

# *The Science of Reading Movement: Implications for Teacher Autonomy and the Future of Literacy Education*

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# The Science of Reading Movement: Implications for Teacher Autonomy and the Future of Literacy Education

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The claims of Science of Reading (SoR) movement advocates mirror the narrative created in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era: teachers do not know how to teach reading or refuse to acknowledge scientific research that informs us about how children learn to read. Teacher proof commercial reading programs are promoted as the one-size-fits-all solution for all students if teachers implement them with fidelity. As a result, a teacher's professional expertise and autonomy are threatened, and teachers are forced to resist mandates for program fidelity in subtle or more overt ways in order to meet the needs of their students. This paper asserts that a broader vision for literacy education is needed that acknowledges the essentiality of literacy in a democratic and diverse society. Embracing a broader vision of literacy will facilitate the reclamation of science and all sources of knowledge by teachers and empower them as decision makers about how best to teach their students.

**Keywords:** reading instruction; education policy; phonics; balanced literacy; teacher autonomy; science of reading

## Introduction

The “science of reading” (SoR) movement is often conflated with the research and science that informs how students learn to read. The co-opting of the term science of reading by the SoR movement has profound implications for education policies that affect teachers, school districts, and the children they serve. Among the most vehement proclamations of the movement's proponents is that teachers and the education community are anti-science when it comes to how we teach children to read. They often cite the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (NRP, 2000) as seminal research that supports their claims about the need for a phonics-intensive approach to teaching early reading. They further claim that the findings of the NRP have been largely ignored by educators over the past two decades. The NRP had been instrumental in introducing the term scientifically-based-reading research (SBRR) methods to reading instruction nomenclature and formed the basis for the large-scale federally mandated reading reform initiative *No Child Left Behind* implemented in 2002 (NCLB).

SoR movement proponents' anti-science claims about teachers have found fertile ground with the public, policy makers, lobbyists, and legislators. These claims perpetuate the supposed reading wars that were kindled in the 1950s with Rudolf Flesch's book *Why Johnny Can't Read* (Flesch, 1955) and found favor with certain conservative sectors of society. Flesch exonerated the teaching profession, writing “The teaching of reading

– all across the United States, in all the schools is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense” (p. 2). It is no surprise that 1955 was also the year economist Milton Friedman published his treatise “The Role of Government in Education” in which he labeled public schools as a governmentally operated monopoly and advocated for school vouchers to send students to private schools (Friedman, 1955). In the following decades, Friedman's influence would dramatically increase, winning the Nobel Prize for economics in 1976 and later as the author of President Ronald Reagan's free market economic and anti-public school education policies. Education policies and reform initiatives throughout subsequent presidential administrations have, to one extent or another, facilitated or promoted school choice ideologies (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992; Chubb & Moe, 1990; White House, 1999; White House, 2025; Reagan, 1983; Tiede, 2016).

SoR movement advocates find favor with conservative groups like the Fordham Foundation and the Hunt Institute that overtly promote school privatization through school vouchers (Chu, 2022; Johnson, 2024). When journalist Emily Hanford's podcast “Sold a Story” gained popularity in 2022, she became a spokesperson for the SoR movement and ideologues that blame public schools and teachers for the perceived low reading achievement of our nation's schools. Importantly, corporate entities have capitalized on this most recent iteration of the reading wars to generate massive profits by producing scripted,

SoR aligned programs. A narrative was created: students are failing to learn to read because teachers do not know how to teach reading or refuse to acknowledge scientific research, specifically the findings of the NRP, about how children learn to read (Hanford, 2022).

### **SoR's Brand of Science versus Actual Scientific Reading Research**

This narrative infers that scientific research was non-existent prior to the NRP. This, however, dismisses the rich tradition of science and research that has informed us about how children learn to read for more than a century. This includes, for example, the eye-movement studies of James McKeen Cattell and Edmund Burke Huey, the work of William S. Gray from the University of Chicago who used his extensive research to develop the Dick and Jane series, and the research of Marie Clay that resulted in the Reading Recovery program (Doyle, 2021; Johns, 2023; Kim, 2008). These research endeavors were ground-breaking and added to the knowledge base of how children learn to read and how teachers can most effectively teach reading. The purpose of research is to add to existing knowledge and develop new understandings. Scientific inquiry does not yield definitive solutions, however. For example, research conducted in laboratories by neuroscientists provides insight into which parts of the brain are enacted when a person reads. This type of research is limited, however, because of its very nature and does not yield information about the interactions of social factors and literacy acquisition (Compton-Lilly et al., 2020). Thus, research findings should be viewed within the context of the vast body of reading research that exists. The value of new findings is additive, but not definitive in determining how children learn to read.

SoR movement proponents cite the NRP as the definitive body of research that they claim supports their phonics-first and phonics intensive approach to reading instruction and reject other approaches such as balanced literacy, cueing systems, reading inventories, and anything related to whole language approaches (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2023). However, SoR movement proponents are, in fact, rejecting any research, past and present, that challenges their presumptions. As Gerry McVerry asserted, "Science of reading is anti-science" (Hoffman et al., 2021, p. 95).

The movement's disregard for science, in fact, extends to their reporting of the NRP when researchers clearly warned against an over-emphasis on systematic phonics in early reading instruction: "... it is important to emphasize that systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program. ... Phonics should not become the dominant component of a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor the significance attached. ..." (NRP, p. 2-97).

Recent research supports the NRP's conclusion regarding the role of phonics and the need for a balanced approach

in reading instruction. After conducting rigorous and extensive research in the United Kingdom, Dominic Wyse and Alice Bradbury (2022) concluded that after fifteen years of implementing phonics methodologies as the primary focus for early reading instruction, a balanced reading approach, with a focus on language, reading, writing and analytic phonics would be most beneficial for students learning to read. Wyse and Bradbury further concluded that dismissive attitudes about Kenneth Goodman's whole language approach to teaching reading are not supported by research and there should be a more careful consideration of the whole language orientation. Importantly, Dominic Wyse and Charlotte Hacking (2024) extend balanced reading to create a model in the form of a double helix that illustrates the interconnectedness of a child's language and environment and the intertwining of both reading and writing instruction in literacy development.

### **The Commercial and Ideological Forces Behind the SoR Movement**

During the NCLB era, there was a belief by its supporters that the application of the findings of the NRP would create "a nation of readers" as promised by a previously published federally funded research report by the Commission on Reading (The National Academy of Education, 1985). Supporters of NCLB legislation asserted that systematic and explicit phonics instruction, high stakes accountability for teachers and schools, and an increased focus on standardized tests would create equitable opportunities for all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, and would end the "soft bigotry of low expectations" (Rubel & McCloskey, 2019).

Commercial reading producers and test manufacturers were already poised to ensure that programs and products were available to meet the challenge of providing the training and materials teachers needed to implement NCLB mandates. NCLB brought with it five billion dollars in Reading First (RF) funding, which meant that there was a ready market for scripted reading programs guaranteeing success for schools striving to meet the demands for accountability. In fact, the stage had already been set in the 1990s for investors who envisioned education reform schemes as a source of revenue. For example, the investment firm Lehman Brothers sponsored the first Education Industry Conference in New York in 1996, *The New York Times* reporting that for-profit companies had already captured \$30 billion in the total \$340 billion spent on education in the United States. Therefore, when RF's massive budget of one billion dollars a year became available in 2002, the corporate world was poised to capture the market (Applebome, 1996; Manzo, 2008; Owens, 2015).

During the NCLB era, school districts focused their efforts on obtaining RF funds, which required implementing reading curriculums that were "research based" and aligned with the NRP. For many districts, it wasn't a question of whether to purchase a commercial program, rather it was which one to pur-

chase. All that was needed was a proclamation by the program developers that the program was research-based and aligned with the NRP. This was despite the NRP researchers' warnings against the wide-spread adoption of commercial reading programs that promised to be the magic cure for children's reading needs and improve reading achievement (Garan, 2002).

According to George Hruby, corporate forces have driven the adoption of commercial reading programs as states and districts clamber to align the curriculums with SoR movement dictums that have been legislatively imposed across forty states. This time it is not the five billion dollars in RF funds that are providing a boon for commercial entities, but the 190 billion dollars that flooded the market during the Covid pandemic. While these funds were dispersed for a variety of purposes like air filtration systems and technology, they were an enormous source of revenue for companies that produced commercial reading programs (Sam Bommarito, 2023a; Sam Bommarito, 2023b).

As Elena Aydarova (2024) explains, the corporate interests that have capitalized on the SoR movement are interwoven with a conservative network of non-profit agencies, think tanks, lobbying organizations, and philanthropic entities. At the heart of these organizations is an ideology that encompasses much more than early reading instruction. They are aligned with free market approaches to education such as school choice, charter schools, school vouchers, and a narrowly structured and common curriculum that reflects a conservative agenda. At the same time the SoR movement with all its various allegiant ideological forces, students, teachers, and librarians in more than 30 states are experiencing book banning efforts and curriculum censure (PEN America, n.d.). The danger of the ideology that undergirds both the SoR movement and censorship, according to Paul Thomas, is that we're erasing decades of improvements in how we include more diversity in our books and methods for teaching reading (Hagerman, 2024).

### **Commercial Reading Programs and Mandates for Implementation Fidelity**

A hallmark of commercial reading programs, both in the NCLB era as well as in the current SoR movement driven era, is the guarantee that their programs will demonstrate improvements in reading achievement – with one caveat: teachers must implement them with fidelity. According to program developers, it is not the quality of teachers that improve reading achievement. It is tightly designed and well-engineered programs that yield positive results (Diamond, 2004). With these programs, teachers are relegated to the role of the deliverer of the program because the program will work well with any teacher regardless of expertise or years of experience. In other words, commercial reading programs are designed to be teacher-proof.

Timothy Shanahan, who served as a researcher and author for the NRP, provided a commentary in 2024 about his concerns regarding the insistence by SoR aligned program devel-

opers and administrators that teachers implement commercial programs with fidelity. As Shanahan points out, there is a tendency by program developers to “‘idiot proof’ the programs, narrowing them down to the point that fidelity is the only possibility.” He further states, “... slavishly following such a curriculum is unlikely to succeed, unless teachers are wisely adaptive” (Shanahan, 2024).

An essential component of the role of teachers is being able to differentiate instruction and adapt lessons based on the diverse needs of their students. Effective teachers practice adaptive instruction routinely based on the “social, linguistic, cultural, and instructional needs of their students” (Parsons et al., 2018, p. 206). This is true for elementary teachers implementing scripted reading programs as well as for middle and high school content area teachers delivering a lesson. Parsons, et al., call this an awesome balancing act as teachers adjust instructional lessons and practices to meet the needs of their individual students. Instructional adaptability and flexibility has long been recognized as an essential element of effective teaching (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Gambrell et al., 2011; Hattie, 2009). As Parsons et al. (2018) point out, commercial reading programs designed to be teacher-proof do not support teachers in “adapting their instructional techniques to the diverse students they teach” (p. 208).

### **Teacher Autonomy and Commercial Reading Programs During the NCLB Era**

In 1983, Patrick Shannon sounded the alarm about the use of commercial reading programs, cautioning that the adoption of highly structured reading programs could lead to teachers becoming alienated from their instruction and students. The organization of the program would become the focus of reading instruction instead of the ability of teachers to make decisions about how best to teach their students (Shannon, 2005). Shannon's cautionary note was validated in a study I conducted in Mississippi in 2006–07 with reading specialists implementing a scripted commercial reading program. Instead of referring to individual students by name in discussions, they began referring to them by the unit students were on within the program. For example, students were labeled as “unit six students” or “unit ten students” based on their reading group's status within the program. In other words, the program had co-opted the reading specialist's focus on the individual needs of their students (Owens, 2010). The teachers had, as Shannon predicted, become alienated from their instruction and students.

The alienation from reading instruction experienced by the reading specialists in Mississippi was indicative of a greater phenomenon as teachers were required to implement commercial programs during the NCLB era. Their professionalism was questioned, and they were losing their autonomy to make decisions about how best to teach their students to read. Achinstein and Ogawa (2006) examined the implementation of

a commercial reading program in a school in another state in which fidelity to the program created tension among the professional staff. As one 35-year veteran teacher in the district bluntly stated, “Our superintendent [said] that the district has made a commitment to – it’s the new ‘f-word’ now – fidelity to the program. Which means that teachers aren’t to pick and choose what they want and do not want to teach” (p. 37). Another teacher in the district expressed her concerns about the strict demands for program fidelity which she described a requirement to “... follow it exactly and don’t add your creativity.” She went on to state, “I’m watching teachers kind of shrivel” (p. 40). She further explained, “What I’m feeling from the district is that teaching and education are not important. What’s important is the program that we’re using and following it, and individual style and teacher’s knowledge, and their abilities and individuality should not come into play” (p. 43).

Teachers implementing other commercial reading programs offered similar insights into their experiences. A teacher reported feeling that her ability to make decisions “had been appropriated by the district’s withdrawal of trust in her as an informed professional” (Meyer, 2002, p. 458). According to this teacher, she had been told by a district administrator that “for far too long teachers in this district have thought that their job was to create curriculum” and that the job of teachers was to simply deliver curriculum (Meyer, p. 453). Other teachers described the seeming irrelevance of their expertise when implementing commercial programs. For example, one teacher stated that a teacher’s absence is inconsequential because you “can just put the [program’s] lesson plan in and anyone can do it.” She felt that her professional expertise was dismissed, stating, “... I give myself more credit than that” (Datnow & Castellano, 2000, p. 790). The notion of a “one size fits all” reading program was challenged as well. Implementing a commercial reading program was, according to one teacher, akin to the banking model that Paulo Freire described as a system in which knowledge is decontextualized and “deposited in learners’ heads” (p. 790).

### **Teacher Autonomy and SoR Aligned Commercial Reading Programs**

With the rise of the SoR movement a new generation of teachers find themselves struggling to implement commercial reading programs that make bold claims about their ability to create “a nation of readers” if teachers will simply implement them with fidelity. The language of NCLB, with its mandate to implement scientifically-based-reading-research methodology has transitioned to a mandate to implement programs aligned with the science of reading.

A consistent thread that is interwoven in the cloth of both the NCLB era and SoR movement is assigning blame to teachers for the so-called reading crisis. According to Paul L. Thomas, with the adoption of scripted reading programs, there are two

major impacts on teachers – deprofessionalization and removal of autonomy (Hagerman, 2024; Thomas, 2022). The narratives of teachers during the NCLB era and those implementing SoR-aligned programs are remarkably similar. One 33-year veteran teacher who chose to leave the profession after the adoption of a SoR aligned scripted reading program stated, “It was not about teaching the students any longer, it was about teaching the curriculum. ... It took away individualization and asked teachers to kind of teach students the same thing.” She further explained that she felt the scripted programs take away teachers’ knowledge and authority and is damaging to both teachers and students.

Another reading teacher challenged the “one-stop shop” mentality of her district in adopting a scripted reading program. She stated, “I kind of see it as our role as reading teachers, whether I’m a classroom teacher or an interventionist, to figure out what is the system or the program or the approach that’s going to work for individual kids and meet them where they’re at. It’s not really, you know, one-size-fits-all.” She further commented, “My toolbox should be full and I should be able to use whatever I see in my professional judgment to be the best approach for individual students” (Hagerman, 2024).

After implementing a scripted reading program in her school district, a reading coach discussed the lack of time students are able to spend engaged in reading whole books. Students in kindergarten through second grade are only allotted ten minutes a day for independent reading and students in third grade engage in independent reading for fifteen minutes a day. After third grade, however, independent reading is almost non-existent due to the rigid structures of the reading program (Johnson, 2025a).

### **Teacher Resistance to Scripted Commercial Reading Programs During the NCLB Era**

Resistance to demands for program fidelity emerged during the NCLB era, although for the most part, acts of resistance were subtle. For example, teachers would supplement the program with additional reading materials like trade books and children’s literature, skipping sections of the program, resequencing lessons, or abandoning portions of the teacher’s script. Other teachers veered from prescriptive lessons by adding activities not in the script by, for example, having students perform a play based on one of the readings (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Owens, 2010). These subtle forms of resistance were carefully planned to fly under the radar of administrators who monitored teachers’ fidelity to the program. For example, one teacher, when asked how she navigated program fidelity mandates, explained that she had adopted a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Unless she was asked specifically about implementation fidelity, she did not discuss it (Owens, 2010, p. 116). Teachers often appeared to be compliant for the most part, but exercised their autonomy in ways that did not draw the ire of administrators. In other words, their compliance with pro-

gram fidelity mandates is what Alice Bradbury calls “cynical compliance,” which she defines as “tokenistic, half-hearted and tactical” (Bradbury, 2012, p. 183).

Some acts of resistance, however, were more overt. One teacher, for example, upon realizing that the scripted reading program wasn’t appropriate for her fifth and sixth grade students, began using the program less and less and created her own literature-based units. Other teachers resisted mandates for program fidelity by conducting long term inquiry projects, conducted writers’ workshops, and hosted literature circles in class. One teacher exercised her resistance by teaching reading in Spanish to her non-English-speaking students (Shanton & Valenzuela, 2005). These were bold moves in light of administrative mandates for program fidelity and, at times, these acts of resistance brought with them administrative retaliation. Teachers sometimes found themselves labeled as insubordinate and even fired (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Shanton & Valenzuela, 2005).

The sanctioning or firing of teachers had a chilling effect on other co-workers. Richard Meyer (2002) describes the experiences of an early childhood teacher as her school transitioned to a scripted reading program. Her once vibrant and joyous classroom became highly regulated and administrators routinely visited her classroom to make sure that scripts were followed. The teacher describes the visitors in terms of the “... phonics police ... the curriculum cops.” According to Meyer, she was “held hostage by the curriculum” because she was afraid of being fired for noncompliance. Meyer further stated that other teachers, too, were coerced into compliance with the program and asserts that this type of “compliance is a form of violence” because the teachers’ professionalism was “systematically ripped away by threats and intimidation” (pp. 458–459).

### **Teacher Resistance to Scripted Commercial Reading Programs During the SoR Era**

Once again, teachers find themselves navigating commercial reading programs, this time with SoR aligned programs, and deciding if they can or should comply with demands for program fidelity. And as was the case in the NCLB era, teachers are finding ways to resist program fidelity mandates in order to meet the needs of their students. For example, one fourth grade teacher noted that the time allotted for phonics instruction was the same for students regardless of grade level and even the content of the phonics lessons was not developmentally appropriate. She veered from the program’s fourth grade phonics lessons by emphasizing morphology instead of drilling students on low level phonics skills or having them read nonsense words (Johnson, 2025c).

One reading interventionist discussed her experiences working with young readers while implementing a SoR aligned program. Her district expected her to follow the program with fidelity. She noticed, however, that focusing only on phonics

and phonemic awareness, as dictated by the program, did not meet the needs of her students. They were not transferring skills to reading and writing, and she began augmenting the program by incorporating interactive writing and shared reading experiences, adding “authentic meaningful connections to literacy so her students could make progress” (Johnson, 2025b). She also drew on her expertise to supplement the program’s assessments and encouraged other teachers to use, for example, spelling inventories to facilitate informed decision-making about how to meet the needs of individual students.

Unlike the NCLB era, teachers face additional constraints when SoR-aligned programs are implemented at the same time school districts are faced with censorship and book banning efforts by outside forces. This is the case with one high school English teacher who found herself censored by her district’s adoption of a commercial program and a district policy that prohibits any teaching about racism (Smith & Banuck, 2024). She was challenged to find a way to maintain her own professional identity, honor her students’ racial and cultural experiences, and keep the peace with her administration. She found a way to resist curricular mandates through compromise with her principal. After explaining why the curricular mandates were harmful to teachers and students, her principal accepted a compromise that allowed teachers to alter their implementation of the program and use different materials and texts. While agreeing with the compromise, the principal cautioned teachers to “keep their heads down [and] not make a scene ...” (p. 32).

### **Teachers’ Motivation for Resisting Mandates for Fidelity to Commercial Programs**

Ultimately, the motives of teachers who resist mandates of fidelity to SoR-aligned commercial programs are clear. It is a matter of social justice for the students they teach and the need for autonomy in making professional decisions about how to meet their educational needs. Teachers on the front lines of education understand all too well that the students they work with every day bring with them a wealth of diversity. When considering how to best teach their students to read, teachers cannot merely rely on a pre-packaged program that assumes a linear, segmented, and sequential phonics-first approach will be effective for all students. As Etta Hollins states, SoR “prioritizes an approach that systematically advantages children with a specific cultural and linguistic socialization and disadvantages those from different cultural and linguistic traditions” (Hoffman et al., 2021, p. 70). Teachers therefore are forced to resist mandates for program fidelity. To do otherwise means that they cede their “ethical and moral responsibility to be knowledgeable and adaptive in their teaching of literacy...” (p. 95). Teachers should not be forced into this type of Faustian bargain in which they are required to ignore the multifaceted needs of their students in order to keep their jobs or avoid retribution. But most importantly, who pays the price



when teachers' professional knowledge and autonomy are disregarded? It is the students who are subjected to the attenuated literacy instruction provided with SoR aligned programs while not benefiting from the professional knowledge and expertise of their teachers to make decisions about how best to teach reading.

### Moving on From the SoR Movement

The valiant efforts of teachers as they resist SoR mandates are laudable in light of the colossal forces that seek to de-professionalize them and diminish their role to being mere implementers of a teacher-proof program. As the SoR movement was beginning to gain traction with policymakers and legislative bodies, members of the Literacy Research Association (LRA) discussed the implications of the movement for reading instruction and research. LRA members asserted that the SoR movement promotes a reductionist view of literacy development that focuses almost solely on phonics instruction and that it marginalizes students from diverse cultural and linguistic traditions. They further called for a broader view of literacy in research (Hoffman et al., 2021).

Literacy teaching and learning is complex and, therefore, challenging the SoR movement requires an acknowledgment of this complexity. The National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE, 2019) envisions literacy beyond a narrow set of skills as they explain:

Literacy has always been a collection of communicative and sociocultural practices shared among communities. As society and technology change, so does literacy. The world demands that a literate person possess and intentionally apply a wide range of skills, competencies, and dispositions. These literacies are interconnected, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with histories, narratives, life possibilities, and social trajectories of all individuals and groups.

According to the International Literacy Association (ILA), literacy is a basic human right and defines it as the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context . . ." (ILA, 2019).

Educational complexities are not easily reduced to learning outcomes that can be measured or packaged in curricular programs for sale on the commercial market. It is important to remember that the SoR movement is primarily focused on only one aspect of literacy – reading – and even within that aspect, the SoR movement focuses on skills that are easily reduced to data points with easily measured learning outcomes. For example, the ability of a student to read fluently is generally reduced to a number like how many words a student can read

accurately per minute. In doing so, a very important definitional aspect of fluency, prosody (reading with expression), is ignored. However, the reductionist view of reading espoused by the SoR movement is essential for maintaining the education market's profits. The SoR stamp of approval on the boxes of curriculums is what is most valued by the marketers of commercial reading programs.

If, on the other hand, a broader view of literacy is adopted that moves beyond the binary discussions of the supposed reading wars, the complexities of literacy teaching and learning will disrupt the market for commercial reading programs and challenge the reductionist view of reading as a set of measurable skills that is at the core of the SoR movement. That doesn't mean that teaching reading skills like phonemic awareness and phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, or fluency should not be taught. It does mean, however, that all aspects of literacy development are given equal weight.

### A Broader View of Literacy

A broader view of literacy also acknowledges that literacy education has a role in sustaining democratic ideals in a diverse and pluralistic society. For one of America's founding fathers Thomas Jefferson, an educated citizenry was critical in order for our nation to thrive. He looked to the Enlightenment as providing a foundational understanding of what was needed to sustain the democratic principles of the United States. Jefferson's vision for a new nation was predicated on Enlightenment ideas regarding empirical science, freedom of inquiry, human reason, and the progress of humanity (Karier, 1986).

The period of the Enlightenment, as described by historian Jonathan Israel, was a "quest for human amelioration" driven by an amalgam of philosophy, science (including social science, political science, and economics) that led to "revolutions in ideas and attitudes" seeking revolutionary recipes "for mankind and, ultimately, in its radical manifestation, laying the foundations for modern basic human rights and freedom and representative democracy" (Israel, 2013, p. 7). For me, the Enlightenment reflects the complexity and the role of literacy that the education community of teachers, learners, and researchers needs in order to break the juggernaut of the SoR movement. Literacy teaching and learning is simply too important to cede to a movement. It requires a broader lens, a different paradigm, and a new definition.

Harkening back to the Enlightenment era, I propose "enlightened literacy" as a new paradigm in which the employment of literacy in all its various forms and modalities, informed by philosophy, science, social science disciplines, and the humanities, promotes hope for the improvement of the human condition, democracy, and global citizenship. Inherent within this definition is a reclamation of the sciences from the SoR movement and an acknowledgement of all the sources of knowledge in the arena of literacy teaching and learning, recognizing the power and promise of literacy to improve the lives of

all humans, sustain democracy, and promote global citizenship. Actualizing a broader vision for literacy teaching and learning requires a framework that places the purpose of literacy at the center of learning, supported by cornerstones that reflect the dispositions that will guide literacy professionals and students toward enlightened literacy.

### A Panoramic Perspective

The SoR movement promotes a narrow, prescribed, and reductionist view of literacy that reflects a standardized and back-to-the-basics ideology. However, a panoramic perspective enables teachers to utilize a larger lens to envision the vast body of research and knowledge about how children learn to read. A panoramic perspective empowers teachers to draw on an array of disciplines and knowledge to make informed professional instructional decisions. Attempting to implement a scripted commercial reading program with fidelity suppresses the autonomy of teachers' ability to utilize their professional knowledge to make decisions about how best to teach their students. As a result, the lens they can use becomes smaller as they follow the dictums of program developers who may never have taught in a classroom. Teachers, for example, are asked to disregard their knowledge about the psychological research that informs their work with students such as the theories of Jean Piaget about cognitive development, the sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky, and Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (Johnson, 2022). As a result, maintaining fidelity to a reading program means that teachers must suppress what they know about the social factors that affect their pedagogical decisions such as socioeconomic status, race, culture, and ability as well as other human dimensions such as individual characteristics.

Teachers who resist mandated program fidelity are engaging in acts that reclaim their panoramic perspective because of their commitment to their profession and the students they teach. Not only do they draw upon what they already know, but teachers also increase their professional expertise by reading research that informs them about pedagogy as well as social aspects of teaching and learning. They consult with others about what types of literature, activities, and approaches to provide students that will motivate them as readers and writers. In other words, teachers are researchers as well as practitioners.

### A Humanistic Ethos

According to Steven Pinker (2018), the goal of humanism is the maximization of "human flourishing – life, health, happiness, freedom, knowledge, love, richness of experience . . ." (p. 410). A humanistic ethos is an attitude that encompasses an ethical stance that considers how one should live in society and take responsibility for one's self as well as the lives of others (WheelerCentre, 2017). Teachers who embrace a humanistic ethos recognize that each student is singularly unique in what they bring to the classroom community and value the diversity

of their students in all its various forms – linguistic, cultural, ability, socio-economic status, gender identification, the composition of their families, the communities, religious affiliation, or even their personalities.

Effective teachers reject prepackaged SoR-aligned one-size-fits-all programs and, rather, align their instruction with the principles of the universal design for learning and with the practice of differentiating instruction based on the needs of their students. Assessments of student learning are formative in that they enable teachers to make instructional decisions about what their students need. Teachers who embrace a humanistic ethos honor the diversity of their students through literature. The literature they provide for students, through read alouds or for independent reading, features diverse characters and settings that serve as mirrors and windows for students, enabling them to see themselves and their lives as well as learn about other people and lives different from their own (Owens, 2022; Bishop, 1990; Smith-Buster, 2016). Students are, therefore, given opportunities to walk in the shoes of others and develop empathy. And teachers model a humanistic ethos for students so that they can consider how to live within a world that is increasingly complex and diverse, and how to take responsibility for not only themselves but for others who share our world.

### A Spirit of Curiosity

The origin of the word curiosity shares the same Latin root as words like accurate (done with care); curator (a custodian of collections or artifacts in museums); or curative (something that has the ability to cure). Within the classroom environment a spirit of curiosity is created as teachers provide time and space for children to learn beyond the mandates of scripted reading programs and highly structured curriculums. Enlightenment philosopher David Hume described curiosity as the love of truth (Hume, 1739–40). It seems, therefore, that nurturing curiosity must be one of the major goals of education. In an educational system that prioritizes the use of SoR-aligned programs, time is often a scarce commodity, and teachers struggle to carve out time to nurture this innate passion. Reclaiming this valuable time, nevertheless, is essential.

Curiosity is the fountainhead of innovation and discovery as is evident when one considers the work of scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers. For example, theoretical physicist Richard Feynman employed thought experiments to ponder how Martians might view life as an Earthling. Albert Einstein used visualization to think about the interactions between movement and light, and Bertrand Russell posed paradoxes as he developed mathematical theories (Christopher Sykes, 2018; Isaacson, 2008; PhilosophieKanal, 2020). However, thought experiments are not solely the domain of adults, scientists, and philosophers.

There are ways to develop cognitive skills associated with this concept with students. For example, when we ask young



children to ponder what life would be like for Little Red Riding Hood if she lived in their own community, we are engaged in a thought experiment. There are endless possibilities for thought experiments in the classroom. Blown and Bryce (2013) did an in-depth analysis of the use of thought experiments with young students learning about scientific concepts. For example, a teacher might prompt a conversation while teaching a science lesson, asking students what happens when they drop a ball. Of course, students intuitively and experientially know that the ball will end up on the ground. However, the teacher can hold up a globe and ask what happens when a child in Antarctica drops a ball. The children who already understand the concept of gravity will respond with the same answer – it will drop to the ground. However, children who haven't cognitively grasped the concept of gravity will benefit from a thought experiment. Using a globe, these students are asked "isn't the ball rising upward in Antarctica instead of falling down?" Cognitive dissonance is created, and a creative teacher can work with students to resolve the dissonance through conversation and experiments. It's hard to imagine a dull lesson when this type of thought experiment is on the educational menu.

### A Focus on the Pragmatic

Teachers are asked to trust that the reading program they are required to implement is based on reliable learning theories and evidence-based research. The concept of theory to practice has long been a key component in teacher development. What has been lost in recent decades is the reality that theory often arises from practice.

The philosophy of pragmatism formed the education theories of John Dewey, who envisioned the classroom as a dynamic laboratory in which children learn about democracy (Dewey, 1916). The Deweyan notion of education cannot be pre-packaged in commercial programs. It relies on the ability of teachers and learners to work together, pose problems, and experiment with solutions. A focus on the pragmatic acknowledges that teaching and learning is a dynamic process and enables teachers and literacy researchers to move beyond static notions of what constitutes the science of reading. Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism in education is built on the premise that teachers, in addition to knowing their subject matter, need to consider the cultural and personal backgrounds of their students and design learning activities based on the interests of their students. A one-size-fits-all program is counter intuitive for teachers who maintain a focus on the pragmatic.

### Conclusion

The SoR movement, in resurrecting the supposed reading wars, has likewise resurrected the narrative that teachers are to blame for the perceived lack of reading achievement of students. Common to both the NCLB and the SoR movement era is the reliance of teacher proof commercial reading programs and requirements for teachers to implement programs with fidelity.

Teachers' acts of resistance reflect their fundamental understanding of their role in effectively teaching their individual students and the need to be adaptable and flexible in making instructional decisions. In fact, demands for fidelity to SoR aligned commercial programs run counter to long-standing research that supports the ability of teachers to be able to make professional instructional decisions about how to best meet the diverse needs of individual students (Parsons et al., 2018). In other words, when teachers' autonomy is threatened while implementing commercial programs with fidelity and they are prohibited from exercising professional instructional decision making, they are being asked to be less effective as educators.

Literacy education is too complex to be reduced to a set of skills that are easily measured and packaged in products to be sold to school districts with guarantees of success for all students. As the members of the LRA (Hoffman et al., 2021) concluded, we need a broader view of literacy that extends beyond basic reading skills. We need to acknowledge the essentiality of literacy in a democratic and diverse society and reclaim science within this broader view as a source of knowledge. Most importantly, however, we need to maintain a focus on what's most important: the students we teach, the communities in which we live, the global home we share, and a re-energized American dedication to democracy.

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