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Book Review: How Education Policy Shapes Literacy Instruction: Understanding the Persistent Problems of Policy and Practice

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Historically, the most heavily legislated domain of education has been reading instruction, and it has also been the most cited measure for assessing educational advancement (Tierney & Pearson, 2021). In *How Education Policy Shapes Literacy Instruction: Understanding the Persistent Problems of Policy and Practice* (2022), edited by Rachael Gabriel, scholars from all over the country contributed chapters on perpetual educational concerns, such as retention, intervention, early childhood and English language literacy acquisition, and coaching. The relationship between literacy teaching, learning, and research is explored through policy documents and peer reviewed research articles published from the 1960s to the present to establish ideas and solutions. In not only linking these challenges over time within a historical and political context, but also establishing an association between all these issues within the broad context of literacy research and policy, the contributors have curated a text for teachers, administrators, and policy makers who want to understand contemporary concerns in education, as well as the cyclical and sometimes troublesome nature of the reading wars.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In chapter one, authored by Rachael Gabriel and Shannon Kelly, the historical context of education legislation over the past one hundred and fifty years is examined, from funding state universities in the nineteenth century, to educational training provided by the GI Bill after the Second World War, to the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), which placed an emphasis on higher education in order to globally compete, and contribute to the Space Race. The chapter also highlights other significant, historical events, such as the Social Security Act and the Voting Rights Act as a frame of reference to discuss the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), which was signed by President Johnson in 1965. ESEA was part of Johnson's legislation on the "War on Poverty," and for the first time, education was framed as a solution to social problems, rather than an economic or defense necessity. This legislation was the first to engage K-12 education, and it funded school libraries, teacher professional development, and additional teachers and tutors among low-income districts. The authors argue that by examining the history of policy responses to students' individual differences, such as race, class, gender identity, religion, culture, sexual orientation, disability status, and other identity markers, research, teaching, and even society evolves over time. They end with the notion that because of the social and cognitive nature of reading, that "systems that respond to reading difficulties can exacerbate inequity" (p. 6-7). This chapter serves as a framing for the entire book, as all the following chapters encapsulate these claims.

Chapter 2: Retention in Grade and Third Grade “Trigger” Laws: History, Politics, and Pitfalls.

This chapter, authored by Gabriel P. DellaVecchia, discusses the current third grade retention reading laws in the United States, which as of the publication of this book, have been enacted by twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia. The laws came to be popular due to concerns about standardized test scores, the impact of reading on general academics, and third grade being identified as a vital point in a child’s education. DellaVecchia examines the history of these laws, dating back to the 1970s, which is when schools established minimum competencies. He explores how the panic over failing schools was intensified in *A Nation at Risk* (1983), which served as a reference for school reform until No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted in 2002. The author examines the connection between reading laws, school accountability measures, school choice initiatives, and the privatization movement of schools. He dismantles any talking point that retention is a viable solution to academic performance, discussing the negative impact on high school graduation rates, social-emotional well-being, and economic outcomes. DellaVecchia proclaims that the focus on retention takes away from important conversations about literacy and advocates for an increased focus on supporting teachers instead. Since students of color are more likely to be retained, he ends by doubting the genuine purpose of the retention laws, suggesting that they are ill-intentioned and contribute to the “school to prison nexus” (p. 47). Again, he argues for alternatives, such as universal pre-K, and stresses the need for literacy scholars to become more involved in the policy space to impart research and knowledge onto policy makers. His work is vital for any state considering adopting a retention law, or for any state wanting to reconsider their already existing retention laws.

Chapter #3: Remedial Reading Programs: Identification, Instruction, and Impacts of a Separate System of Learning.

This chapter, authored by Katherine K. Frankel, discusses the history of remedial reading programs in K-12 education, and all the different terminology that’s been used to describe remedial reading programs. Frankel provides commentary on the history of the word remediation, its ties to medicine, and how remedial reading has been described as an illness to be cured. She argues that remedial reading programs tend to focus on compliance with policies, instead of being responsive to students’ needs, which tends to involve separate curricula and programming. This creates disjointed programming from the classroom instruction, which can impact transfer of knowledge and consistency across classrooms. Within the context of history and policy, Frankel argues that the historical focus on phonics within the reading remediation space does not always account for the multi-dimensional nature of

reading, and that readers need to be understood holistically, from multiple data points. From the passage of ESEA, to creation of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), resources have been allocated to provide support to students to tackle what has been described as a reading crisis. With the formation of the National Reading Panel (NRP) in 2000, policymakers required that all programming intended to support students' reading be based on "scientific" reading research (the basis for NCLB), which required research based instructional practices and programs focused on early reading. Frankel maintains that, to reform remedial reading programs, decision makers must focus on dynamic profiles of readers, versus a singular diagnosis of reading difficulty, as well as move away from program outcomes being the sole data point, without considering the individual students themselves, and the qualitative data that may include. The author concludes with, "reading researchers and policy makers need to reflect on and engage the diversity of experiences of remedial reading programs that extend far beyond test scores, and then chart a new way forward" (p. 80).

Chapter 4: Early Reading Instruction: Politics and Myths About Materials and Methods.

This chapter is written by Natalia Ward and Nora Vines. Though federal literacy policy had little to say about the nature of early reading instruction for two hundred years, this chapter examines early reading instruction and related policy. After the passing of ESEA, Ward and Vines describe how a combination of factors including changing demographics in the country, the passage of the first iteration of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1975, as well as the publication of influential white papers of the time, all contributed to the idea that economic competitiveness was being directly influenced by reading achievement. From the NRP, to the NCLB era, to *Race to the Top* (2009), and the adoption of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) in 2010, Ward and Vines demonstrate how influential educational initiatives impacted policy, the ever-changing shift from federal to local control, and the recurrent nature of the reading wars. What's most compelling, though, is how the authors use the context of history and policy to discuss the current Science of Reading (SoR) movement. They use the example of Emily Hanford's series of publications (2018), which argued that explicit phonics instruction in the early elementary grades is a universal remedy, and how this, coupled with the concept of knowledge building, are what SoR supporters are advocating for in terms of reform. Ward and Vines question what knowledge is or, more importantly, whose knowledge should be included in these curricula when we are advocating for a knowledge building curriculum. They also question the accountability of curricula publishers, especially when teachers may only have access to a single message about the teaching of reading, without evidence that it's

effective. The question also comes up about how to make instruction more culturally sustaining when schools must adhere to prescriptive curricula and guidance. Instead, the authors call for adaptive literacy practices which meet the needs of individual students, and that a well-rounded reading education is provided to students, which includes access to caring and knowledgeable teachers, the use of high quality, culturally and linguistically sustaining materials which promote a love of reading. As we navigate the commentary of our most recent wave of education reform as an educational community, these are vital questions to consider while engaging in discourse.

Chapter 5: Cumulative Disadvantage: Differential Experiences of Students with Reading Difficulties.

The author, Laura Northrop, begins the chapter by discussing how since publications such as Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read- And What You Can Do About It* (1955) up through Hanford's *Hard Words* (2018), there has been public concern for students learning how to read. Northrop notes that dating back two hundred years ago, early reading difficulties were believed to be caused by "word blindness, eye problems, and emotional disturbance..." (p. 123). Reading difficulties were not addressed by educational policy until the passage of ESEA. As framed in ESEA, poverty directly resulted in reading difficulties, and the remedy was extra instruction, provided by reading teachers. Around the same time, the theory emerging that reading difficulties were caused by a problem in the brain, which led to the passing of IDEA in 1975. Northrop argues that policy itself changed the implications for reading difficulties from environmental issues to neurological issues, which shows how policy can directly impact research and practice. The author discusses some persistent issues and questions with reauthorizations of both ESEA and IDEA, including who actually receives services and why, under the law. With the passing of retention laws in the 2000s, data collected under these policies were used to retain students. Northrop notes that historically, policy has impacted the type of reading intervention students receive based on specific requirements in the policy, and she makes parallels to the current SoR movement. With the current SoR movement, there is a focus back to decoding and language comprehension, which is showing up in policy. Northrop contends that this shift to a one size fits all instruction could limit access to different types of instruction students may need, and that policy impacts which students receive reading intervention instruction primarily by the underlying assumption used in the policy to identify who counts, or qualifies, as a struggling reader.

Chapter 6: A Language for Literacy Learning: Language Policy, Bi/Multilingual Students, and Literacy Instruction.

The author of this chapter, Amber N. Warren, discusses instructional practices, assessment, and teacher preparation of bilingual and multilingual students, specifically in the United States, and how they directly connect to the related policy. Warren recounts the history of bilingual education in the United States, beginning with hundreds of thousands of students being taught German at the turn of the twentieth century. However, following the first world war and due to a decreased number of immigrants coming from Europe, bilingualism was seen as a problem for national security, which directly shows how what was happening in the world impacted not only policy, but educational practices. This time period was the beginning of the assimilationist education movement that Warren argues still exists today. The author traces the evolution of policy, such as the Immigration and Nationalist Act (1965), and the first installment of The Bilingual Education Act (BEA), which was passed in 1968, to connect how broader policy initiatives related to immigration directly impacted educational initiatives. With increased focus on English only instruction and assessment, as well as students specifically from disadvantaged backgrounds and Spanish speakers, the BEA did not represent the cultural and linguistic diversity present in populations across the United States. Additionally, after reported high dropout rates in cities, civil rights and community groups began to advocate against an English only approach, and the push for using culturally relevant materials was seen to enhance native language in order to develop the English language emerged. The BEA was reauthorized many times over decades, switching back and forth from a monolingualism approach to a bi/multilingual approach. Warren points out that more expansive immigration policies typically have more linguistically expansive education goals. Thus, the shift to state control appears to be creating ever more uneven terrain within the landscape of bi/multilingual student education. She calls for policy makers, administrators, and educators to embrace the linguistic complexity of students, to create ongoing learning opportunities for educators to increase their knowledge of language development, as well as sociopolitical and political factors impacting educational equity, and lastly, working towards policies related to the most current research.

Chapter 7: How Literacy Policy Shapes Understandings of Teacher Quality: Coaching, Evaluation, and Measures of Teacher Effectiveness.

This chapter, authored by Rachael Gabriel, focuses on the evolution of policies related to teacher quality and their impact on reading achievement. Though state and federal legislation was relatively silent on the notion of teacher quality until the turn of the twenty first century, “examples of teacher evaluation systems from the early 1900s included checklists of items related to hemlines, petticoats, and whether

and how it is appropriate for teachers to be seen with unmarried men in public” (p. 170). Gabriel provides examples such as IQ and achievement testing, as well as readability formulae, to show how tools originally created for the military were eventually adapted for educational purposes. Gabriel touches upon Bond and Dykstra’s *First Grade Studies* (1967), Heath’s *Ways with Words*, and even the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) reports from the 1980s to show how teacher quality was a research focus for a while before its adoption in schools. Though literature on job embedded mentoring became prevalent in the 1960s, the concept of coaching began to take hold in schools. Gabriel connects past to present, using NCLB (specifically Reading First) to discuss how though coaches were being used more readily in schools, Reading First argued that a specific curriculum, supported by coaches, would bolster the quality of instruction enough to increase outcomes. She adopts the example of The Widget Effect, which has been used to explain how teachers were viewed as generic widgets in an educational machine because they were never evaluated or individually developed, to show how coaching models often take away teacher autonomy, creativity, and expertise. Gabriel argues that despite its consistent failure as a policy strategy, the assumption that materials and coaches can increase teacher quality is showing up again in the most recent round of SoR laws that are being passed across the country. She calls on the reader to consider how we have ended up here again.

Chapter 8: Influence and Evidence in Reading-Related Policy

The final chapter was written by Rachael Gabriel and Shannon Kelly. After examining all these issues in education, from a historical and political lens, the authors offer critical questions, answers to pressing issues, and even a call to action for teachers, administrators, and policy makers. Gabriel and Kelly discuss how white papers are often written by think tanks and foundations to directly impact policy making. They argue that these papers are often not peer reviewed, nor do they require consensus from highly qualified, diverse groups of individuals. They also discuss the issue with peer reviewed research, and that it is often locked behind a paywall, which leads to a decrease in access to those that most likely need access to it the most. This model of research dissemination, coupled with how easily white papers can travel, directly contributes to their popularity in terms of policy making. White papers can be disseminated widely, oftentimes through social media, and for no cost to the reader. Gabriel and Shannon continue, and note that, “what seems like grassroots movements often have roots in, and resources drawn from, national organizations, funded by a handful of powerful elites and reinforced by a loosely coupled network of philanthropists, and Edutech companies whose stake in public education is incredibly apparent” (p. 187). As consumers of educational reporting,

it's important to be mindful of this, and consider how we can interrogate these papers to consider accuracy, authorship, and intent, especially when we consider how much of an impact these white papers have had on policy (and therefore schools) throughout history. Aside from white papers, Gabriel and Kelly discuss systemic issues in the educational space that could be used for reform. For example, the idea that it takes three to five years to fully implement a new curriculum is commonly accepted among researchers and could directly impact policy. However, policies routinely require that schools and districts change curricula and interrupt long term professional learning strategies with multiple other mandates. Though they note these persistent issues that schools encounter when trying to properly integrate what the research says versus what the policy says, they also call for an increased focus and accountability for vendors of educational tools, such as curriculum and assessments. Gabriel and Kelly assert that despite good intentions, grassroots movements and policymakers often prescribe a one size fits all approach that does not honor nor address the specific nuances in school contexts and communities, as well as factors such as engaging and culturally relevant texts and individualized instruction. They state, "if we expand our understandings of why/how students struggle with reading to consider the ways that students' identities are affirmed or oppressed in school settings, and the ways their linguistic competence is measured and developed, our prognostic frames might better match the available evidence on retention and instead aim for alternative policy solutions..." (p. 193). In concluding statements, Gabriel and Kelly maintain that current reading policy relates back to past policy strategies that have been attempted with limited success, including accountability, standards, and curriculum mandates. Their final call to action is to consider who benefits from the perceived reading crisis. They argue that corporations benefit from an educational system in crisis because they can sell products that claim to solve problems, and that conservative policy makers benefit from an educational system in crisis as a means towards privatization.

As we navigate laws and policies around literacy, it's important to be critical and consider what we know about research, history, and policy when advocating for us against a particular law, policy, or even new curriculum in a school. This book equips teachers, administrators, and policymakers with this knowledge to help consider their positions, by studying the past to inform the present and future.

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