized over people.

Although this type of partial representation was less prevalent in the photographs of students, the approach was still evident. Two stock images depict only students' hands (Fittes, December 7, 2023; Fittes, January 26, 2024). In the first image, a dark-skinned hand puts letters into a puzzle board. An almost identical photograph from a real classroom can be found in Schwartz (July 20, 2022a). In the second image, a blurred body serves as the backdrop for the focal hand engaged in turning book pages. Two other images from Schwartz's report (July 20, 2022a) also only show students' hands. In one image, two students' hands organize printed sentence strips into opinions and reasons. In another image, a student's brown hands are writing a personal narrative that poignantly serves as a reminder of the complex humanity belonging to each student. Yet, as with the partial representations of teachers, these students' hands and body parts could belong to any student anywhere.

Theme Five: Narrow Representations of Reading Education Expertise

We conclude our account with a final thematic strand focused on representations of expertise in the image corpus. Our theme statement reads: *EdWeek's* images offer a narrow vision of reading leadership and expertise that misrepresents or minimizes the knowledge of teachers, teacher educators, and reading researchers who fall outside of Science of Reading parameters. As we reviewed years of images and articles published by *EdWeek*, we observed repeatedly the power inequities evident across the images. Power is narrowly attributed to the politicians, consultants, and researchers whose work closely aligns with Science of Reading principles.

Significantly, teachers never possess the microphone. Instead, in several photographs from the last two years of our data corpus, legislators stand or sit behind microphones, their voices and policies amplified (e.g., Schwartz, February 22, 2024; Stanford, May 6, 2024). Only one state official, the Chancellor of the New York Board of Regents, advocates for a moderate approach to implementing the Science of Reading, offering guidance but not mandates (Schwartz, January 19, 2024). Another image shows Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters against a backdrop of the American flag, Oklahoma's state flag, and his state's seal. His education department has partnered with Moms of Liberty to create "Teach Kids to Read Week" in defiance of the American Library Association's Banned Books Week (Schwartz, October 9, 2023). However, his support for the Science of Reading earns him visibility and presence in this data corpus, regardless of any ideological or political reasons that may underlie his literacy motivations.

Teachers are often positioned as learners in the image set. For example, in Will's article (December 13, 2019), one male school administrator sounds out vowels while two female teachers take direction from a LETRS facilitator. In another photograph provided by a consultancy company (Banerji, May 29, 2024), a group of female school leaders surrounds the male consultant. The school

leaders face away from the camera, their backs to the viewer and their eyes fixed on the consultant, who is framed in the center of this image. He looks down at his clipboard, his fingers to his mouth as he prepares to impart his wisdom gleaned from learning walkthroughs. The only teachers assigned expertise are early elementary teachers who have received Science of Reading training and know better now (e.g., Schwartz, July 20, 2022a).

Discussion and Implications

EdWeek is a news organization that its readership trusts to report complex educational issues accurately to various stakeholders. Critical and nuanced reporting is essential because their audience includes people who impact what happens in schools, even though they are not immersed in public school environments and do not witness firsthand all that K-12 teaching and learning entails. Yet, the headlines and images presented across our data corpus do not interfere with the circulation of Science of Reading discourse, sharing a model or figured world of reading (Gee, 2014) that simplifies a complex conversation and omits divergent or expanded accounts of reading and literacy.

Our study suggests that *EdWeek* does not fully account for representation across multiple dimensions. Representation issues include the limited number of journalists publishing articles on reading education and the small number of school contexts to which photographers and journalists have access. Stock photographs help conceal the limited number of real classrooms depicted in Science of Reading reporting and present market-ready, noncontroversial depictions of reading that smooth over conversations about reading instructions that are not settled. These stock images also help hide the complex and multifaceted realities of the real people—particularly students and teachers—who experience daily life in K-12 schools.

Therefore, we argue that *EdWeek* and other education news outlets could consider pursuing more in-depth, longitudinal, and context-specific accounts of the impact of Science of Reading legislation. The real photographs featured a small number of schools and teachers who have shifted to a Science of Reading approach. This limited representation does not constitute reporting on a national scale, and these schools and teachers should not be understood as representative of all schools and teachers in the United States (see Machin, 2004). Repeating images and using real photographs as stock images creates a false impression of in-depth investigative work and limits the perspectives and experiences made available to *EdWeek*'s reader-viewers. Thus, our work aligns with other scholarship that shows how journalists and publication houses circulate influential stories that cast teachers and schools as deficient or inadequate with very weak evidence to support these dominant, generalized narratives designed to stand for all schools and teachers (e.g., Kachorsky et al., 2020; MacPhee et al., 2021). The nuance of context is lost.

Furthermore, the *EdWeek* headlines and images showcase the following experts: consultants, researchers from outside the field of education, legislators, administrators, and trainers. Teachers in the real photographs are positioned as learners without expertise, or they are shown to be effective educators only after they have learned from those recognized as experts in the Science of Reading. To center more extensively the voices of students, educators, administrators, and college of education faculty who might offer ideas that diverge from Science of Reading advocacy would also be to recognize and respect the knowledge and expertise of these groups of people rather than excluding them and their insights from the conversation.

The omission of classroom teachers and teacher educators (many of whom began their careers as K-12 teachers) erases the expertise of those who have dedicated years to learning the art and science of teaching reading to students. This erasure erodes public respect for teachers and university professors while overlooking or glossing over societal and systemic issues that impact students' school experiences (Thomas, 2024). In this way, Science of Reading education journalism

might contribute to existing narratives that support the deprofessionalization of teachers and the scapegoating of teachers as the cause of many wrongs in our world (Gale de Saxe et al., 2018). Widening the lens, such narratives form part of a much larger dismantling of public education. On March 20, 2025, the president of the United States signed an executive order to dissolve the Department of Education at the federal level (Exec. Order No. 14242 , 2025).

To be clear, we are not arguing for the erasure of the featured perspectives; instead, we call for a more comprehensive representation of teachers and their experiences, including the voices of teachers, administrators, policymakers, and personnel from schools resisting mandated curricula and restrictive literacy policies or experiencing challenges enacting Science of Reading curricula. These stories, which may complicate or question the Science of Reading movement, should not be hidden behind conceptual art in specially designated opinion sections but incorporated into mainstream reporting on Reading and Literacy and expressed through both images and words. The microphone needs to be passed to more people so that additional perspectives and expertise can be included in these ongoing conversations. Passing the microphone may help education journalism move toward courageous and critical news reporting and away from unlabeled advocacy (see Tierney & Pearson, 2024). This call for action applies to *EdWeek,* as well as any other publishing corporation disseminating print, digital, and audio stories on education.

We also call for more expansive representations of what counts as reading in *EdWeek's* coverage of reading and literacy education. By predominantly focusing on printed words on paper or in books, *EdWeek* fails to fully acknowledge the full range of reading experiences students need or how texts and language function in our lives (Gee, 2014). Just as Kachorsky et al. (2020) identified in their analysis of *TIME* Magazine covers featuring formal schooling, these images present an almost nostalgic account of reading that resembles very traditional ways of doing school. This version of reading does not acknowledge the critical, digital, and media literacy capabilities that students need to develop to navigate this world. This reduction of reading to *only* Science of Reading principles (as witnessed in some states' legislation and standards) is potentially harmful and damaging to our students. Reading the word is important, but so, too, is reading the world (Freire, 1968/2018).

When education news reporting does not represent the nuance, divergence, and full breadth of conversations, the "news" becomes more aligned with advocacy than with the deep communication of significant issues. Instead of supporting the open exchange of viewpoints, giving voice to less-represented people, and seeking to understand research and ideas that diverge from dominant narratives (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014), current education journalism risks awarding more power and volume to those who already have both. Some people may even argue that the media are complicit in advocating for the standardization of reading instruction and are politically motivated to do so.

Indeed, the influence of education journalism on policymakers and the legislation they write cannot be ignored. For example, Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy (2024) released a report calling for Science of Reading-aligned curriculum. He cited four *EdWeek* articles but not articles written by reading education scholars or published by literacy organizations. Furthermore, when political groups like Moms for Liberty, a far-right parental rights organization that opposes inclusive and anti-racist curricula, support movements like the Science of Reading (Schwartz, October 9, 2023), it is important to consider why they might be motivated to do so. Journalists reporting on reading *science* may offer impressions of objectivity and neutrality. However, readers must continue to critically examine the educational, political, and social consequences of this kind of journalism and the approach to teaching reading such reporting promotes. The science of reading is not a settled matter (Hoffman et al., 2020; MacPhee et al., 2021; Tierney & Pearson, 2024). This conversation should not be closed.

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