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by Steve Timmer
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The Great Literacy Food Fight

[[The second installment of the story is here.](#)]

Proof of the bromide, "There is nothing new under the sun," comes once again to the Minnesota Legislature in the form of the febrile cheerleading for something branded by a hedge fund as the *Science of Reading*. But it's just phonics, dressed up in an expensive package. You can sell some people anything if it costs enough, and if you can sell it to legislators, you're golden.

Before we can talk about what's afoot, though, we need some background on what I call *The Great Literacy Food Fight*. Here's a short video introduction to the *Science of Reading*.

What the Phonics is The Science of Reading?

If you watch the video, you'll see that phonics has periodically reappeared with near-religious fervor in the debate on literacy and the best way to teach reading. In the last few years, it's been back again, largely fueled by the company responsible for a (big surprise) pricey phonics program of instruction: [LETRS®](#).

The literacy food fight goes back even further than the video suggests, back to Horace Mann, who is widely regarded as the [father of public education](#) in the United States.

Parenthetically, the “Common School” movement started by Mann obviously influenced the drafters of the Constitution in Minnesota to include the Education Clause, Article XIII, Section 1, which creates the obligation of the state to create and maintain a system of Common Schools: a universal, free basic education to all students in the state.

UNIFORM SYSTEM OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS. The stability of a republican form of government depending mainly upon the intelligence of the people, it is the duty of the legislature to establish a general and uniform system of public schools. The legislature shall make such provisions by taxation or otherwise as will secure a thorough and efficient system of public schools throughout the state.

As I have noted elsewhere, [the Education Clause is under assault](#).

Whole language vs. phonics

Mann was a proponent of the “whole language” school (so to speak) of teaching literacy.

So what are the “reading wars” and when did they start? They go back to the 1800s, when debate began about the best way to teach kids to read. Horace Mann, the influential educational reformer who was secretary of education in Massachusetts, argued against teaching the explicit sounds of each letter, arguing that students would then not learn to read for meaning and that they should first learn to read whole words.

A debate over emphasizing “phonics” or “whole language” has been voiced ever since — at least by scholars and policymakers, who often don’t bother to pay attention to what teachers are actually doing in the classroom.

The debate [flared in 2013](#), when the National Council on Teacher Quality, a group created by a conservative think tank to diminish the influence of teacher education schools, published negative ratings of many of these institutions and attacked their literacy instruction.

Well, that’s interesting, isn’t it?

LETRS® is the newest wave in the Greatest Thing Ever in Education

The quote above is Valerie Strauss, [writing in her column, The Answer Sheet](#), in the Washington Post a few years ago. She was introducing a piece by Rachael Gabriel that was included in the column. In it, Gabriel wrote this:

Instead of arming educators with tools to manage the complexity of literacy learning, we put them in the middle of a political, philosophical conflict with religious overtones. We first tell them there is one right way. Then, 10-15 years later, we tell them they’re getting new materials, schedules, expectations and “professional development” because something else is the one right way. Some individual educators braid together coherent understandings in the midst of volatility. Others do not.

This sounds a lot like a current bill in the Minnesota House, [HF629](#).

Gabriel is exactly right about this; if you teach for a while (as multiple members of my family have) you will encounter successive waves of the newest Greatest Thing Ever in Education. What most of them have in common is a desire to limit the agency of teachers to teach. That’s obviously what the fake grass-roots organization, the National Council on Teacher Quality, had in mind.

It is laughably puerile and naïve to think you can pass a big phonics bill and suddenly students will read better. But that’s the nature of education politics and education journalism, perhaps especially.

Learning to read is far more than decoding words

Literacy learning *is* a complex enterprise. From a piece by David Reinking, Victoria J. Risko and George G. Hruby [in another Valerie Strauss column](#):

This latest [phonics war dust-up] taps familiar themes. First, reasonable differences among qualified professionals are framed as a war between opposing factions. Second, phonics, as an approach to teaching reading, is a flash point. Finally, mainstream educators are portrayed as purveyors, or clueless victims, of conspiratorial resistance to scientific evidence. The latter theme is sometimes punctuated with anecdotes from distraught parents who have been led to believe that their children are being betrayed by an unenlightened educational establishment.

These themes make for a compelling journalistic narrative and they can benefit for-profit interests outside mainstream education, particularly during a pandemic when many parents are seeking help teaching reading at home. But, they also obscure established evidence that teaching reading is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Overlooked is the common ground shared by those who draw different conclusions on the finer points of available research.

More from the article:

[R]easonable differences exist along a continuum. On one end are those who see phonics as the foundation of learning to read for all students. To them, phonics — lots of it — is the essential ingredient that insures success for all students learning to read, and it must be mastered before other dimensions of reading are taught.

On the other end are those who see phonics as only one among many dimensions of learning to read — one that gains potency when integrated with meaningfully engaged reading and writing, with vocabulary and language development, with instruction aimed at increasing comprehension and fluency, and so forth. (For an extended discussion, [click on this.](#))

Both of the Strauss columns are excellent and a much better exposition of the whole issue than you'll get from me. I will end this here, with the promise of a discussion of LETRS®, the Science of Reading (which is really a trademark, too), and [HR629](#).