

Comments on Reinking, D.P., Hruby, G.G., & Risko, V. (2023). Legislating phonics: Settled science or political polemics? *Teachers College Record*, 125, 104-123. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/01614681231155688>

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The article by David Reinking, George Hruby and Victoria Risko represents research of policy matters at the center of developments in beginning reading. It offers a critical examination of the assumptions undergirding what is touted as the “Science of Reading” and of the claims proposed from this work. The authors have combined critical analyses of data from test scores with historical examinations, discourse analyses and a careful examination of other sources for which they have scrutinized various antecedents and the validity of findings and implications.

Their article represents the need to take pause as it raises a critical question about the integrity of the claims being made about what was being proposed and legislated under the umbrella of the Science of Reading (SoR). The article by Reinking, Hruby and Risko begins with a critical unpacking of the ideology undergirding the legislative reach of mandates associated with the “Science of Reading”. As they indicate:

We believe that legislating how reading must be taught based on narrowly bounded ideological positions, expressed polemically, and aimed at establishing an uncontested orthodoxy is inappropriate and counterproductive. First, it contravenes political power and its whims over professional practice, in effect arbitrating differences among scholars in matters of professional practice. Second, it sanctions reading instruction, in both senses of the word. That is, it sanctions what must be taught, and, at least implicitly imposes sanctions against any deviation from mandated practice, even if alternatives are recognized as reasonable and sound professional practice supported by research. Third, it usurps the professional flexibility and judgment that are necessary to meet the diverse needs of individual students (Reinking, Hruby and Risko, 2023, p. 105).

Throughout the article the authors enlist a critical lens to unpack the power dynamics at play in tandem with detailed analyses of the research that has been enlisted by some of the Science of Reading advocates to warrant the restrictive phonics regimen. They provide evidence to warrant the conclusion that the manner of phonics instruction stems from a distorted review of research and some of the key syntheses of the nature and role of phonics in beginning reading. They do so by contrasting the claims with the actual results of key Reading First studies, the findings from the National Reading Panel Report and by illuminating the flaws in the interpretation of test results nationally and at the state level—in particular the misrepresentation of the findings from the state of Tennessee.

Essentially, they challenge the notion that there is irrefutable evidence for the necessity for teaching phonics as the sole basis for beginning reading and as an essential intermediary for word learning and in turn reading for meaning. In conjunction with doing so, they challenge the critiques of Balanced Literacy and Whole Language and suggest these and other curricular

approaches should be displaced and replaced with what has become touted as Structured Literacy.

Integral to the critique by Reinking, Hruby and Risko is a discussion of the nature and role of science. The authors offer the argument that with the notion that the science of reading is never settled and indeed posited what has become widely quoted from the article—namely the notion of settled science is “an oxymoron”. Specifically, they profoundly declare

Associating settled science with instruction is also telling. Neither the NRP report, nor any research since, suggests that there is a settled science that establishes an indisputable boundary between scientific and nonscientific instructional practice in every context, for every student. Consistent throughout the report, and summarized in its conclusions, are many unanswered questions and unresolved issues that need clarification through more research, and most of these remain unanswered. Reinking, Hruby & Risko, 2023, p. 123.

The deft discussions of some of the key issues related to the “Science of Reading” substantiate a statement of P. David Pearson that they use to preface their article.

When we do not have definitive research to answer a question about policy or practice, we can easily slip over the line and privilege ideology and belief over evidence . . . When research travels to the land of policy, often only the headlines make the journey, leaving the details and the nuance behind (Pearson, 2004, p. 238).

The article by Reinking, Hruby and Risko interrupts and raises questions about these major policy developments, warranting literacy educators and policy makers to take pause in relation to the doctrine touted as settled science as well as to the vitriol, ad hominem attacks and demand for allegiance to die-hard positions being represented in recent legislation for beginning reading.