

Navigating (Another) Reading Crisis as an Administrator: Rethinking the “Science of Reading” Movement

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ABSTRACT

The *Science of Reading* (SOR) movement puts administrators in a difficult position since they must navigate a wide range of educational stakeholders—students, teachers, parents, board members, political leaders, and the public. This discussion offers a broad but detailed overview of the problems created for administrators by the SOR movement (i.e., systematic phonics, teacher quality, reading programs, reading proficiency, and social justice/equity). This overview is followed by a series of new (and better) approaches for school administrators to become more effective instructional leaders of reading and advocates for addressing individual student needs and supporting teacher professionalism.

Keywords: Science of Reading, reading, leadership, reading legislation, education reform

The winter before the COVID-19 shutdown, I gave my first invited presentation on the *Science of Reading* (SOR) at a state literacy organization’s annual conference. I was not yet certain how the audience of mostly teachers of beginning readers would react to my critical analysis of the SOR movement—a movement that is grounded in a misleading media story and that would eventually impact reading practice and legislation (Aydarova, 2023; Reinking et al., 2023; Thomas, 2022b).

That presentation proved to be enlightening for me because, even as the attendees positively received my critiques of SOR rhetoric and claims, I noticed an important *different* reaction when I confronted the misleading media attacks on Lucy Calkins’s Units of Study reading program. I paused my presentation and discussed this with the attendees, who were quick to express displeasure with Units of Study. When I asked for fuller explanations, we arrived at an interesting and important clarification: Teachers were frustrated *not* with Units of Study but with administrators holding teachers accountable for teaching the program with *fidelity*.

In short, this experience clarified for me that reading programs are neither the problem *nor* the solution for any of our concerns about reading achievement. However, the reading program merry-go-round of adopting new programs, re-training teachers, and then focusing on *fidelity* to the program creates a teaching and learning environment that is often antagonistic and uncollaborative as needed for serving the individual needs of students and supporting the professionalism of teachers. Currently and historically, educators have been held accountable for implementing reading programs as a proxy for teaching children to read.

The crisis rhetoric about reading reform and schools being in a constant state of manufactured educational crisis and reform (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Thomas, 2022a, 2022b) put administrators in a difficult position since they must navigate a wide range of educational stakeholders—students, teachers, parents, board members, political leaders, and the public. The discussion in this paper offers a broad but detailed overview of the core problems created for administrators by the SOR movement (i.e., systematic phonics, teacher quality, reading programs, reading proficiency, and social justice/equity). These problems are followed by a series of new (and better) approaches for school administrators to become more effective instructional leaders of reading and advocates for addressing individual student needs and supporting teacher professionalism.

Differentiating the SOR Movement and Reading Science

First, this discussion makes an important distinction between the SOR *movement* and *reading science*. The SOR movement has its roots in the 1960s with the work of Jeanne Chall and her challenges to whole language (Thomas, 2024; Tierney & Pearson, 2021) as well as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era with the influence of the National Reading Panel (NRP), which I examine below. But the more recent SOR movement is situated in reading legislation beginning around 2012 and then a media explosion around 2018 with the work of Emily Hanford (2018). Although the SOR movement has been compelling (notably the podcast *Sold a Story*) and has directly influenced reading legislation (Aydarova, 2023; Reinking et al., 2023; Thomas, 2022b), the key claims and the rhetoric of reading crisis are at best misrepresentations and oversimplifications—and at worst simply false (Aukerman, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Thomas, 2022a, 2022b; Tierney & Pearson, 2024).

Aukerman (2022a) offers an excellent outline of what constitutes the SOR movement as distinct from the more complex body of reading science, a body of research a century old:

From how much of the media tells it, a war rages in the field of early literacy instruction. The story is frequently some version of a conflict narrative relying on the following problematic suppositions:

- a) science has proved that there is just one way of teaching reading effectively to all kids – using a systematic, highly structured approach to teaching phonics;
- b) most teachers rely instead on an approach called balanced literacy, spurred on by shoddy teacher education programs;
- c) therefore, teachers incorporate very little phonics and encourage kids to guess at words;
- d) balanced literacy and teacher education are thus at fault for large numbers of children not learning to read well (para. 2).

Critics of the SOR movement as a media and political movement (Aukerman, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Aydarova, 2023; Compton-Lily et al., 2023, 2024; Reinking et al., 2023; Tierney & Pearson, 2024) are not rejecting reading science, but in fact advocating for recognizing that reading science resists a simple story for understanding reading achievement, reading instruction, and reading reform. With that distinction in mind, I now consider core claims of the SOR movement against the fuller and richer body of reading science as a series of problems that offer new approaches to reading and for school leaders.

Understanding the Role of Systematic Phonics: The Balance Problem

“Newspapers do not just write about education, they also represent to their readers what education is ‘about,’” explains Edling (2015, p. 401). And since the influential *A Nation at Risk* report released under Ronald Reagan, that “about” has been “crisis” (Thomas, 2024). Reading achievement by students, it seems, has also been in a constant state of crisis; for example, Nicholas Kristof (2023), writing in *The New York Times*, offers what has become one of the most misleading but uncritically embraced claims in education today: “Two-thirds of fourth graders in the United States are not proficient in reading.”

While I explain why this statistic is misleading in detail in a later section, note that Kristof (2023) includes also a now-standard argument:

One explanation gaining ground is that, with the best of intentions, we grown-ups have bungled the task of teaching kids to read. There is growing evidence from neuroscience and careful experiments that the United States has adopted reading strategies that just don’t work very well and that we haven’t relied enough on a simple starting point—helping kids learn to sound out words with phonics (para. 6).

Almost the exact same reading crisis blamed on a lack of phonics has been made for 80 years in the US (Thomas, 2022b; Tierney & Pearson, 2021), yet Reinking et al. (2023) clarify: “There is no indisputable evidence of a national crisis in reading, and even if there were a crisis, there is no evidence that the amount of phonics in classrooms is necessarily the cause or the solution.” In fact, many scholars have shown that the overemphasis on phonics (usually calling for systematic phonics for all students and/or phonics-first instruction) by the SOR movement lacks evidence in the body of reading science (e.g., Tierney & Pearson, 2024).

Administrators must recognize the oversimplification of the crisis/rhetoric of the SOR movement and the misuse of the NRP in the media and among politicians as well. Just 20 years ago, in fact, the NRP was a key element of the mandate in NCLB that all reading instruction must be “scientifically based” (Wilde, 2004); however, many scholars noted then that the

NRP report was both a politically skewed and incomplete analysis of reading science/research (Garan, 2001; Yatvin, 2000, 2002, 2003). Nonetheless, the NRP report revealed that systematic phonics was effective for pronunciation in grade 1, but not for comprehension, and that it wasn't more effective than whole language approaches in later grades for comprehension (Stephens, 2008).

In short, despite the rhetoric of the SOR movement, American students have not been cheated in reading instruction due to a lack of systematic phonics (Reinking et al., 2023; Tierney & Pearson, 2024), and thus, reading reform should not be significantly or primarily centered on mandating systematic phonics for all beginning readers.

Further, the recurring reading war has never served individual schools or students well, and so reading reform should focus on the specifics of the students being served while avoiding oversimplification of test data. As well, reading reform should disentangle policy from reading programs and reading theory, both as sources of blame and solutions to concerns about reading achievement.

One example of how this has occurred is in the UK where systematic phonics instruction has been mandated and implemented since 2006. And yet, recently with the release of test data, another reading crisis has been declared. In fact, research has already shown that students would be better served by a balanced approach (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022, 2023). That conclusion in the UK is not about *balanced literacy* as a theory or program, but about what balance in instruction means—balancing instruction in terms of demonstrated student strengths and needs. In other words, balance is not about a program or a one-size-fits-all approach, but about identifying and serving individual student needs. This, then, leads to the next problem connecting the attacks on balanced literacy, teacher knowledge, and teacher education.

Understanding Balanced Literacy and Teacher Education: The Teacher Quality Problem

The SOR movement, whose popularity originated in the media (Hanford, 2018), claims the reading crisis was caused by a lack of systematic phonics instruction and balanced literacy-dominated reading instruction, all of which is rooted in teacher education failing to incorporate reading science (see Aukerman, 2022a). However, this is at once a complicated and a false series of claims. These misleading arguments are also linked to the SOR movement's attacks on a few reading programs (Units of Study by Calkins and materials by Fountas and Pinnell).

Here, it is important that administrators can distinguish between the *caricature* of balanced literacy repeated in the media and the accurate representation of the reading philosophy/theory. Consider this definition of balanced literacy from Spiegel (1999):

This leads me to the following definition: A balanced approach to literacy development is a decision-making approach through which the teacher makes thoughtful choices each day about the best way to help each child become a better reader and writer. A balanced approach is not constrained by or reactive to a particular philosophy. It is responsive to new issues while maintaining what research has already shown to be effective. It is an approach that requires and frees a teacher to be a reflective decision maker and to fine tune and modify what he or she is doing each day in order to meet the needs of the child. (p. 116)

Administrators must recognize a few clarifications about SOR claims that balanced literacy has contributed to a reading crisis:

- There is no evidence (in other words, no empirical research) that any uniform theory/philosophy of reading has been implemented across the entire US or that balanced literacy (or any reading theory) has caused a reading crisis (Reinking et al., 2023; Tierney & Pearson, 2024).
- SOR attacks on balanced literacy are caricatures that do not represent what balanced literacy promotes, which is primarily serving the individual needs of students by honoring teacher autonomy and expertise (Siegel, 1999). Again, research addressing mandated systematic phonics for all students in the UK, in fact, has found a need for "balance" (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).
- SOR attacks on balanced literacy are recycled versions of attacks on whole language in the 1990s that proved to be misleading and false blame (Krashen, 2002; Thomas, 2022a, 2022b).

The blame matrix among SOR advocates starts with the false premise of a reading crisis (Reinking et al., 2023), and it then places blame on teacher practice, asserting that teachers of reading do not know how to teach reading because teacher education has failed them (Hanford, 2018). However, once again, we have no research or scientific studies showing either that teacher practice is lacking or that teacher education is failing (Aukerman, 2022a; Hoffman et al., 2020; Reinking et al., 2023; Tierney & Pearson, 2024).

The irony of attacks on teacher practice and teacher education is that SOR advocates cite the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), a conservative think tank established by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. For over two decades, NCTQ has released negative reports about teacher education that are not scientific; in fact, external reviews show these reports are primarily ideological and grounded in weak methodology and cherry-picked research (Thomas, 2023). Further, NCTQ's negative characterization of teacher education ignores the robust research base on teacher education (Hoffman et al., 2020; Thomas, 2023).

Here, I think, it is imperative that administrators challenge attacks on teacher expertise and teacher education because, as noted above, these attacks are not grounded in credible research, and the consequences of these claims have been states mandating and adopting structured literacy programs that are *scripted curriculum* (Aydarova, 2024; Carnine, 2024). These legislative moves are de-professionalizing teachers, imposing a one-size-fits-all mandate onto students, and decreasing the diversity of texts used with students (Compton-Lilly et al., 2020; Hoffman et al., 2020; Khan, et al., 2022; Rigell, et al., 2022; Thomas, 2022b).

Additionally, the outsized attack on teacher knowledge and practice further misrepresents the dominant causal sources of student achievement. One of the most complicated realities we face in public education is that measurable student learning is still overwhelmingly a reflection of out-of-school factors (Burrell & Harbatkin, 2024). The value-added methods era, in fact, revealed that teacher impact on test scores is as low as 1-14% (American Statistical Association, 2014).

Therefore, school leaders are forced into complicated positions whereby they need to better explain test data, further help the public and teachers understand the limits of instruction and programs, and effectively demonstrate teachers' and schools' positive impact on students appearing to perform well below expectations.

This nuanced and complex approach will prompt charges of making excuses; however, it is imperative that leaders resist the rhetoric of "failure," "crisis," "miracle," and "no excuses"—key elements in a reform process that hasn't worked over the last 40 years. Instead, educators must adopt language that is tempered, honest, and realistic to better serve students while also assuring parents and the public that the work of teaching and learning is a journey that is complicated and less predictable than we would like.

Understanding "Three Cueing and Guessing": The Reading Program Problem

Another target in the reading crisis for SOR advocates is claiming that a few reading programs—specifically Lucy Calkins's Units of Study and programs by Fountas and Pinnell—have been the primary mechanisms for imposing the so-called failed balanced literacy onto teachers and students. Part of the flaw in this attack is that these programs are not uniformly implemented across the US over the 30-year period when National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores have been basically flat (Reinking et al., 2023), and yet, media coverage dramatically overstates the impact of only a few criticized programs. Units of Studies, for example, is used in only about 16–25% of schools, as reported by Schwartz (2022) in *Education Week* and Calkins (2024) herself. However, media stories have targeted Calkins and Units of Study in dozens of stories and podcasts that the program has failed at a scale that would contribute to a national reading crisis—all without scientific evidence. But as noted above, beyond that these claims simply lack research or scientific proof for claims of failure, the attacks are grounded in caricature. The entire practice of teaching reading has been reduced by the media to *three cueing and guessing*. Media and SOR advocates present a caricature of teachers encouraging students to use pictures when reading instead of implementing decoding strategies. For example, in a picture book with the word "horse," three cueing strategies are misrepresented as encouraging the student reader to look at the picture of the horse on the page instead of applying their letter and phonics skills to decode the word "horse" (see the clarification below, however).

Several problems with blaming and legislation banning three cueing and guessing, along with specific reading programs, confront administrators because of this misinformation. First, media and public caricatures of teachers and instruction erode the credibility of public education. Further, these excessive attacks on instruction and programs feed a cycle of dropping current reading programs and then adopting new ones. Legislation also drives new teacher professional development (currently LETRS, which lacks research showing the training is effective for improving student achievement [Research roundup, 2022]) and instructional materials that cost taxpayers and educators millions of dollars and time better spent on more substantive efforts.

And then, more specifically, attacks on three cueing and guessing are misrepresenting both. Three cueing is better referred to as *meaning, structure, and visual* (MSV), which is not simply asking students to use pictures to guess at words:

The letters MSV stand for meaning, structure, and visual, and recent discussions of early reading instruction refer to them as the 'three cueing systems.' Too often the descriptions of MSV are incorrect. Specifically, MSV is not

using context, such as pictures and syntax, to guess words as an alternative to using the letters and words on the page. . . .

MSV relates to information sources available to all readers irrespective of the method of instruction or the type of text read (e.g., decodable or authentic). Written language offers the reader multiple sources of information in print to support reading for meaning. Three of these sources are syntax, semantics, and grapho-phonetic information. A fourth is the system of sounds (phonology). Effective reading involves the use and integration of all information sources available to the reader; no one information source takes priority over another. (The North American Trainers Group, 2022, paras. 1-2)

A pattern is emerging about SOR advocacy and the resulting legislation grounded in the blame—misrepresentation and a lack of credible research or evidence for those claims. Neither three cueing nor guessing is represented accurately in the SOR movement or in legislation banning the practices (Mora, 2023; Tierney & Pearson, 2024). The stories driving the SOR movement are often simple and thus compelling. Leadership, then, must find ways to ease the tensions between this simple messaging and the complex nature of the teaching and learning of reading. One way to do that is to step back from the misinformation and offer a counter message that, while complex, is accurate and lays the foundation for substantive reform that supports teachers and serving individual student needs.

Understanding the Manufactured Reading Crisis (Again): The Proficiency Problem

If anything represents the work of an education administrator over the past forty years, it would be data—specifically student test scores. As noted above, at the center of the SOR movement is a recurring claim about reading scores by students—2/3 of students are not proficient readers (Hanford, 2018; Kristof, 2023)—that is fundamentally misleading because it is a reference to NAEP data.

Administrators need to clearly and accurately explain all student test data to a wide range of stakeholders—students, teachers, parents, board members, politicians, and the public. Regretfully, NAEP makes that task incredibly difficult, especially since media routinely misrepresents the achievement levels of the test. First, NAEP uses achievement levels that are, frankly, confusing because the most cited level, “proficient,” is *aspirational* and well above grade level achievement (and “basic” is approximately grade level) (Bourque, 2009; Loveless, 2016, 2023; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021a, 2021b; Rosenberg, 2004).

Therefore, when the media claims 2/3 of students are not proficient, the reference is *misleading* since in the case of NAEP, “proficient” is well above what most students should achieve at any grade. To make this more confusing, we have no standard for “proficient” or “grade level” in the US, and the terminology across states is also not consistent. Note that state-level expectations for students tend to fall within NAEP’s “basic” level (Figure 1).

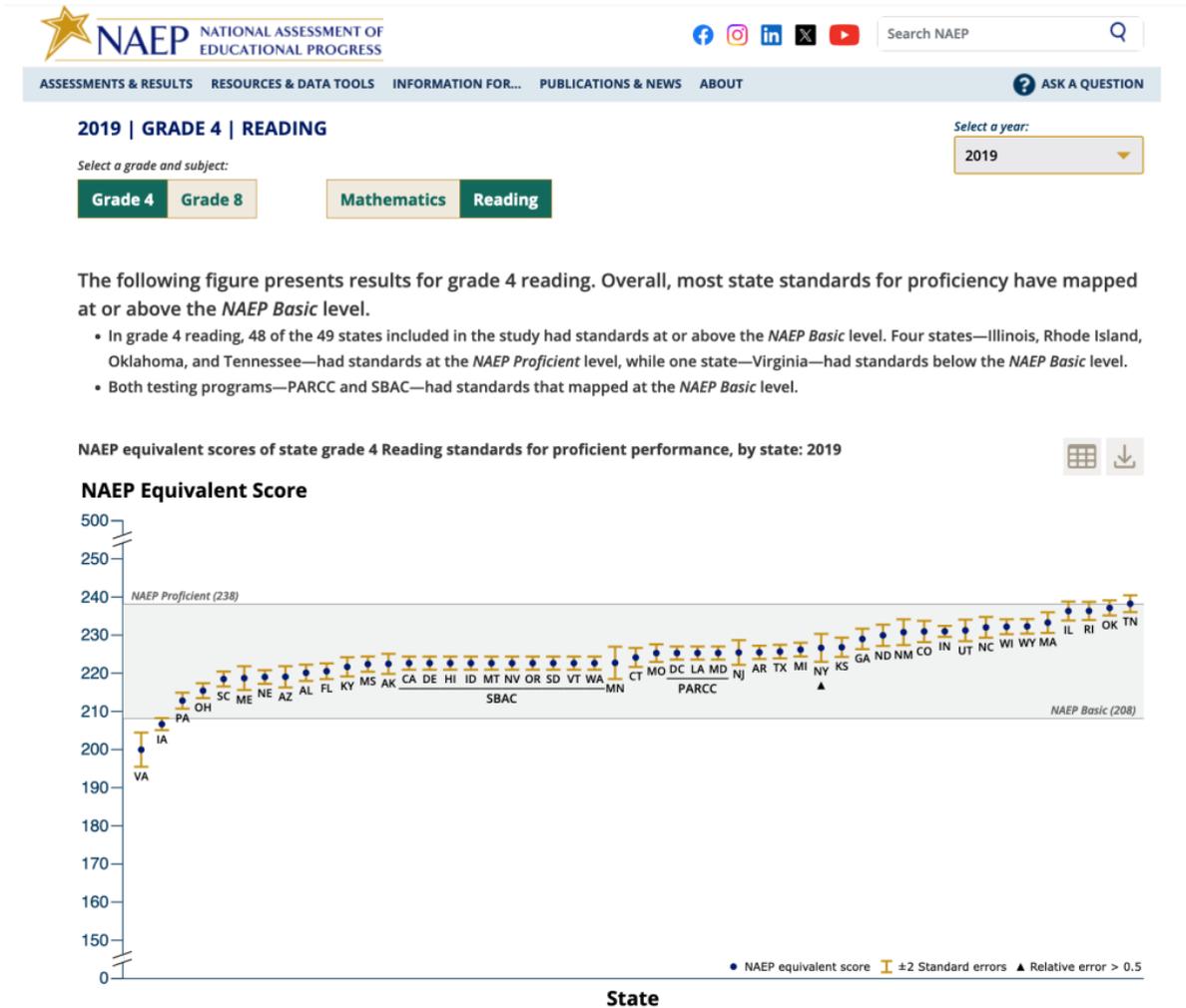
Administrators are caught between a misleading but compelling public narrative about low reading scores (students failing to learn to read because of teacher incompetence and tax dollars invested in failing reading programs) and a much more nuanced and complicated reality about that data: NAEP grade 4 reading scores have been flat for 30 years, and those scores have shown about 2/3 of students are reading at grade level or above (at NAEP “basic” and above) (Compton-Lilly, Spence, Thomas, & Decker, 2023; Reinking, 2023; Tierney & Pearson, 2024).

Here, I think, is the most important entry point for administrators during the SOR movement and the rise in new legislation. More nuanced and accurate messaging about test-based student achievement should include the following:

- While test data can be useful, test scores (especially standardized national test data) remain mostly a reflection of factors beyond the school walls. Again, recent research shows that out-of-school factors account for over 60% of test scores (Maroun & Tienken, 2024), and teacher impact on test scores are as low as 1-14% (ASA statement, 2014).
- Declaring a reading crisis is neither accurate nor helpful for addressing the observable needs of our students. While test scores in the US have been flat for decades, the evidence shows that marginalized groups of students (students of color, impoverished students, multilingual learners, and students with special needs) tend to be over-represented in low test scores. Reform and funding need to address these persistent inequities.
- Teacher assessments and state-level testing can provide more valuable evidence of how to teach and serve our students than national randomized testing such as NAEP.

Figure 1

State and NAEP Achievement Levels Correlation



Note. Reprinted from *Mapping state proficiency standards onto NAEP scales, 2007–2019*, by National Center for Education Statistics, 2021 (<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/statemappingtool/#/subject-grade>). Copyright 2021 by the U.S. Department of Education.

For educators, the irony is that “reading proficiency” is a *rhetoric* and *manufactured crisis* problem (Berliner & Biddle, 1996) that makes it nearly impossible to better and more equitably address student reading proficiency. School-based leadership must provide the counter-narrative about what test scores mean: how well students are learning to read and what role teachers and reading programs play in pursuit of higher reading proficiency. And although NAEP data does not show that the US is in the grips of a reading crisis, it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be working to make learning and teaching reading more effective—especially for the students who have not been served well for decades despite round after round of education reform.

Understanding the Inequity of Reading Achievement: The Social Justice Problem

In the US, conservative education reform (e.g., Teach for America, charter schools, school of choice) sits behind a veneer of seeking ways to better serve marginalized students—Black and brown students, students in poverty, multilingual learners, and special needs students (Aydarova, 2024). This places administrators serving those marginalized populations in a challenging position because although the particular reforms are often not what is needed, action to address the failures of equity in education remains urgent.

Unfortunately, the SOR movement is proving once again to fit into the contradictory dynamic of claiming to serve equity while driving mandates that are counter to equity efforts. From a broad perspective, the main equity failure of SOR mandates is imposing a one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction. For example, in California, multilingual scholars and teachers helped defeat SOR legislation because it is reductive and oversimplifies marginalized students' needs (Briceño, 2024). But the larger failure of SOR for diverse student populations is legislation banning some reading programs while mandating and endorsing others.

In an analysis for the NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, Khan, Peoples, and Foster (2022) evaluated McGraw Hill's *Wonders*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Into Reading*, and Savvas' (formerly known as Pearson) *myView*—three of the most SOR-endorsed programs—and concluded,

We found that these three curricula, which collectively reach millions of students across the country, have deficits that are often not being raised in the current public debate about curriculum. Their texts, language, tone and guidance communicate harmful messages to students of all backgrounds, especially Black, Indigenous, students of color, LGBTQIA+ students, and students with disabilities.

Similar to the ideology driving the Common Cores standards in ELA, SOR programs and materials decontextualize language in ways that erase culture and context from texts.

Further, an examination by Rigell, et al. (2022) of *Wit and Wisdom*, a scripted SOR program, “indicate[s] that whiteness is centered at every level of the curriculum in text selection and thematic grouping of texts, as well as through discursive moves in teacher-facing materials (e.g. essential questions for learning modules).” While the anti-CRT movement banning diverse texts appears to be a separate phenomenon in US education, the reality is that the SOR movement is achieving indirectly what censors have sought to accomplish. Administrators, especially those serving diverse populations of students, must resist “whitewashing” the curriculum in the name of “science.”

Leadership in Times of Crisis: A New (and Better) Approach to Reading

Since *A Nation at Risk*, the US has been in a series of education reform cycles grounded in new standards and high stakes testing. This accountability era is in its fifth decade, yet none of the reform cycles have ever resulted in success—only another pronouncement of “crisis,” with most of the blame of failure leveled at students, teachers, administrators, and schools. Education reform has also remained almost entirely a top-down hierarchy, mandated by state and federal legislation and implemented under accountability structures by educators. The SOR movement continues those patterns of top-down accountability reform and about 80 years of reading crisis as well.

As I have detailed above, the SOR story, driven by the media and the resulting reading reform legislation, is a deeply flawed oversimplification of reading science that has resulted in one-size-fits-all mandates. It has also led to scripted curricula that de-professionalizes teachers and superficial reading programs that whitewashes student texts. School leaders are thus restricted by their obligations to implement legislative mandates. That tension also includes their educational stewardship of teachers and students who represent unique strengths and needs that resist simple analysis or boxed programs as silver bullets.

Finally, below are suggestions for new (and better) approaches to school leadership related to five common reading problems.

- *The Balance Problem.* The SOR movement overstates two aspects of phonics instruction—first, making a false claim that a reading crisis has occurred because teachers do not include phonics in reading instruction; second, misrepresenting reading science by calling for systematic phonics for all students or imposing a “phonics-first” mandate on reading instruction. School leaders must not only correct these misrepresentations but also foster a culture of balance among teachers that recognizes the complexity of teaching reading while also centering comprehension (and not decoding) as the goal of reading instruction (Wyse & Hacking, 2024). This different approach must resist reducing reading instruction to simplistic commitments to theory; claiming to teach “structured literacy” is no better than claiming to teach “balanced literacy.” The key is seeking ways to balance instruction against the needs of the students being served and rejecting one-size-fits-all approaches.
- *The Teacher Quality Problem.* After decades of phonics-centered reading mandates in the UK, some are beginning to address “broader questions of teacher professionalism, of government control and of academic freedom” (Yandell, 2024). For school leaders in the US, this is a distinct challenge since the public discourse for decades has centered teacher quality as the key to student achievement. As noted above, however, teacher quality and instruction have very small impact on measurable student outcomes, particularly when compared to out-of-school factors.

School leaders, then, must resist fatalism while not succumbing to unrealistic and aspirational claims about raising test scores. A new and better approach is helping parents, the public, and teachers understand the realities of test scores while establishing a much more complex set of data to reflect teacher and school impact on student achievement. But please note: Something worth repeating is that teacher and school quality matter, but in ways that resist standardized measurement of student achievement (see Gerald Coles (2019) in the recommended list below). Thus, administrators need to support teacher professionalism instead of centering test scores as the primary or sole evidence of teacher quality.

- *The Reading Program Problem.* “A child’s individual differences, skills and experience matter a lot in the learning process, and learning to read is no exception,” wrote Briceño (2024), adding, “That’s why new legislation based on the erroneous assumption that there is only one way to teach reading is so dangerous for California’s students.” This should be the foundation of reading-focused instructional leadership in every school. And thus, a new and better approach to reading is to de-center reading programs, abandon holding teachers accountable for fidelity to programs, and re-imagine accountability around fidelity to teaching students to read. In short, schools should be committed to teaching students to read—not teaching reading programs (Afflerbach, 2022).
- *The Proficiency Problem.* The data shift needed by school leaders is resisting the centering of test scores, and instead, emphasizing the need for a wide range of evidence that supports purposeful teaching that addresses students’ unique needs. Further, school leaders must help to communicate and clarify fair and accurate information about test data and achievement levels (notably the confusing terminology in tests such as NAEP when compared to terms used in state testing). Media jumbling terms such as “proficient” and “grade level” requires school leaders to be better teachers about what test scores do and don’t prove about learning and teaching in their schools.
- *The Social Justice Problem.* The truth about reading achievement is not that the US is suffering a phonics-centered reading crisis but that historically and currently marginalized students (Black and brown students, students in poverty, multilingual learners, special needs students) are over-represented in populations of students scoring below grade level. And the complicated additional truth is that reading achievement is not unique among all achievement, but literacy is certainly essential for students’ education and lives. School leaders must make that key distinction while also making a solid commitment to better serve marginalized student populations. The US has a long history of political negligence in terms of serving marginalized and minoritized populations; this isn’t a crisis, but a regrettable norm that can and must be addressed. However, one-size-fits-all programs, reductive skills-based instruction (for example, nonsense word assessments such as DIBELS), and whitewashed texts are further cheating those students, not addressing their complex and urgent needs.

“Within each one of us there is some piece of humanness that knows we are not being served by the machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis and is grinding all our futures into dust,” wrote Audre Lorde (2102) in 1982. Although Lourde was speaking at a Malcolm X celebration, she could just as easily have been describing what it has meant to be an educator for the last 40 years in the US. We teach in an extended era of perpetual crisis (Edling, 2015). But as I have detailed above, the claim that an education crisis, including a reading crisis, exists is mostly manufactured (Berliner & Biddle, 1996), and it in fact is unsupported by substantial scientific evidence.

Administrators as leaders are often the faces and names on school success and school failure. Media and political narratives tend to emphasize failure; therefore, administrators can find themselves trapped between their loyalty to students and teachers and the compelling claims of poor performance. The SOR movement is less about reading proficiency or reading reform and more about media, market, and political agendas that rely on perpetual crisis and permanent reform (Deleuze, 1992).

Successfully navigating the challenging and overwhelming landscape of crisis rhetoric and permanent reform requires informed leaders. And these leaders must be dedicated to what matters most—serving the unique needs of each student and supporting the professionalism and autonomy of their teachers.

Recommended Reading [Open Access/Free Download]

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