Introduction to the Special Issue: Science of Reading Policies

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Abstract: Over the past decade, a wave of literacy policy reforms—often framed under the banners of the "Science of Reading" (SoR) and the "right to read"—has spread internationally from England to the United States, Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand. These reforms, while consistent in their emphasis on structured approaches to early reading instruction, have sparked significant controversy and debate. This special issue examines the global phenomenon of literacy-focused education reform, exploring how reading is constructed as a policy problem and mobilized through political agendas, media narratives, and privatized intermediary organizations. Contributors analyze the complex interplay between policy implementation and educational infrastructure, revealing how reforms influence not only pedagogy but also curriculum, assessment, professional development, and leadership. Drawing on diverse international contexts and methodological approaches, the papers interrogate the consequences of centralized control, rapid implementation,

and market-driven solutions. Findings suggest that despite widespread adoption, SoR-related policies have not consistently led to improved outcomes or equity and often exacerbate systemic issues such as racial and linguistic oppression. The issue highlights the dangers of politically driven pedagogy and the erosion of educational expertise, raising critical questions about accountability, democratic governance, and the future of literacy education.
Keywords: Science of Reading; structured literacy; reading policy; global reading policies

Introducción al número especial: Políticas sobre la Ciencia de la Lectura

Resumen: En la última década, una ola de reformas de políticas de alfabetización—a menudo enmarcadas bajo los lemas de la Ciencia de la Lectura (*Science of Reading*) y el "derecho a leer"—se ha extendido internacionalmente desde Inglaterra hasta los Estados Unidos, Canadá, Australia y Aotearoa/Nueva Zelanda. Estas reformas, aunque coinciden en su énfasis en enfoques estructurados para la enseñanza inicial de la lectura, han generado una gran controversia y debate. Este número especial examina el fenómeno global de las reformas educativas centradas en la alfabetización, explorando cómo la lectura se construye como un problema de política pública y se moviliza a través de agendas políticas, narrativas mediáticas y organizaciones intermediarias privatizadas. Los colaboradores analizan la compleja interacción entre la implementación de políticas y las infraestructuras educativas, revelando cómo las reformas influyen no solo en la pedagogía, sino también en el currículo, la evaluación, el desarrollo profesional y el liderazgo. Basándose en diversos contextos internacionales y enfoques metodológicos, los artículos interrogan las consecuencias del control centralizado, la implementación acelerada y las soluciones impulsadas por el mercado. Los hallazgos sugieren que, a pesar de su adopción generalizada, las políticas relacionadas con la Ciencia de la Lectura no han conducido de manera consistente a mejores resultados ni a una mayor equidad, y con frecuencia agravan problemas sistémicos como la opresión racial y lingüística. Este número destaca los peligros de una pedagogía impulsada por motivaciones políticas y la erosión de la experiencia educativa, planteando preguntas críticas sobre la rendición de cuentas, la gobernanza democrática y el futuro de la educación en lectura.
Palabras clave: Ciencia de la Lectura; alfabetización estructurada; política de lectura; políticas globales de lectura

Introdução ao dossiê: Políticas sobre a Ciência da Leitura

Resumo: Na última década, uma onda de reformas em políticas de alfabetização—frequentemente enquadradas sob os lemas da Ciência da Leitura (*Science of Reading*) e do "direito de ler"—espalhou-se internacionalmente, da Inglaterra aos Estados Unidos, Canadá, Austrália e Aotearoa/Nova Zelândia. Essas reformas, embora consistentes em sua ênfase em abordagens estruturadas para o ensino inicial da leitura, têm gerado controvérsias e debates significativos. Este dossiê examina o fenômeno global das reformas educacionais centradas na alfabetização, explorando como a leitura é construída como um problema de política pública e mobilizada por meio de agendas políticas, narrativas midiáticas e organizações intermediárias privatizadas. Os autores analisam a complexa interação entre a implementação de políticas e a infraestrutura educacional, revelando como as reformas influenciam não apenas a pedagogia, mas também o currículo, a avaliação, a formação profissional e a liderança. Com base em diversos contextos internacionais e abordagens metodológicas, os artigos questionam as consequências do controle centralizado, da implementação acelerada e das soluções orientadas pelo mercado. Os resultados indicam que, apesar da ampla adoção, as políticas relacionadas à Ciência da Leitura não têm levado de forma consistente a melhores resultados nem à equidade, e muitas vezes agravam problemas sistêmicos como a opressão racial e linguística. Este dossiê destaca os perigos de uma pedagogia politicamente motivada e da erosão da expertise educacional,

levantando questões críticas sobre responsabilização, governança democrática e o futuro da educação em leitura.
Palavras-chave: Ciência da Leitura; alfabetização estruturada; política de leitura; políticas globais de leitura

Introduction to the Special Issue: Science of Reading Policies

Over the past decade, state and national policies aimed at reforming the teaching of beginning literacy have spread from England to the United States (US), Canada, and Australia, and now toward Aotearoa/New Zealand (A/NZ). Although remarkably consistent across time and international contexts, these policies are often controversial, with significant engagement from media and private intermediary organizations the "right to read" and "science of reading" arises as a policy problem, moves through the policy-making process, and begins implementation (Lubienski et al., 2011). At the implementation stage at the school level, reading-focused policies not only influence pedagogy, but every part of the infrastructure for learning: curriculum, assessment, professional development, and leadership (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). As such, scholars in this issue investigate questions about the impact on the current wave of literacy policies from concerns about increased privatization, media representations, and political interest convergence to systematic racial and linguistic oppression in K-12 classrooms and teacher preparation programs.

Framing Reading as a Policy Problem

Reading is only one of several subjects taught in schools, yet it is frequently constructed as a site of policy problems that can be solved by new or reformed policy solutions. As a result, news media and policymakers engage in continuous and repeated constructions of literacy as a social problem with a policy solution. In this special issue, researchers from around the globe contend with the structures, causes, and impacts of an international policy phenomenon focused on shifting the way beginning reading is taught in schools. Known variably as the Science of Reading (SoR), Structured Literacy, or simply as part of the unfolding narrative of literacy-focused education reform, a similar set of policies have taken hold in England, Australia, Canada, A/NZ, and the majority of states in the US (Schwartz, 2022). Meanwhile, as contrasting policies have taken hold in India (see Ghosh & Sakar, in this issue), some countries have considered, but so far avoided the trend towards early literacy policy, including Ireland, Scotland, and Wales (Gabriel & Dennis, forthcoming).

Writing from diverse and divergent international contexts, and using a wide range of methodological lenses, 10 teams of authors offer insight that support citizens, policymakers and advocates in understanding why, how, and to what ends reading is mobilized as a policy issue with implications for literacy development as well as teaching and learning more broadly. Taken together, they examine the ways financial incentives, political ideologies, media representations, policy implementation patterns, and test scores are woven into increasingly similar stories of state and national literacy policies that shape how children are taught to read in schools, and who benefits from the impact of reform.

In this issue, contributors explore how literacy becomes a social problem across different regions. Ghosh and Sarkar illustrate the manner in which discursive strategies are employed to amplify foundational literacy in India, while Reid and Barton in the US and Ahn and colleagues in Australia examine the ways popular media constructs reading instruction as a problem, and the Science of Reading as a solution in these contexts. There are clear patterns and similarities among these examinations of discourse used in different settings, even when the policies themselves are

contradictory. Taken together, these three articles provide a discursive toolkit that is mobilized in similar ways whether supporting "balanced literacy" in India or the "Science of Reading" in the US and Australia.

Reading Policies: A Global View

The texts of policy documents themselves are also a source of data for understanding the nature and scope of reading policies. Aukerman and Birch conduct a direct comparison of policy documents across Canadian and Australian contexts, showing how ideas and ideologies of literacy are mobilized in similar ways across contexts within the policies themselves. Sandretto and Jesson examine a cross-section of media and policy documents tracing the emergence of Structured Literacy policies in A/NZ. When read as a set, the motion of reading policies across popular media and policy documents becomes clear, and the fine-grained details of particular contexts stand out. For example, the speed at which reforms were introduced and passed in A/NZ is striking compared to the incremental pace of the English case. England introduced policies aimed at reforming early literacy assessment, curriculum, and teacher training during almost one decade. A/NZ discussed, passed, and began implementation of all three within the space of just more than one year. This comparison draws attention to how political parties use reading as a signature issue and connect it to other issues in their broader policy agendas with immediate allocation of resources and attention in ways not often seen within education reform.

In their article, Bradbury and Wyse offer a rare bird's-eye retrospective on the circumstances and impacts of varied waves of reform in England that have served as blueprint for more comprehensive policies abroad. This study helps frame and situate the patterns in other countries and the contrasts in timing, texts, directions, and modes of resistance. Differences in pacing also raise questions about the tight connections between reading policies and other concurrent policies within a specific party's agenda. It is common to say that all pedagogy is political. But what does it mean when politics drives pedagogy—rapidly, directly, and in increasingly coordinated ways?

The simplified view of policy implementation encoded in this policy trend suggests that changing certain inputs within education systems (e.g., assessments and curricular materials) will directly change outputs (e.g., achievement and diagnosis of reading difficulties). This approach has required a "drop-and-switch" method of education reform, wherein schools must drop what they are currently using, and then adopt one or some of a list of state-approved options. Policies that take up the simple view conflict with school improvement and policy implementation research, which consistently highlights the role of contextualized learning and iterative development as the primary processes for improvement. Rather than building on the strengths or infrastructures that exist in schools and districts, the simple view of policy suggests that a different set of investments would lead to better outcomes. These policy shifts create and reinforce a marketplace for primary reading materials, trainings, and assessments, often limited to a single or small number of vendors.

Do Science of Reading Policies Work?

Shifting focus to the U.S. context, McClain, MacDonell, and Kloberdanz examine the implications of current policies for multiple minoritized students in the Southeast, while Clayton, Noel, Ecks, and Clayton examine the impact of SoR policies on student achievement in the Southwest. This set of papers illustrates our first glimpses of the unintended consequences and real outcomes associated with the increasingly stable set of policy strategies. Implementation of SoR-related policies is not predictive of positive outcomes in these studies, nor is it associated with increased equity of opportunity or achievement. In states whose policies are currently unfolding, including North Carolina and Virginia, Parsons and colleagues and Rowe and Thraikill offer inside examinations of the content and logics of policies that impact work in their own settings. For

example, Rowe and Thraikill detail an insider look at curriculum policy and teacher training schemes and showing the common mismatch between what is advertised as scientific, and what is offered.

These analyses illustrate a policy trend with significant implications for the teaching profession, higher education, equity and access to instruction provided in publicly funded schools, and the impact of increased state control over content and pedagogy on student achievement and society more broadly. And they are not enough.

Outcomes in countries that are farther along in implementation have not produced clear indicators for replication. Rather, they show a story of narrowed possibilities, rushed implementation, ignored evidence, and limited efficacy. As Clayton and colleagues remind us, the infrastructure for instructional improvement is so interdependent that it is next to impossible to isolate curriculum *or* professional learning *or* leadership as a variable—let alone to isolate the impact of a policy on achievement. The evidence we *do* have suggests that the confidence in and persistence of SOR-related policies is unwarranted. State control of assessment and curriculum have not led to uniformly better outcomes in achievement or diagnosis of reading difficulty across contexts or over time (c.f. Odegard et al., 2020, and McClain, Kloberdanz & Odegard, in this issue). Policies that centralize control have, however, created and directed contracts that tend to (further) privatize both curriculum and teacher development as well as teacher training and student assessment. This tendency toward privatization has both the immediate and long-term consequence of relocating expertise and changing sources of information used for policymaking from universities to intermediary organizations (e.g., nonprofit organizations and consulting firms). It therefore aligns with policies that lean towards dismantling or defunding higher education alongside anti-intellectual and anti-democratic impulses, and, predictably, is more closely associated with conservative or right-leaning politicians and parties. This tight alignment between politics and pedagogy is dangerous precisely because it limits accountability for publishers and politicians and positions teachers as widgets blocking or facilitating implementation of mandates rather than creating or developing individualized instruction.

Future Research

With politics aligned to specific approaches to instruction, it is less likely that government agencies will provide accountability for the success of mandated tools. Instead, future research must focus squarely on the specific ways policymaking sets and limits educational opportunities, and the varied impacts of prescriptive education policymaking on achievement, equity, economics, and teaching profession.

While these policies promise improved reading outcomes, the evidence presented across diverse contexts suggests that their implementation often leads to narrowed pedagogical possibilities, rushed reforms, and limited efficacy—particularly in terms of equity and long-term instructional improvement. The centralization of curriculum and assessment, coupled with the outsourcing of expertise to intermediary organizations, raises concerns about accountability, professional autonomy, and the sustainability of educational reform.

Future research examining the longitudinal impacts and the long-term effects of SoR-related policies on student achievement, teacher practice, and educational equity across varied socio-political contexts is needed. Studies centering marginalized voices and exploring how racial, linguistic, and cultural identities are impacted by standardized reforms, particularly in communities historically underserved by education systems, will allow us to better understand the implications of these policies and develop contextualized alternatives. Further, by analyzing policy ecosystems, researchers will better understand how reforms interact with existing infrastructure and local contexts. These ecosystems include both media and political influences, as well as privatization trends.

Ultimately, literacy education must be reclaimed as a public good—one that values professional expertise, democratic engagement, and the diverse ways children learn to read. Future research should aim not only to critique existing reforms but to imagine and support more equitable, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to literacy policy and practice.

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