

Reconstructing Literacies Beyond the Page: A Critical Discourse Analysis of
Elementary Literacy in the Context of a State-Level Early Reading Policy

by

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Abstract

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Thesis directed by Professor Elizabeth Dutro

In response to a proliferation of early literacy policy interventions and heightened and divisive rhetoric around an often-misunderstood concept referred to as the science of reading, this study interrogates the discourse surrounding a state-level early literacy policy within three distinct realms: the macropolitical, the local media, and the elementary classroom. Drawing on critical poststructural theories of discourse that recognize how language shapes and is shaped by relations of power in society, this analysis unearths the ways that language use in each of these areas constructs literacy, literacy instruction, teachers, and students. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the primary methodological and theoretical tool, this study applied a CDA protocol based largely on Fairclough's approach with an additional productively disruptive lens derived from queer theoretical commitments to examine texts produced within the macropolitical, local media, and elementary classroom spaces. Findings point to discursive formations that privilege functionalist views of literacy imbued with neoliberal beliefs about education reform that limit what counts as literacy, who is defined as literate, as well as who is capable of teaching literacy to children. While much of the analysis demonstrates repetitions of neoliberal technocratic views of literacy and literacy instruction that focus almost entirely on reading print to the exclusion of other forms of literate ways of knowing and being, analytical moves

inspired by Foucauldian conceptions of power and discipline, queer theory's refusal of limits, and moment-to-moment understandings of individual communication provide reason for hope. Analysis of conversations at the elementary classroom level suggest ways of thinking differently about teacher identity in relation to teaching and learning in spaces of restrictive policy enactments, as well as possibilities for performing resistant literacy practices as an intervention to reconstruct more liberatory and expansive discourses that celebrate literate lives beyond the page.

Keywords: early literacy, literacy policy, critical discourse analysis, science of reading, teacher identity

This dissertation is dedicated to a future where children are recognized in and out of school for all their beautiful, complex, imaginative, brilliant literate lives beyond the page.

We all have the power and the responsibility to make it so.

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Tigers have claws that are vicious

I would not want one to give me kisses.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Neoliberal Logics: You'd Be a Monster to Disagree	3
Reading First	7
Making AYP: Neoliberal Discourse in Action	10
Recognize. Disrupt. Reconstruct.: Understanding Discourse	11
Why this Study?	13
Research Questions	15
Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework	17
Theory	18
Critical Poststructural Theories of Discourse	18
Discourse	20
Discipline	20
Governmentality	22
Queer Theory	24
Review of the Literature	28
Literacy	29
Literacy: A Set of Skills or Contextual Practices?	29
Brief History of Literacy Education and Assessment	33
Neoliberal Reform	40
Test-Centric Literacy	42
Dehumanizing Students	43
Teacher Resistance	45
Teacher Identity Formation and Negotiation	46
Constructing a Problem and a Solution: Crisis and Science	48
Crisis	48
Science	54
Bringing it All Together: Critical Discourse Analysis in Education	60
CDA in Literacy Research: 2012-2023	62
Reviewing the Literature: 1983-2012	63
Responding to Critiques	64
Chapter 3: Methodology	66
Methodological Stance	66

Inquiry as Stance	66
Positionality	67
Overall Research Methodology	68
What is Discourse?	69
What is Discourse Analysis?	71
Fairclough's Approach to CDA: Description, Interpretation, Explanation	71
Why Does CDA Make Sense in this Study?	74
Research Context	76
Teacher Collaborator	77
Focal Elementary School Description	81
Colorado READ Act	85
Data Collection and Analysis	87
Data Collection: Chapter 4	89
Colorado General Assembly	90
Colorado Department of Education	91
Colorado State Board of Education	92
District Board of Education and Instructional Leadership	93
Data Collection: Chapter 5	95
Data Collection: Chapter 6	97
Audio Recordings	98
Pre-Research Interview	98
Transcripts	99
Field Notes	100
Researcher Journal	101
Artifacts	101
Data Analysis	102
CDA	102
Fairclough's Approach	102
Fairclough: Intertextuality	103
Erickson: Microethnography	105
Conclusion	107
Chapter 4: Elementary Literacy as Constructed within the Macropolitical Space	108
Critical Discourse Analysis Protocol	109
Findings	110

Opening (READ) Act	110
Literacy is Reading and Reading is the Science of Reading	122
Literacy is Reading Print	122
Reading is the Science of Reading	136
Reading Instruction	149
Who's Teaching This?	155
Readers	161
Conclusion	169
Chapter 5: Elementary Literacy as Constructed within the Local Media	170
Local Media Data Summary	171
Literacy	172
You Can Measure It	173
Reading is Situated and Interactive	178
Literacy Instruction	183
Curricular Conspiracies	185
Experts	190
Teacher Constructions	192
Teacher Knowledge as a Problem	193
. . . And a Solution	196
Teacher as Learner	201
Expressing Care for Students	208
Students	211
Intertextual Chain: The Third Grade Thread	211
Conclusion	221
Chapter 6: Discursive Constructions within an Elementary Literacy Classroom	223
Welcome	227
Reading Print	228
Linearity of Literacy Development	234
Data Collection	238
Science of Reading and Curricular Authority	247
Discussions About Text	250
Critique of Reading Comprehension Standards	255
Conclusion: Possibilities for Reconstruction	260
Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion	262

Research Question 1: <i>Literacy and Literacy Instruction</i>	262
Limited View of Literacy	264
The Science of Reading	264
Research Question 2: <i>Students and Teachers</i>	269
Who are Students?	270
Speaking for Herself: Understanding Samantha’s Discourse through Neoliberal Logics and Theories of Identity and Talk	275
Reconstructing the Discourse of Elementary Literacy	283
Expansive View of Literacy	284
Literacy Instruction Informed by Evidence; Implemented by Agentic, Trusted Teachers	288
Students’ Knowledge, Lived Experiences, and Identities Meaningfully Centered	294
Recognize Complexity and Moment to Moment Shifting of Teacher Identity	297
Recommendations	301
Take Political Action at All Levels	302
Hold the Media Accountable	303
Perform Disruptive and Resistant Literacy Practices	304
Data Sources for Critical Discourse Analysis	308
References	313
Appendix A	327
Questions for Each Stage of Fairclough’s Process for Critical Discourse Analysis	327
Appendix B	330
Appendix C	331
Education Legislation Rulemaking Process	331
Appendix D	332
Appendix E	337
Complete Data Set for Chapter 5	337
Table E1	337
Chalkbeat Colorado Articles - 36 total	337
Table E2	341
The Denver Post Articles – 17 total	341
Table E3	343
The Colorado Sun Articles – 8 total	343

Table E4	344
Colorado Public Radio Articles – 4 total	344
Appendix F	345
Protocol for Pre-Research Interview	345
Appendix G	347
Artifacts Generated with Samantha	347
Artifact 1: Graphic organizer showing data collection at King co-created with Samantha during July 12, 2023, meeting	347
Artifact 2: Proposal accepted to AERA 2024. Samantha and I worked on this based on our engagement with the Davis and Vehabovic (2018) article.	348
Appendix H	356
CDA Protocol	356
Appendix I	359
Codebook	359
Appendix J	361
Appendix K	366
Appendix L	368
District Slides	368
Appendix M	370
Appendix N	374
Appendix O	377

Tables

Table

3.1	2021-2022 Demographic Data for King Elementary Compared to District.....	84
3.2	School Performance Framework (SPF) Level for King Elementary from 2010-2019 and for 2022.....	85
3.3	Summary of Data Sources for Chapters 4-6.....	88
3.4	Database Search Results: Chapter 5.....	97
4.1	Comparison of READ Act- vs. Non-READ Act-Related Literacy Items on State Board Meeting Agendas 2012-2023.....	125
4.2	A Hybrid Text with Normative and Creative Movement.....	147
4.3	Exchange During SBE Meeting Demonstrating Abstraction of Readers/ Students.....	168
5.1	Summary of Local Media Article Data Set by Category.....	172
5.2	Headlines from Schimke’s “Investigative” Reporting Related to Curriculum.....	189
6.1	Excerpted text expressing tension about data collection and use at King.....	242

Figures

Figure

3.1	2021-2022 Demographic Data for King Elementary Compared to District.....	127
3.2	School Performance Framework (SPF) Level for King Elementary from 2010-2019 and for 2022.....	240

Chapter 1: Introduction

I met King Elementary School¹ second-grade teacher Samantha early in the fall of the 2019-20 school year. I was attending my first meeting with a group of teachers at King as part of my new role as a doctoral student and research assistant for an ongoing multi-site qualitative research study. At one point, Samantha, who had recently taken part in professional learning with a nationally recognized center for gender and sexual diversity in education, expressed frustration at not being able to read aloud high-quality, identity-affirming texts with her students. “I really am mad because I feel like there’s no time for those read alouds,” she lamented in a September conversation. Brit, the King instructional coach, replied, “There are so many times for rich read alouds.”

“No. There’s really not,” Samantha responded sorrowfully. “I feel like there’s not. I feel like I’m going to get in trouble this year.”

I listened intently to Samantha’s frustrations, immediately relating to her dilemma. As a former elementary and middle school literacy teacher and instructional coach, I recognized the tension teachers like Samantha feel. The decision to enact antioppressive pedagogies (Kumashiro, 2002) within a system governed by curriculum mandates and accountability goals can seem impossible or too costly for teachers whose professional evaluations are increasingly coupled with student performance on high-stakes standardized tests (HST) (Ruecker, 2022). The restriction I felt as an educator operating under the reform policies implemented with the enactment of the

¹ All proper names related to the district level of analysis, including the district name, school name and district participant names, are pseudonyms.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and continuing under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) drove my decision to apply to graduate school. I wanted to understand how accountability structures born out of neoliberal policies operate within elementary literacy classrooms.

The ideologies, or logics, behind policies such as NCLB and ESSA can be described as neoliberal, as they are situated within a market-based framework where education has become commodified, and students and families are positioned as consumers vying for finite resources that are supposedly awarded based on merit and individual effort and achievement (e.g. Au, 2016). Some of the values that undergird neoliberal education reforms include individualism or meritocracy, efficiency, goals based on skill accumulation, competition, and rationality. Over two decades since the passage of NCLB, what makes neoliberalism such an insidious force within education is the pervasiveness of the underlying logics, which Americans have become so accustomed to as to render them commonsense and neutral. It is this “hiding in plain sight” nature that intrigues me, as the practices that follow from neoliberal education policies often defy reason when considered outside of the ideological surround. This is because, as Willis (2008) reminds us, ideology works to reproduce and maintain the status quo by defining the parameters of legitimate discussion and convincing the public that what is contained within the dominant discourse is common sense, or within one’s best interest. An example of this idea would be the suggestion by some advocates of phonics instruction to limit children’s access to non-decodable text as they learn to read (Cummins, 2002, pp. 114-115), which seems irrational outside the logics of such an ideology.

To introduce this study, I begin by further framing neoliberal logics as a rationale for this work, illustrating their influence over my own entry into the teaching profession. Next, I recount a personal experience where the discourse of accountability infiltrated a school and classroom, before explaining the theories I draw on to make visible how discourses operate. I continue with the purpose of this study, including the research questions, before concluding with an overview of this dissertation.

Neoliberal Logics: You'd Be a Monster to Disagree

When I was a senior in high school, I enrolled in an elective course entitled “Minorities.” Though it may seem difficult to believe that an actual high school would offer a course with this title, I am not making this up to make a point about the minimal level of racial and ethnic diversity in my community. Rather, the course title is yet another illustration of how language works to construct realities, which will become apparent shortly. At the time, I do not recall thinking this was an absurd and incredibly reductive name for a course, and I looked forward to learning about experiences that were outside of those I encountered in my very white, highly conservative, upper-middle class suburban community. While in this course, I read Jonathon Kozol’s (1991) *Savage Inequalities*, a structural analysis that attempts to shed light on underlying causes of funding and resource disparities between urban and suburban schools in U.S. schools and the ongoing racial and socioeconomic segregation that continues after *Brown v. Board of Education* and civil rights legislation attempted to create more equal educational opportunities (Farmer-Hinton et al., 2013). I grew up knowing my parents elected to live in the community where I was raised because of the reputation of the public schools, but this was the first time I

deeply thought about the realities of public education in the United States. What I read in Kozol's book shocked and angered me, and four years later, I returned to the (one-sided) messages I received from his work to think again about education as a central context of inequality.

“One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education” (Kopp, 2001, p. xii). I cannot remember where I was when I first heard these words, the vision statement for Teach for America (TFA), but when I did, I knew that I had to be part of the movement to make this statement a reality. My mind flashed back to the pages of *Savage Inequalities*, and I thought to myself something along the lines of, “I attained an excellent education at the public schools I attended. All children should have an opportunity to have an education just like mine!” This thought was immediately followed by the realization that if I had experienced an excellent education as a student, surely, I could be a teacher who provided a classroom of students with an equally excellent education. After a few months of applying and interviewing, I was accepted into Teach for America in Baltimore, Maryland; and just like that, I was absorbed into an organization steeped in neoliberal logics. My naive entry into the teaching profession illustrates the problem with the neoliberal logics supporting the public education system in the United States. Who could possibly argue with a statement like, “One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education”? Or, No Child Left Behind? Or, Every Student Succeeds? You'd have to be a monster to disagree with these ideas. And you're not a monster, are you?

Though critical education scholars have relentlessly peeled back layers of policy rhetoric and benign- or positive-sounding statements like TFA's vision (e.g., Au, 2007, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019; Miller et al., 2022; White, 2016), it is extremely difficult to convince the general population that policies designed to combat educational inequality are, in fact, contributing to the perpetuation of such. There are many reasons for this, but a significant problem is the circular logic that is used to present one of neoliberal education reform's most insidious components, high-stakes standardized testing (HST), as an essential part of the solution in the fight toward equity in education. These tests are often only administered in mathematics and reading/language arts. In the latter, reading is assessed through selected-response and short-answer questions based on decontextualized grade-level aligned texts. The logic required to believe in the usefulness of these assessments begins by first adopting the view that learning to read is accomplished by acquiring a set of context-neutral, linearly-developed skills, which, once mastered, will result in achievement on standardized assessments. Then, you must follow a series of if-then statements that are part of such a tightly closed loop, it's difficult to decide where to start. I will start, though, with another neoliberal code: the achievement gap, and for the purposes of clarity, I will only consider test scores on a state-level reading assessment:

1. If there exists a persistent gap in test scores between demographic categories of students, then the groups of students with the lower test scores are not reading as well as the groups of students with higher test scores, presumably because they have not mastered the set of skills needed.

2. If the groups of students with the lower test scores are not reading as well as the groups of students with higher test scores, then the students with the lower test scores have not received adequate instruction in reading.
3. If the students with the lower test scores have not received adequate instruction in reading, then they should receive more direct instruction of reading skills that are necessary to succeed on the state assessment.
4. If the students with the lower test scores receive more direct instruction of reading skills that are necessary to succeed on the state assessment, then they will get higher test scores on the next assessment.

At this point, students will face another round of assessment, and if statement four proves to be false, that is the students who originally had lower test scores still have lower test scores, the cycle will begin again. This logic rests on several assumptions, including that the mechanism used to discover these gaps in achievement (the tests) are objective tools that measure what we believe they measure (actual reading ability or skill). As I will explain in chapter 2, this is a deeply flawed assessment, not least because these assessments are premised on scientific racism (e.g., Willis, 2008)

This is just one example of how the logic of neoliberal education reform functions to maintain an inequitable and unjust system wherein students, families, and often teachers, are blamed for poor achievement on HST, and a reason for increased intervention in public schools, often using market-based reforms, is created.

And so, I find myself here, all these years after the commonsense allure of TFA's vision statement started me on my path as an educator. Though I feel shame at

not having seen through the neoliberal logics as a young adult, I am driven now to understand how neoliberal logics circulate in discourse related to elementary literacy (reading)² policy and practice. What goes unexamined as part of the commonsense language of elementary literacy? I turn now to reflecting on my early years as a teacher to illustrate how discourses about elementary literacy recirculate.

Reading First

When I joined the 2005 cohort of Teach for America (TFA) corps members, I became a first-grade teacher in Baltimore, Maryland. Although I did not recognize it at the time, I had been indoctrinated into the discourse of neoliberalism through TFA's espousal that no excuses and high expectations for all students was all that was required to close the "achievement gap," which was TFA's central mission at the time and framed as the difference in student outcomes between the students who would sit in our classrooms in the fall, the vast majority of whom were students of color whose families were living below the federal poverty line, and their affluent white peers attending schools in other communities. TFA convinced us well-meaning, mostly white, recent college graduates from mostly middle-class families that the most important task we had ahead of us was increasing student test scores. They also told us that we were qualified for this job despite having almost no classroom experience as teachers and the fact that most of us had never been to Baltimore, let alone the

² I have added *reading* after the phrase *elementary literacy* here as an intentional move, as I believe it is critical to make clear what is meant by *literacy*. In this study, I aim to make visible how *literacy* has been discursively limited in many spaces, including the policy realm I examine in this study, to include only *reading print*. Throughout this study, I will be careful to name which literacy practices I speak about, as appropriate. I will use the construction as I have here, *literacy (reading)*, where I see *literacy* being deployed by others in ways that I believe are restricted to *reading print*.

neighborhoods in which our future schools lived. It is here that I circle back to the course title where I first read *Savage Inequalities*. I can never know the full extent of how it manifested, but there is no doubt that taking a course called Minorities reinforced my embodiment of the role of white savior in my classroom of all Black children. The language used in that high school classroom separated me from my students before I even met them. Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991) furthered this framing, as Farmer-Hinton and colleagues (2013) point out in their analysis of his portrayal of East St. Louis, Illinois, Kozol's outsider voice positions students within the community as one-dimensional victims, which "may prompt teachers to take a missionary approach to teaching in urban centers like East St. Louis in an effort to save students from their communities" (pp. 8-9). Although I do not question my genuine love and care for the students and my desire for them to be successful in my classroom, it can also be true that I undoubtedly was imposing my views of success on them, and I also accepted uncritically the methods of teaching I was told to employ in the classroom.

And what methods were these? This was 2005, just five years since the release of the National Reading Panel's (NRP) report advocating for the explicit, systematic, direct instruction of phonemic awareness and phonics in the early grades, as part of the five components of effective reading instruction—the remaining three being fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This was also just after NCLB had been enacted, along with the Reading First program, which offered grants to states who used *scientifically* and *evidence-based* reading programs. Although I cannot remember the exact details, I do remember getting materials labeled "Reading First", and most

importantly, Baltimore City Public School System had just gotten a new literacy curriculum for elementary schools, funded through Reading First. In the week before school started, I sat with hundreds of other elementary school teachers in a sweltering high school cafeteria and learned how to implement the Open Court literacy curriculum with fidelity. I learned all about the five components of reading endorsed by the National Reading Panel and enshrined in the Open Court curriculum, and as a first-grade teacher there was a heavy emphasis on systematic, explicit phonics instruction. The curriculum even came with dozens of consumable decodable books for the kids to read and take home after we learned a new sound-spelling combination. What we did not develop in this training, however, was any pedagogy related to connecting with students about their own lived literacy practices. Literacy was not framed as a sociocultural practice, but rather a set of skills that I was responsible for delivering to my students.

Upon arriving at school armed with the Open Court materials, the teachers were told by our administrators in no uncertain terms that we needed to follow the scope and sequence provided in the curriculum. As a first-year teacher, I had the support of two experienced first-grade teammates, and they informed me that I just had to make it look like I was adhering to the curriculum by posting student work in the hall labeled with the correct Maryland State Standard for the district supervisor to see during his walkthroughs. By 2005, the pressures of NCLB legislation were acutely felt in schools like mine in West Baltimore, and though my first-grade students were not spared a state-wide standardized test in the spring, only the students in third through fifth grades took the Maryland State Assessment, which counted toward our

school's official evaluation. These older students' test scores held serious consequences, and as a result I was largely left alone by the administrators whose attention was targeted on third, fourth and fifth grade classroom teachers in an effort to boost scores in whatever way possible. No one came to check if I was on a specific lesson on a given day or if my lesson matched my teammates across the hall. I was learning fast what mattered in a world of HST and accountability, and it certainly had nothing to do with my students' as individual literate beings.

Making AYP: Neoliberal Discourse in Action

The morning routine at my first school in Baltimore illustrates the way these pressures permeated our existence and made clear just what our purpose was as teachers and students. Every morning, the public address system would crackle to life, signaling my students and I to stand as the first bars of Whitney Houston's stunning rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner filled the air. After the national anthem was played, we joined with one of our administrators in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance before a string of announcements was read by the administrator. These announcements always concluded with a rousing reminder that we needed to make AYP that year and thus we were expected to work hard and focus on our schoolwork. The actual phrase, "We need to make AYP," was declared every single day from August until testing began in March to a building of pre-K through fifth grade students with no context and no further explanation, not even a mention of the words for which the letters AYP stood. Though no longer used after NCLB's reauthorization as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) under then-President Barack Obama, AYP stands for adequate yearly progress, and in 2005 it was the magic number by which each school's test

scores needed to improve each year for the school to be on track to meet the unrealistic goal of every student meeting the proficiency benchmark on state standardized tests by the end of the 2013-2014 school year (NCLB, 2002). Needless to say, my five- and six-year-old students had no idea what AYP meant and why their principal or assistant principal told them every day that it was our central focus as a school community. Thankfully, steeped as I was in the discourse of accountability and laser-focused on demolishing the achievement gap, I was not so far gone at that stage that I ever felt it was important to explain the concept to them, though it is revealing that none of them ever asked.

Recognize. Disrupt. Reconstruct.: Understanding Discourse

How does a phrase such as “adequate yearly progress” enter into the daily discourse of an elementary school in Baltimore? Finding an answer requires an understanding of how humans use language. Scholars who study discourse recognize that humans use language to do things. This includes anything imaginable from sending a text message to tell a friend you will be late to an actor repeating the lines of a script to bring to life a character to a teacher explaining the procedures for moving into small reading groups during an elementary literacy block. Scholars who study discourse from a critical perspective recognize one of the key principles of language holds that language is used to construct power relations in society and is also constructed by such relations. In other words, from a critical perspective, language is not neutral, rather there are rules governing who can say what, when, and to whom, and these rules are in large part determined through power relations in society. Relatedly, critical language scholars understand that these rules vary across settings,

and the resulting set of language possibilities is referred to as a *discourse* (I elaborate on these ideas in chapters 2 and 3). These discourses vary across social settings such that there is a medical discourse, an auto repair discourse, a classroom discourse, and so on. Depending on a researcher's interest, a discourse may be more or less specific such that there is a pediatrician discourse, a Volvo repair discourse, or an elementary literacy classroom discourse. Discourse changes over time in response to a variety of factors, including changes to policy. At times, this change can be subtle and hardly noticeable, while in other circumstances a sudden influx of language may occur requiring rapid learning of new terms and ideas. The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 is an example of the latter. Countless phrases, such as "adequate yearly progress," entered the discourse of American public schools rather quickly. As I explained earlier, these words and phrases out of context seem harmless, if not benevolent, and thus were incorporated into the discourse relatively smoothly. After all, who doesn't want to see a school make adequate yearly progress? Two decades later, the discourse of American public schools is saturated with words, phrases, and concepts that constitute a discourse of accountability. A discourse that would not exist without accountability policies and practices codified through NCLB. As a former elementary literacy teacher and coach with deep belief in the liberatory power of literacy, I am interested in understanding just how saturated the discourse that circulates in and around elementary literacy classrooms is with such neoliberal-coded discourse. As I explain more in chapter 3, the impact of policies and practices carried out through neoliberal discourse in literacy classrooms are many and severe. One example I often mention when explaining my research to others is the concept of

“low students” and “high students.” Spend enough time in any elementary school across the country, and I would be surprised if you did not hear some version of these phrases uttered. What does it mean for a child to be considered “low” or “high”? Relative to what? And, even if the child never hears those phrases spoken about them, does a teacher interact differently with a child once they have been positioned as “low”? This is neoliberal discourse that must be examined and disrupted.

In my study, I draw from critical poststructural theories of discourse that understand language as implicated with power as described above. Critical theories of discourse provide the foundation for critical discourse analysis (CDA), the primary methodological tool for my study. Importantly, these critical views of discourse recognize that power can be oppressive and creative, and unearthing existing discourses is a crucial step in working to resist and break free from their harmful impacts. In this study, I draw on critical poststructural theories of discourse and the related lens of queer theory to examine, disrupt, and ultimately reconstruct literacy discourse in policy, media, and classroom contexts. As I elaborate in chapter 2, I draw inspiration from what queer of Color theorist Muñoz (2009) describes as the queer lens’ insistence on “doing for and toward the future” (p. 1).

Why this Study?

In fall 2022, I had my first experience teaching a course titled *School and Society*. This is an undergraduate course that asks students to think critically about the ways school and society are implicated with one another. As the semester progressed and students read powerful critiques of public school in the United States written by well-regarded scholars, I came to a troubling realization. Though many of the texts we

read were published well over a decade ago— some as early as the 1960s and 1970s— they all decried similar aspects of public schooling that persist to the present. The terms used to describe unequal resources (Biddle & Berliner, 2003; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2006) and class- and race-based variances in instructional methods (Anyon, 1980; Baldwin, 1963/2008) were not identical, but the underlying constructs were. This was a stark reminder of the need to continually unearth and examine the discourses circulating in and about schools. The policies may change over time, but the insidious pull toward maintaining the status quo is unrelenting. The discourses that construct what is (im)possible in schools and other institutions remain one of the most powerful tools for preserving the system of white supremacy governing schools and society, hence the repetition of familiar themes in critiques of public education over time.

Though the texts used in *School and Society*, and many others, lay bare the long history of inequality in schools, we are now in an era where state and local governments are seeking increased control over what can be taught in public schools. The discursive move of choice within the area of early literacy (reading) education is to employ the power of *science*. The science of reading (SOR) dominates discussions of early literacy (reading) policy and practice at all levels of engagement (see *Reading Research Quarterly*'s two special issues devoted entirely to this topic published in 2020 and 2021, respectively). The adoption of policies, programs, and practices that align with SOR has ushered in yet another phase in the seemingly-endless era of accountability guided by neoliberal logics of meritocracy and acontextual solutions to localized challenges. It is important, then, to examine how neoliberal discourse is

responding to these changes, and crucially, how it impacts teachers and students in this time and place.

Research Questions

The description of my first years as a teacher shows a clear example of how language shapes and is shaped by the social context within which it is used. Outside of the context of neoliberal education reform, particularly NCLB legislation, AYP has no meaning nor consequence. Within such a system, however, this term carries significant consequence for schools. I am interested in understanding how changes to early literacy (reading) policies in the state have impacted the discourse circulating through various spaces engaging in conversations about literacy in schools. To explore these ideas, I ask the following research questions:

1. How are *literacy* and *literacy instruction* constructed in the discourse surrounding a state-level early literacy (reading) policy?
2. How are *students* and *teachers* constructed in the discourse surrounding a state-level early literacy (reading) policy?
 - a. For both questions, I ask what is made possible and impossible through these constructions and in the relations of power present?

In seeking answers to these questions, I examine discourse produced within three spaces: 1) the macropolicy level (i.e., within the policy itself and as produced by policymakers at the state and local levels), 2) the local media, and 3) in conversation with an elementary school teacher.

This research contributes to the body of scholarship critical of neoliberal reform policies in shaping public education and offers particular insight into how teachers negotiate complex and shifting identities within such contexts. In the next chapter, I present the conceptual framework that supports this study, including both the bodies of knowledge and theoretical foundations that have guided my analysis. I then turn to a description of the methodology that I have carried out in executing the study. Here, I describe my own stance and positionality toward the work, the research context and teacher collaborator, Samantha, as well as the data collection and analysis procedures used throughout the study. The next three chapters, chapters 4, 5, and 6, present detailed findings from my critical discourse analysis of the macropolitical, local media, and elementary literacy classroom spaces, respectively. Chapter 7 brings the study to a close with a discussion and conclusion pointing toward possibilities for discursive reconstruction, including specific implications and recommendations for policy and practice.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

I situate this study in a conceptual framework built from critical theoretical traditions concerned with the recognition, examination, dismantling, and reconstruction of systems of power. I layer critical poststructural theories of discourse and the commitments I draw from queer theory to inform a methodological design using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the discourses circulating in and about a state-level early literacy (reading) policy.

In this chapter, I begin by describing the critical poststructural theories that inform my understanding of discourse, foregrounding the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault and its impact on Norman Fairclough's development of critical discourse analysis (CDA). I then turn to aspects of queer theory, particularly Kumashiro's work and concepts that have been applied to education scholarship, particularly in critical literacy studies, which enrich the theoretical framing central to my discourse-centered analytical methods. In considering scholarship relevant to this study, I begin by examining how literacy has been theorized, considering its framing as a functional, sociocultural, and critical/political phenomenon. I then move to a brief history of how literacy instruction has taken place in schools. Throughout this analysis, the overlap of policy and practice in public elementary school spaces in the United States cannot be avoided, as political regimes and discourses, most recently neoliberalism, have shaped what is valued and silenced. Then I connect to relevant literature to understand teachers' work to construct their identities within this restrictive environment. I end this section by looking at two constructs *crisis* and *science* to situate each in historical and contemporary contexts, as these are important

to the analysis in this study. I end the chapter with an exploration of how CDA has been taken up in educational scholarship.

Theory

Critical Poststructural Theories of Discourse

Just as there are numerous strands of critical theory rooted in critical thought (Gottesman, 2016), the theoretical underpinnings of the critical study of language are plentiful (Rogers et al., 2016). Early scholarship in this area includes important historical works by Bakhtin (1981), DuBois (1903/1990, 1940/2007), and Woodson (1933/2011), among others. These works are important to note, as the voices of scholars of Color and those who are not based in Western academic traditions are often erased from the historical lineage (Rabaka, 2008; Rogers et al., 2005).

In the 1970s, Halliday (1975, 1978; cited in Rogers et al., 2005), developed a theory of systemic functional linguistics which emerged along with the linguistic turn in the social sciences and an increase in poststructural and postmodern theories, thus bringing linguistic theories and methods into a critical phase. Halliday's theory, and related linguistic disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and ethnography of communication, drew interest from sociologists and cultural theorists as a mechanism to bring a micro-analytical lens to the analysis of macro-structures in order to understand how the two were implicated in the construction of social practices (Rogers et al., 2005). From this merging of critical social theory and linguistic analysis, Fairclough (2001) developed one of the most commonly-cited descriptions of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which draws heavily on a Foucauldian theory of discourse. As I will elaborate in chapter 3, I draw heavily on Fairclough's (2001, 2003)

approach to CDA as a method, and thus situate my understanding of discourse within this Foucauldian tradition. In particular, I find Foucault's conceptions of discourse, discipline, and governmentality to be useful foundations upon which to layer analysis. After situating Foucault's work more broadly, I turn to each of these three concepts.

Education scholars have drawn on Foucault over time, as his work has helped to illuminate the subjectivities of students and teachers, as well as constructed a framework where education can be viewed as both "disciplines and practices" (Peters & Besley, 2007, p. 7). This viewpoint is explained, in part, through the four primary types of "technologies" that emerge throughout his work:

(1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988, p. 18)

Foucault's conception of power as expressed in *Discipline and Punish* (1975/2004) is found throughout society, having both positive and negative effects. In this view, power is not something one has, rather exercising power relies on the agency of dominated subjects, and power is exercised only within a system where individuals are

free to act according to a set of possibilities but choose to act in accordance with sanctioned behavior, often due to an acceptance of normative discourse.

Discourse

For Foucault, discourses are implicated with power and knowledge, and sanctioned behavior emerges through discourse. In Foucauldian framing, discourse may be thought of as “the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation” (Foucault, 1971/2010, p. 107), such as the discourse of public school and the related science of reading (SOR) discourse. For Foucault, power and social control may be exercised through limits on who gets to speak as an expert in a particular society or system. The discursive practices of definition, description, and categorization as carried out by those in authority hold considerable import, as the classification of people, including students and teachers, is a first step in gaining permission to act upon them, as in the act of enforcing discipline (Cameron, 2001).

Discipline

Such disciplinary power, as conceived by Foucault, is made possible through limits on what can be known and said and what is unknown and unsaid. Foucault calls these patterns *discursive formations* (Foucault, 1971/2010). Discursive formations engage power through the production of knowledge claims that the system of power deems desirable. When a discursive system creates the conditions whereby subjects feel under threat of surveillance, the conditions for a disciplined society are realized (Foucault, 1975/2004). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault considers the mechanisms necessary to create such a society by drawing on Bentham’s architectural figure, the Panopticon. This structure creates the conditions necessary for “the perfection of

power,” wherein a central tower allows for the unobstructed surveillance of subjects below (Foucault, 1975/2004 p. 201). When the subject is aware of the possibility that they may be surveilled at any moment, the resulting effect is a sense of permanent surveillance, even if the surveillance is in reality not exercised continuously (Foucault, 1975/2004).

Foucault’s articulation of such a system of surveillance provides a useful frame to think about how neoliberal discourse operates in schools. While Erickson (2004) argues that Foucault’s theorizing of disciplinary power is flawed in providing no room for individual agency, I believe these ideas are helpful in designing research that makes neoliberal discourse visible and comprehensible to teachers. Erickson’s (2004) central critique of Foucault’s use of the Panopticon is that this image suggests a society wherein surveillance is permanent and unavoidable, thus creating a pessimistic view of the possibility of resistance toward social change. I argue that the use of the Panopticon metaphor in considering surveillance in schools lies not in a reality that teachers and students are literally under constant surveillance, but rather that neoliberal discourse and the material realities of testing and achievement data, along with increasingly standardized systems of teacher evaluation (Ruecker, 2022), create conditions whereby the threat of surveillance influences teachers to adjust their behavior in a form of self-discipline. Thus, the effect of such “visible and unverifiable” power (Foucault, 1975/2004, p. 201) is that teachers take on the role of both discipliner and disciplined. This is a concrete example of Foucault’s (1975/2004) recognition that power only exists when subjects have the ability to resist but do not.

Governmentality

Expanding on the idea of power and discipline acting with and through the subject, Foucault uses the term “governmentality” (Foucault, 1988, p. 19) to describe the interaction of technologies (or techniques) of power with technologies of the self. As Doherty (2007) explains:

governmentality is as much about what subjects do to themselves as what is done to them. As Peters (2001) puts it, ‘government in this sense only becomes possible at the point at which policing and administration stops; at the point where government and self-government coincide and coalesce.’ (p. 197)

Conceiving power and discipline in this way complicates the notion of how teachers are positioned to resist accountability structures in their classrooms. Recognizing the complex relationship between the governed (teachers) and the governing (school- and district-based administrators, policy-makers at the local, state, and federal level) potentially makes the idea of resistance by teachers less accessible. On the other hand, this conception of government and power relying on self-government may also be useful in understanding the possibilities of resistance, as Foucault’s later ideas suggest.

Gordon (1991) contends Foucault’s later work exhibits two strands of optimism related to his conceptions of government, or discipline. First, Foucault expresses the idea that a method of governing (i.e., accountability policies) may only be possible if the underlying logics appear rational—not just to those governing (i.e., school- and district-based administrators, policy-makers at the local, state, and federal level) but to the governed (i.e., teachers), as well. This is aligned to the notion of “commonsense” rationality central to the idea of ideological hegemony (Britzman,

1995; Gramsci, 1995; see also Jacobson & Bach, 2022). Secondly, Foucault's work supports the assertion that "ideas which go without saying, which make possible existing practices and our existing conceptions of ourselves, may be more *contingent, recent* and *modifiable* than we think" (Gordon, 1991, p. 48, emphasis mine). Taking these two strands together, Gordon argues that governed individuals' willingness to live as subjects of the government is of increasing consequence to the quality of the relationship between the two. Perhaps a source for Gordon's discussion of Foucault's optimism, in a 1982 interview with Rux Martin (1988), Foucault stated:

My role—and that is too emphatic a word—is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. (p. 10)

Foucault's analysis—and Gordon's optimistic treatment of such—is crucial to my study's aims. Though it can be challenging to see the optimism in the state of K-12 schooling in times of neoliberal reform, using CDA to make visible the ideologies underlying the disciplining discourses of accountability provides a path for teachers to examine, question, and reconstruct such discourses. In this way, what was once considered the "evidence" for success or failure, may be seen for what it is—the construction of an unjust and unequal system. I turn now to consider how queer theory may be layered onto these critical poststructural theories of discourse to further trouble the very concepts underlying neoliberal discourse.

Queer Theory

I am drawn to queer theory as an analytical lens to support a critical unpacking of discourses surrounding a state-level elementary literacy policy. While it could be said that poststructuralism—an intellectual precursor of queer theory—offers sufficient support for the destabilizing analysis I am interested in, I am inspired by Rabaka’s (2008) critique of contemporary critical theorists who weaken “critical potency and radical potential of their theories” (p. 3) by using a single discipline or lens. As a productively disruptive approach to considering the construction of normalization (Britzman, 1995), the “queer” in queer theory is not always meant to connote an identity category, but also operates as a verb, calling on researchers to trouble traditional epistemological stances by taking up a position outside of them and attempting to break them down (Meyer, 2007). As a foundational concern, queer theory seeks to destabilize and disrupt claims to stable categories, resulting in scholarly work encouraging the use of queer theory beyond a focus on gender and sexual identity (Somerville, 2014). Thus, though many studies employ queer theory to conceptualize how gender and sexual identity are constructed through heteronormative practices in institutions, such as schools (as, indeed, I and coauthors have done, see Caasi, Yerkes, & Dutro, 2023), queering other identity categories such as race, class, or being classified as il/literate or “struggling reader,” are of interest to queer theorists. What I find so profoundly unpretentious about queer theory and those who embrace its commitments is its rejection of “rigidity and consolidation” (Coleman et al., 2022, p. 263). In fact, Jagose (2005) states, “queer’s opposition to the normative is its one consistent characteristic” (p. 1981). Thus, while gender and sexuality remain central to

the theory, “queer theory has increasingly structured inquiry into the ways in which various categories of difference inflect and transform each other” (Jagose, 2005, p. 1984), recognizing the ways that identity categories—themselves unstable constructions with very real social consequences—implicate one another in unpredictable ways. Muhammad and Mosley (2021) echo this sentiment in their plea for identity and equity learning in literacy, saying we:

cannot talk about equity without also discussing racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression that are at the root of inequity in schools. These forms of oppression and others can impact students’ literacy practices. (p. 190)

As I will describe in more detail below, the neoliberal education practices that are enacted in elementary literacy classrooms as a result of policies like the state-level policy at the heart of this study reproduce forms of oppression that limit access to equitable and liberatory literacy practices. This oppression, as Muhammad and Mosley (2021) importantly point out is not limited to one identity-defined group or another, nor could it ever be, as queer theory makes visible the limits of such identity-based categories to explain the full extent of marginalization in a multiply-oppressive society. Samantha, the second-grade teacher who I collaborate with in this study, recognizes this in the work she does every day with her students. Her commitments to LGBTQ+ advocacy alongside a nationally-recognized center for gender and sexual diversity in education and her ongoing advocacy as an ally for LGBTQ+ students and communities solidify my decision to apply a queer lens to my study.

Queer theory in education has importantly been interested in how schools as sites of the repetition and citation of discursive formations open up inquiry into how

the very purposes of school might be reconstructed to see learning as a process that is not about “closure and satisfaction” but rather about “disruption and opening up to further learning” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 43). This is a useful conceptual frame to consider for this study, as neoliberal logics promote the idea of learning, particularly early literacy (reading) learning, as an efficient process of acquiring discrete, measurable foundational reading skills. Kumashiro’s (2000, 2002) theory of antioppressive education draws on what he refers to as “contemporary feminist and queer readings of psychoanalysis” (2000, p. 43) to suggest that to enact a truly transformative education, resistance to change must be replaced with a desire for change and “learning to be unsatisfied with what is being learned, said, and known” (p. 43). Kumashiro is theorizing about antioppressive education in the context of working against the type of harm that is reproduced in schools against the Other, defined as:

those groups that are traditionally marginalized in society, i.e., that are *other than* the norm, such as students of color, students from under- or unemployed families, students who are female, or male but not stereotypically ‘masculine,’ and students who are, or are perceived to be queer. (2000, p. 26)

But I do not think that his conclusions are less apt for second-grade phonics lessons than for high school social studies classes. I am interested in applying these ideas to consider what resistance might look like in ways that I do not yet know nor expect.

Education researchers have taken up queer theory as a framework to guide research in a variety of ways, and I see generative possibility in combining queer theory’s commitments to troubling what is taken for granted and moving beyond

binaries with the analytical tools of critical discourse analysis to deconstruct neoliberal discourse. For instance, accountability policies have normalized a system where students are ranked and sorted, often manifesting in the elementary literacy classroom in binary categories such as low readers/high readers (Brezicha et al., 2022).

Additionally, teachers are often positioned within this system as either resisting or conforming, another harmful and reductive binary that fails to capture the complex decision-making teachers engage in when determining how to respond to the pressures faced within this system. Importantly, the theoretical framing provided through a queer lens also brings focus to the often-overlooked reality that the discourse circulating in an elementary literacy classroom within a neoliberal accountability regime is never fully implicated in nor fully exonerated from the harm inherent in such a system. Thus, attention to the *positive* and *antioppressive* discourse is essential to this work. The tools of CDA, combined with an explicit attention to queering these and other simplistic labels, provides an opportunity to deconstruct this language, revealing the work it does to reify (and also resist) deficit beliefs about students, teachers, and schools. Once identified and deconstructed, language can be reconstructed that embraces the uncertainty and infinite possibilities inherent in antioppressive instructional practices (Kumashiro, 2002).

Coleman et al. (2022) affirm queer literacy research as “a fluid, shifting, contingent praxis” (p. 250), suggesting the intergenerational scholars who share authorship in this important article believe that the field is best served by a broad view of how the commitments of queer theory might be taken up in literacy research. It is

precisely such inherent resistance to limiting pressures that draws me to the use of queer theory as a productively disruptive lens in my research.

Starting from these theoretical frameworks allows me to put my research study in conversation with the key principles of *discourse, discipline, governmentality, troubling binaries, and opening space for possibility and uncertainty* as I seek to understand how neoliberal discourse circulates within and about an elementary literacy classroom. I turn now to examine the research literature in which other scholars have considered ideas related to my research questions.

Review of the Literature

In building the framework for this study, I have engaged with a range of literature to support my understanding of neoliberal discourse in elementary literacy spaces. Below, I trace these ideas, beginning with a review of the most common theoretical positionings of literacy as taken up in educational scholarship. This sets the foundation for a brief history of literacy education in U.S. public schools, with an emphasis on how reading has been taught. Within this history, assessment policy and practice are woven through, as the evolution of these two constructs are inextricably linked. As the impacts of neoliberal reform on literacy teaching and learning come into focus, I turn to themes across scholarship that point to how teachers resist the disciplinary powers within the structures of accountability. This resistance leads into a discussion of how teacher identities are formed and negotiated. I then look closely at two constructs that are central to the analysis and arguments I put forth in this study: *crisis* and *science*. These precede the conclusion of this chapter where I consider how

CDA in education research has evolved over time, including a discussion of how this body of research informed elements of my research design.

Literacy

Literacy is an impossibly complex idea that, when evoked, almost certainly conjures a different meaning for each individual—a meaning that is situated and thus shifts as soon as another context is called up. As such, I limit my discussion of literacy in the following sections to those that will support my present inquiry. I begin by considering the theoretical framings of literacy that education scholars (and others) have taken up that are relevant to my research questions, findings, and analysis. Here, I am using literacy broadly, and when I am speaking of a particular component of literacy—reading print, reading one’s surroundings, writing, etc.—I will be specific in my language. Understanding these theoretical stances supports my analysis as I turn toward how literacy education in public elementary schools in the United States has changed over time in concert with shifting political forces and relations of power. This history is important to understanding the current political context for the science of reading (SOR) discourse that saturates talk of early literacy (reading) practices across macropolitical, media, and classroom spaces in the context of the Colorado READ Act at the center of my study.

Literacy: A Set of Skills or Contextual Practices?

The coarsest distinction in conceptualizing literacy for the purposes of this study is between viewing literacy as a set of context-neutral, transferable skills or a collection of social, contextualized practices linked to culture and power. The former is

often associated with functionalist aims for productive citizenry, while the latter describes a range of perspectives that fall under sociocultural views of literacy.

Functional Literacy. When literacy is viewed as serving primarily functional objectives, the benefits of literacy are limited to productive participation in the economy through increased value in the workforce (Lambirth, 2011). As such, only one version of literacy skills exists under this paradigm, and children can be expected to develop these skills linearly along a clearly defined path. Since literacy is not deemed to have any real connection to culture, there is no expectation that one would deviate from this path due to differences in lived experience. In addition to the elements I have described, Lambirth (2011) draws on Hannon (2000) in describing functional literacy as fixed, measurable, transferable, inherently value free, and believed to be the result of individual learning (p. 71).

Autonomous Model. One form of functional literacy, the *autonomous model*, was developed by Brian Street (1984) and others as part of the New Literacy Studies (see below). This view of literacy holds that in order to become *literate*, one must acquire a discrete set of neutral, universal skills that may be directly taught (Lambirth, 2011; K. Perry, 2012; Street, 2003). Central to this stance are the beliefs that these literacy skills can be applied in all contexts (Lambirth, 2011) and “Literacy is something that one either has or does not have; people are either literate or illiterate” (K. Perry, 2012, p. 53). From a critical sociocultural perspective, these reductionist views are flawed, as they mask ideological views of literacy from the dominant culture.

Sociocultural Literacy. Multiple theoretical perspectives emphasize the social and cultural aspects of literacy practices. Adherents to these worldviews honor various forms of lived knowledge and literacies and see the importance of blurring school and home literacies in instructional practices (K. Perry, 2012). In K. Perry's (2012) work distinguishing between several forms of sociocultural literacy, she recognizes Street, Heath, Barton and Hamilton, and Purcell-Gates as important scholars in the field. To this list I add Dutro, Nogueron-Liu, Muhammad, Rogers, Toliver, and many others. Under this theoretical umbrella are New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003), multiliteracies, and critical literacy.

New Literacy Studies. As I mentioned above, New Literacy Studies (NLS) was developed by Street (1984) and others to question traditional reading and writing instructional practices (Lambirth, 2011). The scholarly agenda considers what it means to frame literacy as a group of social practices, rather than a set of skills. Within NLS, the autonomous model of literacy (discussed above), is contrasted with the *ideological model* of literacy; the latter of which positions literacy within social, historical, cultural, and political contexts that are never neutral. This approach to literacy assumes multiple literacies exist over space and time with variable power relations and is thus interested in problematizing what counts as literacy in a given context (Street, 2003). NLS scholars ask questions about what people do with reading, writing, and texts in the real world, as well as the reasons for why they engage in literacy practices, with the recognition that these practices are shaped by factors that are steeped in the socioemotional and affective realm (K. Perry, 2012; Street, 2003).

Multiliteracies. As with other sociocultural perspectives of literacy, the theory of multiliteracies emphasizes real-world contexts where people engage with literacy practices, as well as how power relationships inform literacy and literacy learning (K. Perry, 2012). Emerging from the New London Group (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), multiliteracies takes an expansive approach to text in arguing for more research and exploration to be done with multimodal text and modes of communication beyond language. There is not a rejection within multiliteracies scholarship of print, rather the argument is for an expanded understanding of literacy that embraces print or text as one of many forms of representation (K. Perry, 2012). This stands in sharp contrast to the current construction of literacy within popular science of reading discourse and related policy mandates that construct literacy as limited to reading print, thus erasing the multiple modes seen as valuable within a multiliteracy framework.

Critical Literacy. I have read many accounts of critical literacies (Ahmed, 2016; Janks, 2014; Luke, 2012), and I agree with Rogers and O’Daniels (2015) statement that critical literacy “resists being defined and categorized” (p. 63). Thus, in describing critical literacy, I draw inspiration from Dr. Reiland Rabaka (2008) in his assessment of contemporary critical theory as being interested in expanding to be “in dialogue with theory and phenomena it has heretofore woefully neglected” (p. 3) to mix together the voices of scholars I have found embody the elements of critical literacy I find most persuasive and inspiring. I consider Paulo Freire’s (2020/1970) ideas of liberatory pedagogy to be an important foundation to critical literacy. Emerging in the 1970s, these ideas provide a base upon which critiques of oppressive structures in schools have been built (Tierney & Pearson, 2021). Lankshear and

McLaren (1993) put forth a definition of critical literacy centering practices that support engagement with multiple literacies in the real world, rather than a rote view of reading and writing as it appeared in schools (Tierney & Pearson, 2021). Crucial to my stance is critical literacy's insistence on questioning the power relations inherent in literacy practices that push educators to understand that readers' interactions with text make (im)possible the identities and voices available to them (Moje, et al., 2009). I also believe that critical literacy can be viewed as an embodiment of culturally sustaining pedagogy, as defined by Paris (2012) as "seek[ing] to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 93). I also believe that my view of critical literacy will never be static, as I continue to expand to capture new ideas like the embodied elements of literacy that exist beyond words as suggested by M. Perry (2024) when she writes of pluriversal literacies.

Brief History of Literacy Education and Assessment

Understanding the theoretical framings of literacy is an important foundation to considering how literacy education and testing have evolved over time in the United States. In her exquisitely written history of reading comprehension research and testing in the United States, Willis (2008) describes her subject as "fine threads that are woven through a tapestry" (p. xxv). The tapestry, in this metaphor, is the entirety of historical context within which the story of reading comprehension research and testing is woven through. At times, certain threads are prominent, while at other times they blend into the sociocultural fabric and are hardly noticed. Either way, there are always innumerable strands impacting how the story shows up the way it does. I find

this metaphor resonant, as selecting which threads to bring forth here has been difficult as it is well beyond the scope of this study to examine each in detail. In the sections below, I pull out several to situate the current moment in elementary literacy instruction and the political and cultural context influencing it.

I think it is important to begin with a reminder that schools in the United States have always been sites for the transmission of ideologies about literacy (Willis, 2008, p. 53). In the mid-19th century, the Common School movement sought to expand public schooling in the United States, where literacy served to transmit a common culture (Willis, 2008). Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, the American government used schools as a tool to eliminate the cultures and languages of indigenous peoples including Native Americans and Mexicans. In many cases, these communities resisted this attempt at dehumanization by creating their own schools which used literacy to maintain cultural practices (Willis, 2008). During this time, Black Americans engaged in literary societies that emphasized literacy as a way to improve their lives and fight injustice (Muhammad, 2020). Thus, this time period was one of both formal and informal learning within spaces that both marginalized and celebrated nondominant literacy learning.

Within the realm of the academic, it is difficult to overstate the influence of psychology on literacy research and instruction in the United States. In the late 1800s and early 1900s psychology gained ascendancy as the dominant field shaping American reading scholarship. In this era, researchers portrayed the reading process as behavioral and mechanical, whereby individual skills could be observed, measured, and improved through oral reading. Testing developments produced new ways to

measure reading, intelligence, and other variables related to knowledge (Tierney & Pearson, 2021). Based largely on results of correlational studies, four foundational developments from this time had long range impact on literacy, several of which are still seen today. First, diagnostic reading tests were developed, with the Gray Oral Reading Test considered to be the first such test. Second, the idea of “reading readiness” emerged from correlational studies that purported to identify the necessary skills for pre-reading. Third, the concept of readability assumed a fixed relationship between text and reader such that they could be matched based on a student’s measurable reading ability. Fourth, studies showed that vocabulary was one of the strongest predictors of a reader’s comprehension, leading to the conclusion that teaching vocabulary was an effective strategy to teach reading comprehension (Tierney & Pearson, 2021).

Another ideologically significant idea with far-reaching consequences came in 1915. Frederick Kelly, a researcher interested in improving reading comprehension tests, provided guidance for test questions for silent reading test questions that had “*only one interpretation and only one correct answer*” (Willis, 2008, p. 143, emphasis original). These tests were the first to have students make decisions between alternatives, or “multiple choice.” Willis persuasively argues:

The entire field of reading comprehension has evolved based on Kelly’s notion of ‘wholly right or wholly wrong answer for decades. . . . Underserved students who have been required to participate in reading comprehension testing using this inadequate format, whose culture and languages are not reflected in the content and context of the tests, undoubtedly have suffered. (p. 147)

During this time, literacy included reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and related subskills, though reading and writing were not taught together, as it was not believed that they reinforced one another (Tierney & Pearson, 2021).

In the 1950s, reading scholar William Gray advocated for curriculum of reading skills taught through daily leveled reading selections. The prevailing view held that students as readers were constructed by assembling isolated skills through guided instruction and testing along each step of the process. Testing measured students' reading ability and supported the use of small reading groups to differentiate instruction (Tierney & Pierson, 2021). During this period from the 1950s through the 1960s, assessment, including standardized testing, was considered low-stakes, and school districts, rather than states, were responsible for purchasing and administering tests (Koretz, 2008).

In the 1960s, two key federal actions drove changes in educational assessment. First, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 established the Title I program to improve the performance of low-income schools. The law established the Title I Evaluation and Reporting System (TIERS), which utilized standardized tests. Second, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was launched as a periodic assessment of nationally representative samples of students. Though NAEP testing was intentionally designed to inhibit comparisons across states and is currently unable to be used for accountability purposes, the new tests signaled to the American public that testing is important and necessary for measuring school progress (Koretz, 2008).

Just past the middle of the twentieth century, societal shifts in the United States and beyond brought increased attention to reading as a key lever for increasing equality and opportunity for all students and improving the ability of the United States to compete in an increasingly globalized economy. The United States Congress' "near obsession with finding the 'best method' of teaching reading" (Willis, 2015, p. 31) at this time played an important role in positioning particular literacies as more valuable than others. One large scale, government-supported study undertaken to find the "best" method to teach reading was the First-Grade Reading Studies. At the time (and perhaps even still), the report produced from this set of studies was considered an authoritative voice in determining "no single program of teaching beginning reading was superior to another" (Willis, 2015, p. 32). Left largely unsaid was the fact that the study did not include research that attended to cultural, economic, and formal education differences, effectively constructing beginning readers as "White, six-year-olds, middle-class, and English dominant" (Willis, 2015, p. 32). Publishing research claiming to speak to factors that influence children's development as readers without mentioning any structural economic and social inequalities that might impact their educational experiences is not only immoral from an equity lens, but also unethical from a research perspective, as it ignores empirical evidence that has bearing on the results put forth (Gee, 2001). Despite the significant flaws with the research aimed at finding the best method to teach reading, two important instructional approaches gained support. First, it became clear that teaching reading and writing were supportive of one another, and second, attending to comprehension in the early grades was just as important as focusing on foundational reading skills. This latter idea

pushed against a long-held and still stubbornly-entrenched maxim in elementary reading instruction that learning to read must happen in grades K-3 before reading to learn begins in fourth grade. As Tierney and Pearson (2021) report, in “a number of longitudinal studies, those students taught using a code versus more meaning-centered approaches often floundered as more emphasis was given to reading for understanding” (p. 31). Note that the dismantling of this notion began in the 1960s, yet it still persists today.

In the 1970s, the constructivist turn finally brought the philosophical support needed to support the idea that reading is an interactive event between reader and text, not just an act of translation by the reader of what is on the page (Tierney & Pearson, 2021).

Ironically, just as readers were beginning to be viewed as more agentic and individualized in their interpretations of text, standardized testing was increasing in ways that would necessitate a limited view of reader interaction with text. Many states used minimum-competency testing to gauge student achievement in relation to set expectations. Though this form of testing diminished in the 1980s, Koretz (2008) identifies four lasting effects on large-scale achievement testing in the United States: 1) This was an important step toward the use of tests for accountability purposes; 2) The number of states with state-wide mandated (as opposed to district-mandated) testing programs increased dramatically; 3) There was a shift in how student performance was reported, moving away from norm-referenced tests to criterion-referenced tests; and 4) There was a change in how tests were used to improve

instruction, as the idea that someone was held accountable for test scores was now the primary motivator to improve instruction.

The 1980s and 1990s gave rise to significant developments in both conceptions of literacy and the use of educational assessment. In literacy studies, scholars were paying more attention to the role of the social or cultural context in reading (Tierney & Pearson, 2021), and critical theory was dramatically influencing learning in all areas, including literacy. Though critical thought can be found throughout history, the modern conception of critical theory developed in tandem with the field of sociology and interrogates traditional power structures, including institutions such as schooling. Along with colleague Donaldo Macedo, Freire (1987) advocated for a view of literacy as a “form of cultural politics” (p. viii), whereby the practices are conceived of as either contributing to the empowerment or disempowerment of the people.

During this era, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) coined the term *culturally relevant education* to challenge the way students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds experienced school. Though Black scholars and educators for centuries practiced culturally relevant education (Muhammad, 2020), Ladson-Billings’s (1995) seminal work put a name to the pedagogical theory that insists on attending to student achievement while supporting positive perceptions of students’ cultural identity and critiquing the inequities that schools reinforce.

While the brilliance of students from marginalized backgrounds was being foregrounded and literacy scholars were critiquing systems of power, large-scale educational assessment was growing rapidly, though not in a way that aligned with this critical turn. After the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (National Commission

for Excellence in Education), a surge of ideologically-driven changes known as “the education reform movement” took hold that still dominates education policy today (Koretz, 2008). States required standardized assessments based on state or local content standards, though most states purchased commercially available assessments consisting of multiple choice and short-answer questions (Koretz, 2008). Literacy assessment in this form became limited to presenting short passages followed by selected-response questions wherein readers from all backgrounds are expected to interpret what they read in an identical manner to arrive at the one right answer. With increasingly serious consequences attached to these assessments, literacy instruction has in turn been narrowed (Avalos et al., 2020; Davis & Willson, 2015).

Neoliberal Reform

This brings us to the modern reform era. Since 2002, when NCLB amended the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), neoliberal accountability policies rooted in free-market capitalism and ideals of individual competition and meritocracy have become commonplace in K-12 schools (Au, 2016; Bartell et al., 2019; Fisher-Ari et al., 2017; McCarthy, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2008). As a central component of these policies, high-stakes standardized testing (HST) practices produce the data used to assign value to students, teachers, and schools, often bringing increased pressure felt by teachers and students alike (Au, 2007). While NCLB outlined twelve steps to “ensure that all children . . . obtain a high-quality education and reach a minimum proficiency on challenging state academic standards and state academic assessments” (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), extensive research shows myriad unintended consequences of a singular focus on increasing standardized

test scores. Welner and Mathis (2015) identify, along with predictable outcomes such as substituting a focus on raising test scores for the preferable goal of increasing student learning and a general “narrowing of curriculum and constraining of instruction” (p. 4), the following additional negative inadvertent outcomes:

making schools less engaging and creative; deprofessionalizing teachers and teaching; abandoning our past pursuit of learning that fully encompasses arts, music, social studies, and science; and marginalizing values and skills that help students develop the ability to cooperate, solve problems, reason, make sound judgments, and function effectively as democratic citizens. (pp. 4-5)

The specific impacts of this focus on HST for teachers of literacy at both the elementary and secondary level³ have been documented by many researchers.

Although the implications for policy and practice from this body of scholarship are many, I highlight two themes evident in research published since the early years of the 21st century: 1) teachers recognize a distinct difference between literacy instruction that they believe will result in higher test scores (i.e., test-centric literacy) and literacy instruction and/or practices they would otherwise implement and 2) high-stakes testing plays a role in how teachers position students, particularly students from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, leading students to be positioned in dehumanizing ways.

³ As my research aims to understand how a neoliberal discourse influences what is and is not said while talking to an elementary literacy teacher, I focus here on studies about the impact of HST on *teachers*, rather than the important and revealing work examining how these same policies impact children in elementary literacy spaces (e.g., Dutro & SELLAND, 2012; Dutro et al., 2013; Dyson, 2020; Muhammad, 2020).

Test-Centric Literacy

Literacy scholarship from the past 20 years confirms my own experience as an elementary literacy teacher and coach that the literacy practices deemed necessary to help students increase test scores within the context of high-stakes accountability differ from other literacy practices that teachers might implement without testing pressures.

As identified by Welner and Mathis (2015) as a broad consequence of focusing obsessively on increasing test scores, a narrowing of the curriculum amongst literacy educators is well documented across grade levels (Avalos et al., 2020; Brindley & Schneider, 2002; Davis & Willson, 2015; McCarthy, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2008). Rather than expecting that engaging students in personally meaningful literacy practices such as writing about topics of their choice or participating in a writers workshop (Brindley & Schneider, 2002), teachers often feel pressure to implement literacy practices that explicitly mirror what is expected on high-stakes tests so as to “minimize the distance between what students experience in their classes and what they experience on test day” (Davis & Willson, 2015, p. 371). Such “test-centric instructional practices” (Davis & Wilson, 2015, p. 357) include providing students with on-demand prompts (Brindley & Schneider, 2002; Shelton & Fu, 2004), teaching students to use prescriptions for composing a written response (Davis & Wilson, 2015), modeling how to annotate text correctly and use time wisely (Davis & Wilson, 2015; Nichols & Berliner, 2008), and the use of benchmark tests that emulate the high-stakes testing experience in which students will take part at the end of the school year (Davis & Wilson, 2015). Beyond influencing the content and structure of literacy

lessons, teachers have also identified high stakes testing pressure as a factor in determining the language of instruction used with bilingual students (Palmer & Snodgrass Rangel, 2011).

Findings in this research corpus demonstrate two key ideas that point to a need to reimagine literacy outside of the realm of HST. First, teachers articulated beliefs about ideal literacy instruction differ from these test-centric literacy practices, and secondly, teachers cite testing pressures as the primary reason for the difference between beliefs about literacy and instructional practice (Avalos et al., 2020; Brindley & Schneider, 2002; Davis & Willson, 2015; McCarthy, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Palmer & Snodgrass Rangel, 2011). Additionally, researchers have found that teachers may not always be aware of the dissonance between preferred methods of literacy instruction and what they provide to their students, as evidenced in a comparative analysis of teachers' expressed conceptions of text-based writing and the actual prompts given to students (Wang & Matsumura, 2019). This disconnect points to the value of my study in working to demonstrate how accountability structures and policies permeate literacy classrooms in often invisible ways.

Dehumanizing Students

Another theme of note in the literature is the role that high-stakes accountability regimes play in how teachers position students' diverse strengths and needs related to literacy practices. This positioning often has two intertwined consequences. First, there is a noticeable pattern across the past two decades of teachers positioning students who traditionally score lower on high-stakes tests as burdensome. One consequence of HST articulated by teachers is an increased

awareness of those students deemed lower achieving, with some teachers identifying this awareness as taking away instructional attention from students considered to be average or high performing (McCarthy, 2008). While increased attention on students who likely need more support is a positive trend in theory, the construction of these students as a problem for being “low” has far-reaching consequences for both teachers’ and students’ perceptions. Taken even further, pressures from HST may lead teachers to view students as “test-score increasers or suppressors” (Nichols & Berliner, 2008, p. 16), rather than unique human beings who bring various strengths into the classroom. This dehumanizing way of thinking about children leads to what has been described as “educational triage” (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 232), whereby a school’s limited resources are meted out to students based on how likely they are to pass a high-stakes test.

Secondly, when teachers are asked to position students in relation to their value to a school’s accountability rating, rather than considering the differentiated support students need and that they want to provide, teachers experience consequential feelings of guilt or frustration. Teachers are forced to negotiate their beliefs about their own and their students’ worth with those imposed externally by the state, resulting in what Crawford-Garrett and colleagues (2017) describe as trauma. Theorizing teachers’ experiences through the lenses of trauma and cognitive-dissonance theory (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017), reveals the psychological toll enacted on teachers who attempt to hold culturally proficient beliefs about their students while simultaneously forced to see children through the deficit lens constructed by accountability regimes. Perhaps most troubling about this line of research, in terms of impact on children, is that

scholars have found that even teachers who profess to believe strongly in honoring the strengths students bring from home have difficulty implementing such beliefs, as they feel disempowered to provide instruction that supports diverse students due to the pressures from high-stakes testing (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017; Jacobs, 2019). Barriers to implementing responsive, or adaptive, teaching can include the implementation of scripted curricula, often imposed in an effort to increase student achievement on HST (Vaughn et al., 2022)

Taken together, this body of research reveals standards-based reform policies rooted in neoliberal logics impacts literacy teachers' instructional decision-making, as well as their understanding of what constitutes good literacy instruction and contributes to deficit framing of students of color and emergent bilingual students. At times, these impacts are mitigated by teacher agency through resistance.

Teacher Resistance

Present in much of the literature about teacher response to neoliberal reform policies is a discussion of teachers' ability to resist. This theme makes sense, as critical researchers strive to find a path out of the neoliberal paradigm that restricts the curriculum to tested subjects and increasingly forbids teaching about—or even mentioning—topics that recognize the humanity of all members of a school community. Though researchers continue to identify ways that critical-minded teachers denounce the realities of HST and other accountability policies (Hikida & Taylor, 2020; Leo, 2022; Mantei & Kervin, 2021; Taylor, 2019), research also points to how neoliberal logics may actually limit the effectiveness of teacher resistance, as the onus is placed on individual teachers to enact agency, shifting the attention away from

institutional and structural forces that reify the logic of the current system (Taylor, 2023).

The overwhelming message in this body of research provides an unsatisfying conclusion: it is not easy to “carve[] out spaces of agency” (Leo, 2022). The consequences of test results carry significant weight, at times resulting in student retention, school closures, or school takeover, thus teachers weigh many factors when deciding how to prepare for HST (Hikida & Taylor, 2020). These decisions create undeniable tensions in teachers who experience a mismatch between their own identities as teachers and the structures of the schools and systems in which they teach. The emotional toll of such tensions is not inconsequential (Olitsky, 2020), as supported by research about teacher identity formation and negotiation.

Teacher Identity Formation and Negotiation

Much research on teacher identity formation agrees that a teacher’s professional identity is complex, shaped by internal and external factors, ever-changing over the course of a career (Buchanan, 2015, Mockler, 2011).

Day and Gu (2007, cited in Buchanan, 2015) found that the school context in which a teacher works has significant impact on teacher identity development, an assertion supported by Buchanan’s (2015) own research. Other research supports the idea that teachers’ professional identities contribute to the decisions they make about “approaches to such things as curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment (to name a few)” (Mockler, 2011, p. 517), illustrating the complex relationship between teachers’ out-of-school and in-school identities. Mockler (2011) further describes how teacher identity changes constantly throughout one’s career.

Reeves (2018) describes Clarke's (2009) useful model for understanding some of the factors that contribute to teacher identity (re)formation. Clarke's model of teacher identity formation based on "Foucault's axes of ethical self-formation" (p. 99). In Clarke's model, contemporary research on teacher identity mirrors Foucault's conception of self-formation. She notes, for example, the tension between agency and restriction, the internal and external, and the self and the other are part of identity-building and negotiation (Reeves, 2018). Clarke's model consists of four elements, borrowed from Foucault's four axes of ethical self-formation: "1) the substance of teacher identity; 2) the authority sources of teacher identity; 3) the self-practices of teacher identity; and 4) the *telos* (ultimate objective) of teacher identity" (Reeves, 2018, p.99). The substance of teacher identity involves a teacher's inner voice and interplay with an individual's other, non-teacher identities, while the authority sources of teacher identity represent the external sources a teacher draws on for affirmation of what makes a "good teacher" (Reeves, 2018, p. 100). The self-practices of teacher identity encompass the actions teachers take to perform their teaching identities (Reeves, 2018). The fourth element of Clarke's model is the *telos*, which defines a teacher's "utmost purpose" for teaching (Reeves, 2018, p. 100).

When teachers' identities are not aligned, such as when a teacher's *telos* is in conflict with external representations of what defines a good teacher, identity conflict and negative emotions can manifest, which may have implications for teacher retention (Olitsky, 2020). While teacher "burnout" is often cited as a reason for leaving the profession, Santoro (2011) argues that this concept does not adequately describe the way teachers come to feel under accountability structures. She puts forth the term

“demoralization” to describe “situations where the conditions of teaching change so dramatically that moral rewards, previously available in ever-challenging work, are now inaccessible” (p. 1).

Other researchers seem to suggest that teachers simply have to “Resist!” (Davis & Vehabovic, 2018, p. 586) and draw on “their commitments—to *be the kind of teacher they wanted to be*” (Buchanan, 2015, p.714, emphasis original) when faced with increasing pressure from high-stakes accountability structures.

The idea that teacher resistance is a simple act of choosing to do so or not neglects the layers of complexity that exist both in and out of the classroom. Part of this complexity includes elements of the narrative within popular culture or consciousness that defines the perception of the general public toward teachers, students, and literacy. In the section below, I examine two of the ideas, *crisis* and *science*, as they have both played a role in the construction of literacy, literacy learning, teachers, and students over time in U.S. public school discourse, and are both central to the analysis in this study.

Constructing a Problem and a Solution: Crisis and Science

Crisis

Though the idea of crisis in American public education is by no means limited to literacy education, the role it has played in this area is significant, and it is worth examining several important touchpoints in history leading to the current context.

Army Tests. In spring 1917, immediately after the U.S. had entered World War I, a group of educational psychologists were tasked by the U.S. government to develop a method to efficiently sort through the 3 million new military service recruits to

identity who was qualified for officer training. The members of the American Psychological Association's Committee on Methods of Psychological Examining of Recruits included Henry Goddard, Lewis Terman, Thorndike, and Robert Yerkes. The latter member of this group was the leader of the project and also my great-great uncle. Every one of the men listed held well-documented racist beliefs that intelligence is biologically determined by race or ethnicity yet were in charge of creating a test to "objectively" measure intelligence. Once administered, the results of the test showed, perhaps unsurprisingly, the average intelligence of the recruits in ranked order were as follows: native Whites, immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, and African Americans (Willis, 2008, pp. 163-164). When the results were released:

Educational psychologists joined politicians who encouraged immigration quotas and eugenic means for "race betterment," making race, ethnicity, and class silent partners of intelligence testing and use. In addition, numerous studies followed that focused on racial differences in intelligence, including Arlitt (1921), Ferguson (1919), and Fukuda (1923). The army testing of male recruits, the results of the tests and the interpretation of the tests, were published in newspapers throughout the nation. As one might expect after the publication of the Army's test results, *there was a public outcry of a crisis in education* (i.e., the education of Whites) and the need for improvement and reform. (Willis, 2008, p. 164, emphasis mine)

The connection to reading comprehension research is significant, as the Army Alpha test, the version created for literate recruits, contained a large reading comprehension

section. The use of standardized testing for these purposes, and the resulting narrative that 1) “native white Americans” are most intelligent as “proven” by a scientifically-developed test and 2) there is an educational crisis in the country, established a foundation that has been reproduced over and over. This was not the last time national security was deployed as justification for large-scale assessment of intelligence and the resulting calls for improvements to public education.

Why Can’t Johnny Read? In the 1960s concern rose in popular culture about students’ reading performance, though the evidence for this concern is not actually clear and students may have been improving (Tierney & Pearson, 2021, p. 25). One outlet for this concern was a book written by a lawyer named Rudolph Flesch (1955) called *Why Johnny Can’t Read—And What You Can Do About It*. In this book—written for an audience of “fathers and mothers,” as “the teaching of reading is too important to be left to the educators” (p. ix)—Flesch, himself an immigrant from Austria, claims “there are no remedial reading cases in Germany, in France, in Italy, in Norway, in Spain—practically anywhere in the world except in the United States.” And, further, “there was no such thing as remedial reading in this country either until about thirty years ago” when the United States began teaching reading in its current (as of 1955) state in 1925 (Flesch, 1955, p. 2).

The current method to which he is referring is the “word-method theory” (Flesch, 1955, p. 95), which includes “the experience approach” (Flesch, 1955, p. 98). As a result of this approach, Flesch (1955) concludes, “Your child’s trouble with reading comes solely from the fact that in school he has been taught word guessing

instead of reading—and by reading I mean getting the meaning of words formed by letters on a printed page, and nothing else” (p. 110).

Flesch describes in detail the phonics approach that he advocates as the preferred method to teach reading, being careful to distinguish the type of phonics he supports: “Systematic phonics is *the* way to teach reading, unsystematic phonics is nothing” (p. 121, emphasis original). In the chapter “A Letter to Johnny’s Teacher,” he makes the point that he is not specifically attacking progressive education:

Who says a progressive, liberal-minded teacher must not tell her pupils anything about sounds and letters, but must do nothing but condition them to the sight of certain words? Why is the word method always labeled modern and phonics always branded as reactionary? There is no earthly reason for pigeonholing them this way. Phonics is one way of teaching reading based on certain psychological and linguistic principles, and the word method is another way—based on certain other, inferior psychological principles and no linguistic principles whatever. (p. 127)

Finally, in an example of alarmist rhetoric, Flesch (1955) states:

The word method is gradually destroying democracy in this country; it returns to the upper middle class the privileges that public education was supposed to distribute evenly among the people. The American Dream is, essentially, equal opportunity through free education for all. This dream is beginning to vanish in a country where the public schools are falling down on the job. ... Mind you, I am not accusing the ‘reading experts’ of wickedness or malice. I am not one of

those people who call them un-American or left-winger or Communist fellow travelers. All I am saying is that their theories are wrong and the application of these theories has done untold harm to our younger generation. (pp. 132-133)

The discursive formations within *Why Johnny Can't Read* that position systematic phonics instruction as the moral approach in conflict with the sinister word method while simultaneously posturing as simply presenting a neutral perspective based on evidence is eerily echoed in discursive positionings in modern SOR dialogue, though they first established the foundation of the next manufactured crisis.

Reading Wars. The debate set forth in *Why Johnny Can't Read* (Flesch, 1955) is the root of what has been referred to, among other things, as the reading wars or the great debate. In the introductory chapter of *Literacy as Snake Oil: Beyond the Quick Fix* the book's editor, Joanne Larson (2001) uses both phrases. She states, "In literacy education, the obsession with the so-called *great debate* has polarized public discourse into antagonistic arguments over which method works best" (pp. 1-2, emphasis mine). Later, she defines each side and provides important context thusly:

The so-called reading crisis is currently instantiated as the *reading wars* (Goodman, 1998), the never-ending debate between meaning-based philosophy and basic skills instruction. In its current instantiation, the argument goes back and forth between contextualized, whole text instruction and systematic, explicit phonics instruction. As literacy educators, we have seen this kind of scholarly debate between whole text and the alphabetic principle for over one hundred years (Langer & Allington, 1992). (p. 2, emphasis mine)

As the heart of this debate lies not only a view about how to teach reading, but ideological commitments about literacy and reading that are not insignificant. Larson's (2001) discussion of the reading wars in this chapter is an ideal representation of this ideology, and she does not pretend otherwise. She is squarely on the side of a "contextualized, whole text" approach to literacy, or at least is against the systematic phonics-only approach, as she expresses concern about the commodification of literacy when "researchers of literacy as a social practice and critical literacy are not included in public policy conversations about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment" (p. 1).

A Nation at Risk. In 1983 the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education published its report. The report was titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* and is often credited as the key text in the march toward *No Child Left Behind*, though I think it is clear from the lineage in this literature review that these ideas have been present for quite some time. In the report, American students are characterized as achieving significantly behind their foreign peers, which is framed as a national security risk. This provides support for the idea that the federal government should be responsible for protecting and promoting quality public schools. Additionally, it is noteworthy for the resonance with the media for its rhetoric and tone. "The report's striking tone and conclusions ignited a frenzy of media attention to education and the issue began to rise on the public agenda" (McGuinn, 2006, p. 43).

Sold a Story. In 2022, American Public Media (APM) released the first episodes in a radio documentary series called *Sold a Story: How Teaching Kids to*

Read Went So Wrong. Though not the first production from APM and the journalist behind the work, Emily Hanford, this series had an outsized impact on the public and the education world, including policy-makers. A big part of the reason may lie in the alarmist tone and divisive rhetoric employed by Hanford. This is the latest iteration of the crisis narrative. In the first episode of *Sold a Story*, Hanford (2022) states, “In this podcast, we’re going to investigate where this wrong idea about reading came from. How it’s harming kids.” In an opinion column written in response to Hanford’s work, fifty-eight education researchers plea for an end to the heightened rhetoric, “‘Sold a Story’ podcast takes the fabricated phonics debate a step further, attacking the integrity of a group of educators who have led pioneering research and helped advance our field” (Bomer, et al., 2022, para. 2), a clear indication of the way Hanford and APM have reproduced the age-old story of crisis. A key feature of much of this rhetoric is the use of science to justify the level of alarm. I turn now to how the co-option of science as tool in service of ideological goals has served a role in the manufacture of these crises.

Science

Part of neoliberal discourse involves a rational and technical logic that values the “truth” of science. Willis (2008) traces the widespread American interest in science to the post-Civil War era and quotes newspapers from the time that speak to the way science had entered American popular discourse. At this time, these sources claimed, men and women who wanted to be considered intelligent had to keep up with the latest ideas (p. 19).

This devotion to science includes an obsession with measurement. Moses and Nanna (2007) vividly describe the American testing culture as “part of the very social fabric that comprises our current cultural blanket” (p. 63). The authors argue that numbers produced by quantitative measurement have increasingly been positioned as the only legitimate information to account for a range of social indicators, resulting in a circular logic positing “if we can measure something, it is real, and the fact that we have measured it serves as evidence of its realness” (p. 63). This is a persuasive argument for how neoliberal discourse has permeated not only education policy but American cultural values, as well. The consequences of such widespread adoption of the ideologies underlying neoliberal discourse can be seen throughout the educational system, including in K-12 reading instruction.

National Reports. A series of reports published by federal agencies touting evidence-based and scientifically valid conclusions about best practices in reading contributed to the public’s belief that there was one version of truth when it came to understanding instruction and learning.

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children. In 1998 the National Research Council (NRC) published a report with the title *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. In an analysis and critique of the report, Gee (2001) states that the authors of the report define “real reading” as “decoding, word recognition, and comprehension of literal meaning of text, with a focus on phonemic awareness and the phonological-graphemic code” (p. 8). I find it interesting that this report would define such a term, and as Gee points out, a reader using other cues, such as pictures, is excluded from a behavior classified as “real reading.”

The most significant point Gee (2001) makes in this analysis is the report's authors' insistence on maintaining a context-neutral and apolitical stance in identifying factors that contribute to children's development as readers. Scientific research is being used in the report as a way to, as is done so often, remove any discussion of the need to address societal barriers to equitable economic resources that have been shown to have a clear connection to children's literacy development (Cummins, 2002).

National Reading Panel. Following closely behind the release of the *Preventing Reading Difficulties* report in 1998, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) was asked by the United States Congress to study various ways to teach children how to read and report their findings as the "best ways to apply these findings in classrooms and at home" (NICHD, 1998; in Coles, 2001, p. 29). In response to this request, the NICHD put together the National Reading Panel (NRP). After surveying approximately 125 individuals through oral and written testimony, the NRP decided to study the following topics in depth: alphabets, including phonemic awareness and phonics; fluency; comprehension, including vocabulary, text comprehension, and teacher preparation and comprehension strategies instruction; teacher education and reading instruction; and computer technology and reading instruction (NRP & NICHD, 2000, pp. 1-2). The resulting report, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* was published in 2000.

According to Coles (2001), the NICHD and several members of congress who were proponents of the explicit, systematic, direct approach to reading instruction had hoped that the NRC's 1998 report would have been more vociferous in declaring their

avored method the clear “winner” of the reading wars. Issuing a report of their own would allow for another chance to release research-backed evidence of this conclusion. Further, Coles (2001) conducted a careful analysis of the NRP’s work and concluded that the NRP’s makeup was not balanced, despite claims otherwise, as the majority of the NRP’s members were advocates for systematic, explicit phonics, and there was only one representative in favor of whole-language approaches, a school principal. Further, Coles’ (2001) analysis demonstrated that the NRP’s selected method of meta-analysis resulted in consequential misrepresentation of empirical evidence that elided research results that showed, for example, less significant benefits or benefits that were heightened when combined with more holistic approaches to reading instruction (p, 40).

The media’s response to the National Reading Panel’s report focused on phonics. A headline in *Education Week* read “Reading panel urges phonics for all in K-6” (Manzo, 2000; cited in Coles, 2001, p. 28). The NRP did include other reading skills and instruction, but phonics was stressed for beginning readers, as taught through explicit, systematic, direct instruction, an implicit rejection of the whole language approach (Coles, 2001, p. 28). Coles (2001) further comments on the report’s results:

Despite the report’s failure to provide the scientific evidence for the instruction it advocates, it remains largely unchallenged and is being used as a gold standard to justify legislative and policy mandates for rigid, direct, skills-emphasis beginning reading instruction across the nation. (p. 40)

Again, the report's presentation as research-based gave the results an air of authority that allowed the results to go unquestioned.

No Child Left Behind. In Patricia Holland's (2004) examination of the values that undergird the evaluation and accountability systems put into place through NCLB, she notes the emphasis on measuring students' performance of math and literacy skills. Her recognition of measurement as reflective of particular ways of knowing which delimit the ways accountability is constructed by this policy aligns with Moses and Nanna (2007) who recognized the valorization of measurement as a component of American culture. Continuing with her analysis, Holland notes the appearance of "scientifically based research" over 100 times in NCLB, concluding that this represents the privileging of a functionalist viewpoint. Holland (2004) explains how viewing the social world as "objective, real, and concrete" (p. 230) positions underlying assumptions as valued and thus unquestioned. Berliner (2002) also noted the number of times "scientifically based research" was used in the NCLB Act. He points out that these terms, as they are used in the legislation, are code for randomized experiments. In this way, the U.S. government, is confusing the methods of science with the goals of science, thus negating the message that the policymakers are trying to convey (p. 18).

Writing about the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) upon which much of NCLB was based, McNeil (2000) argues that prior to the adoption of the language of accountability there was space in the public discourse about education for ideas about equity, various views of academic quality, and community values. Under the regime of accountability, McNeil contends, these public discourses are replaced by

an “expert technical language” (p. 731), which limits discussion of educational practice and policy to the language of the tested indicators. By setting the terms for the discussion, neoliberal discourse serves to privilege particular constructions of reality, possibly even concealing discriminatory practices under the guise of goals of equity (Au, 2016; Suspitsyna, 2010).

NCLB’s connection to literacy practices went beyond mandating state tests for grades 3 through 8. As part of George W. Bush’s signature education legislation, the Reading First initiative made grants available to states that established reading programs for grades K-2 that were based on scientific research. A similar program called Early Reading First provided grants for early literacy (reading)/readiness programs based on scientific evidence (McGuinn, 2006).

Science of Reading. The ideologies that undergird the discourse of the science of reading are, clearly, based in the American public’s devotion to science as a source of truth. As Willis (2008) reminds us, “The terrain of struggle is ideology” (p. xxvii). Ideology works to frame ideas as being in one’s best interest and functions to make such ideas feel like common sense. Those who control the dominant ideology have the power to set the terms of the discussion in terms of what is acceptable to talk about and in what ways. Returning to Hanford’s (2018) reporting, in “Hard words: Why aren’t our kids being taught to read?” she says:

The belief that learning to read is a natural process that occurs when children are surrounded by books is a problem not just because there’s no science to back it up. It’s a problem because it assumes the primary responsibility for teaching children to read lies with families, not schools.

Here, she positions the lack of scientific evidence as a problem, reinforcing the ideology of the slavish devotion to science. This, despite the fact that over the course of history there have been countless instances when scientific “proof” has been proven otherwise. This is not to say that evidence should not inform reading instruction in schools (Petscher et al., 2020). Rather, discursive positionings are consequential, and Hanford’s statement minimizes the value of families and print-rich environments, which, I would argue, are some of the most important aspects of children’s literacy lives. Though she is not solely responsible for the circulating popular discourse of the science of reading, her audio documentaries have had a large impact on how this term has been taken up and has reproduced the idea of *science* in ways that echo patterns of Americans’ historical privileging of evidence and what counts as knowledge.

This study aims to use CDA to examine how the ideas I have discussed in the previous sections are constructed through discourse currently circulating in relation to an early literacy (reading) policy. To end this chapter, I consider how CDA has been used in other educational research.

Bringing it All Together: Critical Discourse Analysis in Education

In the two decades since the passage of NCLB, neoliberal discourse has permeated education policy, resulting in profound consequences for schools, teachers, and students. In the wake of conversations about the science of reading in relation to the Colorado READ Act policy, the same logics seem to be recirculating, with equally troubling consequences. I resist the traditional view that policy can be studied in a neutral, rational fashion, instead aligning with critical policy analysts who aim to illuminate how policy serves to normalize ideas (Diem & Young, 2015). Similarly, I

consider policy to exist as both text and discourse, as Ball (1993) has described. In this way, the effects of policy can be both specific and general, as the former occurs when the result of a policy has a material impact such as a change to curriculum or compensation, while the latter occurs as an accumulation of policies might construct truth through discursive formations that render one's lived experience worse than before. Because my study focuses on education policy as a site of analysis, it is important to acknowledge the work of critical policy analysts who similarly are interested in uncovering of ideologies within public policy across a range of disciplines, including education, and who often draw on CDA as a productive means for unearthing the taken for granted assumptions underlying the targets of their investigations (Diem & Young, 2015). As with CDA, CPA is a multidisciplinary approach without one standard set of methods, though analysis always occurs within a rich understanding of the underlying context in which policy is implemented (Diem et al., 2019).

Though policy analysis is not a central focus of this study, and critical discourse analysts include policy as a possible subject of analysis, I acknowledge the importance of CPA as an additional frame that reinforces the processes undertaken using CDA. As I have analyzed policy documents that shape the literacy experience in Samantha's classroom, I believe it is important to recognize the existence of this scholarship, as well as to appreciate the similar theoretical and epistemological underpinnings that exist in CDA and CPA.

Bringing these ideas into conversation with an understanding of *discourse* as "the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation" (Foucault,

1971/2010, p. 107). And recognizing that it is through the discursive practices of definition, description, and categorization that power operates to construct meaning in line with particular ways of knowing, this study seeks to make visible the ways schools have become steeped in neoliberal discourse. I have used critical poststructural theories of discourse and queer theory to examine the discourse circulating in and about an elementary literacy classroom in an effort to identify, critique, deconstruct, and reconstruct such discourse toward antioppressive possibilities for enactment of social justice pedagogies. These lenses shape the study's primary analytical tools, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and critical policy analysis (CPA). To further situate my study within the existing literature, I close this chapter by considering how CDA has been used in education research. Here, I begin with a brief review of literature from the past decade to explore how CDA has been used in elementary literacy education research. Then, I draw heavily on two literature reviews covering educational scholarship using CDA from 1983 to 2003 and 2004 to 2012, respectively. After summarizing the central themes suggested in these literature reviews, I end by addressing critiques put forth in the two literature reviews, which informed elements of my study design.

CDA in Literacy Research: 2012-2023

The use of CDA in elementary literacy research over the past decade reveals the range of applications and possibilities scholars see in this area. Researchers have employed CDA to study educational settings including elementary classrooms (e.g., Beaulieu, 2016; Esquivel, 2020; Fiano, 2014; Lester & Gabriel, 2017; McDonald, 2021; McElhone, 2015), online learning communities (e.g., Schieble, 2012), and

teacher education programs (e.g., Gelfuso & Dennis, 2017). CDA has also been used to examine written texts, whether they be produced by teachers or come from policy documents (e.g., Jacobson & Bach, 2022; Poza & Viesca, 2020).

A recurring theme in this literature relates to the use of multiple linguistic resources to make sense of literacy experiences in various settings (e.g., Esquivel, 2020; Fiano, 2014; McDavid Schmidt & Beucher, 2018). Relatedly, the restriction or marginalization of such linguistic resources in favor of white, mainstream English was present in several studies (e.g., McDonald, 2021; Nuñez & Palmer, 2017; Poza & Viesca, 2020).

The use of CDA also revealed how challenges to normative values and beliefs often remain unsaid or are complicated by insidious neoliberal discourses that circulate within institutions at all levels (e.g., Chu, 2019; Schieble, 2012; Taylor, 2023).

Reviewing the Literature: 1983-2012

Prompted by the increase in education scholarship using the theoretical and methodological commitments of CDA, Rogers and colleagues (2005) published the first of two comprehensive literature reviews examining this body of work. Their search in the early years of the twentieth century yielded 46 studies matching their criteria. When repeating such a search for an updated review of the literature from 2004-2012, Rogers and colleagues (2016) found 257 articles matching their search criteria. This exponential increase in scholarship points to how education researchers value the theories and methods CDA offers.

Across both of the literature reviews, the findings most germane to my study include:

- 1) Studies using CDA in educational research use a balance of written text and interactions as data sources (2005, 2016).
- 2) Education research related to neoliberalism increased dramatically in 2008, with nearly a quarter of studies in 2012 including this construct in their analysis (2016).
- 3) Attention to description of methods is lacking in many studies, particularly relative to the attention given to social theory (2005, 2016).
- 4) Author reflexivity was lacking across most studies (2005, 2016).
- 5) The majority of studies did not attend to the reconstructive aspects of CDA, which involves moving past deconstructing discourse to recognize the creative aspects of power, in addition to the oppressive ones (2016).

These findings resonate in different ways with my study. Findings 1 and 2 are areas where I find overlap with my research, as I analyzed a combination of interactional data and written text, and my research is centered around the impacts of neoliberal logics with policy discourse. Findings 3-5 point to critiques Rogers and colleagues (2004, 2016) have with reviewed scholarship that I sought to overcome in executing my study.

Responding to Critiques

My study builds on the rich scholarship applying CDA to education research over the past several decades. Importantly, my study is designed in such a way that I am positioned to overcome three of Rogers and colleagues' (2005, 2016) critiques, as articulated above. First, in the next chapter, I elaborate on the methodological stance and specific methods I have taken up in conducting this research. By describing the

methodology in detail, I have avoided an overemphasis on social theory at the expense of technique. Additionally, my study was designed to center my commitment to researcher reflexivity throughout the research process. In chapter 6, I examine my own language using the CDA protocol as part of the analysis process. This represents my recognition of the importance of a reflective stance, as I am turning the lens back on myself in conducting the analysis in what Bucholtz (2000) refers to as “reflexive discourse analysis” (p. 1463). Finally, an important aim of this study has been to consider how using the tools of CDA can provide space for resistance to neoliberal accountability policies. This entails not only deconstructing discourse to identify and define neoliberal discourse, but also requires the reconstruction of discourse to reject the subjectivities and positionings embedded within the ideologies at the heart of neoliberal discourse.

In the next chapter, I describe in detail the methodology of my study, including the affordances of CDA and how I have accounted for these critiques of CDA in educational research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In alignment with my identity as a critical literacy scholar, I view my research methodology as inextricable from, and mutually reinforcing of, the theoretical frameworks informing my work. The critical and poststructuralist theories that frame how I look at literacy education make particular methodological stances and procedures possible and necessary. In this chapter, I draw on the conceptual framework I detailed in chapter 2 to describe this study's design. I begin by examining the methodological stances from which I draw my researcher identity, importantly situating myself as a collaborator who values the local knowledge of classroom teachers and brings to bear my unique positionality on this work. I then turn to a description of my overall research methodology, before delineating my data collection and analysis process.

Methodological Stance

Inquiry as Stance

The vision for this study emerged from my experience as a research assistant on a project that prioritizes close collaboration with teachers throughout the research process. As I will elaborate further, the type of work I engaged in requires a trusting relationship between researcher and participant(s), including a blurring of the line between these roles such that both occupy shifting positions throughout the study and beyond. This movement beyond a binary construction of roles aligns with my theoretical commitment to queer theory and positions me to take up what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) refer to as inquiry as stance. As an approach to practitioner

research with both theoretical and methodological implications, inquiry as stance seeks to disrupt the status quo—driven largely by neoliberal reform policies—in schools and other educational spaces and encourages practitioners to come together with localized knowledge and expertise as part of a movement for social change and social justice. Crucially, inquiry as stance embraces a broad view of practitioners as “knowers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. vii), which is central to a research design that centers the participant’s knowledge and goals throughout all phases of the research process. In this study, I view myself, the teachers whose presence is explicitly or implicitly present in all of the policy texts I analyze, and my teacher collaborator as practitioners with knowledge to contribute across all phases of research and policy. The study is a site of becoming in that it is an intertextual thread itself in conversation with the past and with future work to come.

Positionality

I situate my study within the view that a researcher’s mere presence in a research site impacts the study in myriad ways. This includes at minimum altering study participants’ behavior, but a researcher’s unique identity has implications for how the researcher carries out every aspect of the study. Rather than trying to minimize these impacts as a flaw of qualitative research, Paris and Winn (2014) see this as an important aspect of the work, noting that accounting for researcher positionality is a key aspect of study design and must be considered throughout the research project.

For this study, the choice of conceptual framework and methodology invites, if not requires, deep consideration of positionality. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) as

the primary analytical tool demands that reflexivity be present throughout the work (Bucholtz, 2000; Fairclough, 2001), and the critical frames from which I draw are interested in understanding how varying subjectivities interplay in social life. There is no way to know, however, the impact aspects of my identity have had on the work. The identities I carry into this work are somehow both solid and fluid; each facet is always already present, yet which identities dominate, and which lurk beneath the surface varies across time and space. I cannot leave any of my identities—white, K-12 and university teacher, cis-gendered woman, heterosexual person without a physical disability—at the classroom door when entering a site as a researcher. At the same time, how these identities have interplayed with the identities already in the space, as well as the circulating discourses, is never fully knowable. As such, there are undoubtedly aspects of my positionality, including those left unnamed here, that emerged and retreated throughout the study process. I have engaged in this study reflexively, considering my positioning during the inquiry and analysis process. I have noted any implications for the findings and analysis in chapters 4-7. Along with many other skills, I continue to develop my reflexive practice, recognizing that I have not fully accounted for my positionality.

Overall Research Methodology

The primary methodological tool for this study is critical discourse analysis (CDA). Though scholars have taken up CDA in various ways, the common goal within the field is to unearth the processes through which language serves to perpetuate and alter power relations in the social world (Fairclough, 2001). Crucially, the hope of those undertaking such analyses is to recognize how language constructs possibilities,

believing deconstruction and reconstruction can bring about social change. While centering this common purpose of CDA, I draw on scholars from various academic disciplines in designing this study. As Rogers (2011) notes, “there is no lock step method for conducting CDA” (p. xviii), resulting in what she refers to as a “hybrid” approach, wherein theoretical lenses and analytical tools from a range of traditions and approaches are employed based on the demands of a particular study. Below, I describe the scholarly roots out of which this study grows, including Foucault’s (1971/2010) and Gee’s (2015) definitions of discourse and Fairclough’s (2001) approach to CDA.

What is Discourse?

As used in this study, my conception of discourse is largely informed by the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault. As elaborated in chapter 2, Foucault’s (1971/2010) description of *discourse* includes those statements that are revealed through analysis to be connected through predictable patterns of distribution, thus constituting a “field of strategic possibilities” (p. 37). According to Foucault (1971/2010), *rules of formation* define the ways in which statements relate to one another within a *discursive formation*. Foucault’s key concepts describe the way that social context (rules of formation) and language work on one another to construct (im)possibilities (discursive formation) within a given space, resulting in a diffusion of similarities and regularities observable within sign systems (discourse). For example, within this study, I have examined the *discourse surrounding the Colorado READ Act*, which I believe has been defined through repetitions of, and language associated with, the science of reading and neoliberal logics (rules of formation). In this instance, the

process of constructing the (im)possibilities available for literacy learning within an elementary classroom constitutes a *discursive formation* based on the limiting effect of the *rules of formation* on the discourse surrounding the policy.

Aligned with this view of discourse, Gee (2015) distinguishes between *discourses* (little 'd') and *Discourses* (big 'D') (p. 2). The former refers broadly to language-in-use. Thus, anything can be discourse as long as it is language that is being used to *do* something. The latter, however, are aligned with Foucault's conception of discourse in that they are, "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and, often, reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities . . . by specific groups" (Gee, 2015, p. 4). While Gee's distinction is useful in recognizing that any instance of language-in-use may be part of one or more Discourses that define not only what is said, but also who can say it and how, for the purposes of this study, I will continue to use a lowercase 'd' to signify the ideologically informed definition for which Gee uses a capital 'D', making clear through context when I am describing such categories of talk. Understanding discourse as informed by both Foucault and Gee is essential to answering this study's research questions, as one of my primary aims is to unearth how relations of power permeate talk in elementary literacy spaces. As discourses are inherently resistant to internal criticism (Gee, 2015), a conscious effort must be made to identify the theories and ideologies underpinning the rules of formation for a given discourse. For that, I turn to the process of discourse analysis.

What is Discourse Analysis?

Foucault's (1971/2010) articulation of *discourse*, *discursive formation*, and *rules of formation* laid the foundation for his larger project, namely the development of a mode of historical analysis that would unearth the unity of ideas within a particular discipline, such as medicine, grammar, or economics. Using discourse analysis in this way to study the history of ideas is one of many ways discourse analysis has been applied across disciplines. When discourse analysis seeks to uncover the ideologies present in language to make visible the relations of power within, it can be said to be critical in nature (Fairclough, 2001; Rogers, 2011). Thus, working from a critical stance, I situate my research design in Fairclough's approach to CDA, while still drawing from scholars whose work is not strictly defined as Critical Discourse Analysis (with all capital letters).

Fairclough's Approach to CDA: Description, Interpretation, Explanation

In Fairclough's (2001) approach to CDA, he distinguishes between three stages: "*description* of text, *interpretation* of the relationships between text and interaction, and *explanation* of the relationship between interaction and social context" (p. 91, emphasis original). These stages are aligned with the three elements that he believes constitute a discourse (text, interaction, and social context). As a foundational scholar in CDA, it is important to understand Fairclough's approach as a primary influence on my study. Below, I briefly describe each stage of Fairclough's CDA before considering why it is a well-suited method of analysis to answer my research questions.

Description. The description stage of Fairclough's (2001) CDA involves analyzing the text (i.e., spoken or written language) by asking a set of ten questions (see Appendix A for the full list of questions for each of the three stages). The questions are meant to parse out the language features present in the text, including elements of vocabulary (questions 1-4), grammar (questions 5-8), and textual structures (questions 9-10). Detailing the purpose of each question is not necessary to understand methods of this study, though an examination of three types of values that may be present in a text (experiential, relational, and expressive) is worth considering for the purposes of my study. Six of the ten questions (1-3 and 5-7) direct analysts to attune to these values, with the first three questions asking how vocabulary is imbued with each of these values, and questions 5-7 asking the same of grammatical features. Analyzing a text to describe what *experiential* values are suggested by vocabulary and grammatical features makes visible how a text producer chooses to represent their experience of the world, providing cues to the producer's beliefs and knowledge, and ultimately attachment to particular ideologies. (Fairclough, 2001, p. 94).

When looking for the *relational* values imbued in vocabulary and grammatical features, Fairclough's (2001) approach focuses on how representational choices in a text are both a function of existing social relationships between the participants, as well a producer of such relationships.

Finally, describing a text's *expressive* values, as represented in vocabulary and grammatical features (Fairclough, 2001), involves attuning to how each language feature serves an evaluative role. Here, the analyst's interest lies in how a text may reveal elements of the producer's social identity, which can suggest ideologically

based claims to authority, determinations of authenticity (i.e., one truth), and similar positions.

Interpretation. The second stage of Fairclough's (2001) CDA approach, interpretation, deals with the often-subconscious work performed by participants in interaction to make sense of the text they are co-producing. During interactions, participants draw on a series of socially defined and often ideologically based resources (referred to as "member resources" or "MR" by Fairclough) to make meaning of the situational context, intertextual context (i.e., how a text connects to others; see below for a detailed explanation of intertextuality), surface of utterance (i.e., the recognition that sounds or marks hold meaning as words, phrases, and sentences), meaning of utterance, local coherence (i.e., coherence within a particular part of a text), and text structure or "point" (i.e., how a text fits together as a whole; the summary interpretation of a text) (Fairclough, 2001, p. 119). Thus, at this stage, the analyst examines an existing text to work out what interpretations participants make. The interpretive work done by participants in interaction carries ideological significance, as the "interpretations are generated through the dialectical interplay of cues and MR" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 118), and each participant's resources and response to cues are uniquely formed by their social experience and subject positioning both within and outside of the interaction. Appendix A includes Fairclough's suggested questions for the interpretation phase of CDA. Note that these questions seek to understand the interpretations the participants make, not the analyst's interpretations.

Explanation. In Fairclough's (2001) third stage of CDA, *explanation* "is a matter of seeing a discourse as part of processes of social struggle, within a matrix of relations of power" (p. 135). Fairclough (2001) asserts that analysts may view discourses as both making an impact on future social relations and as having been shaped by past struggles. In the evaluation stage, both the former (social effects) and the latter (social determinants) should be investigated at "three levels of social organization: the societal level, the institutional level, and the situational level" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 136). When conducting CDA, analysts determine which level of social organization is most relevant to the research questions under investigation (see Appendix A for the questions Fairclough suggests at this stage of analysis).

In the Data Analysis section below, I describe how I plan to combine Fairclough's (2001) approach to CDA with the important concept of intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992) and Erickson's (2004) conception of microethnography into the design for this study.

Why Does CDA Make Sense in this Study?

In this study, I ask the following central questions:

1. How are *literacy* and *literacy instruction* constructed in the discourse surrounding a state-level early literacy (reading) policy?
2. How are *students* and *teachers* constructed in the discourse surrounding a state-level early literacy (reading) policy?
 - a. For both questions, I ask what is made possible and impossible through these constructions and in the relations of power present?

These questions have emerged within the context of critical frameworks, including poststructuralist and queer lenses. Using CDA as a central methodology for this study follows from these theoretical positions. By making visible the discourses circulating around elementary literacy classrooms, harmful logics, including those associated with neoliberalism can be disrupted, thus upsetting a central project of this discourse that creates binaries that fuel inequities. Second, my questions work to deconstruct the existing discourse as a first step to consider reconstructing antioppressive alternative discourses that construct literacy and literacy learning in ways that position teachers and students differently. CDA, particularly as described by Fairclough, provides a generative basis for my research design because there is an embedded assumption that discourses are connected to both the past and the future. Fairclough (2011) emphasizes the duality of texts as being “shaped by two sets of causal powers and by the tension between them” (p. 122), namely, the conservative power of social structures and social practices and the creative power of individual agency. This recognition within CDA provides the space to examine my research questions: the first by looking for the imprint of social structures and social power on discourse within an elementary literacy context (conservative power), and the second by considering how an increasing critical consciousness (Freire, 2020/1970) may support access to existing agentic power (creative power). As there is not a singular “best” approach to using discourse analysis, nor would such a stance toward research design fit within my theoretical stance toward knowledge production, I now turn to how I have woven the influential strands described above into specific methods of study.

Research Context

I selected my research context to intentionally build from relationships established while participating in a multi-site research practice partnership (RPP) at an elementary school near my university (Ghousseini, et al., 2022). As a research assistant under the supervision of my doctoral studies advisor, I developed close relationships with the teachers and literacy coach at the school, particularly resonating with the experiences of one second-grade teacher, Samantha. Through numerous formal and informal conversations over the course of the larger study, I learned about Samantha, both professionally and personally, and her experiences inspired the development of this study. Given the close collaboration with the teacher colleague at the heart of my study, I begin this section by establishing a foundational understanding of my relationship with and understanding of teacher collaborator, Samantha, before zooming out, first, to describe the elementary school where Samantha works, King Elementary. I close by zooming out further to provide an overview of the context in which the Colorado READ Act legislation has been, and continues to be, enacted.

At the beginning of chapter 1, I described how I first encountered Samantha mourning the loss of time to engage in powerful read alouds with her students about topics that mattered to her and to her vision of creating a community of learners where all identities were embraced and all voices heard. When first conceptualizing this study, my plan was to build a project with Samantha that would involve joint critical analysis of how we talked about literacy and about the literacies of students. I was curious if neoliberal discourse and framings of students as “low” or “high,” for example, would seep into both our utterances. I thought we might look at some policy

documents in the form of district communications she received, or I would separately look at some artifacts for context to support our work, but the primary focus would remain on Samantha and me. When the study launched in 2023, neither I nor Samantha could have prepared for the way that the Colorado READ Act policies would take over Samantha's time and energy. So, as I have discussed in chapter 1, the study pivoted to focus more centrally on document analysis of policy-related content and local media, alongside analysis of my interviews and informal conversations with Samantha. Thus, after describing Samantha and King Elementary, I will end this section with a description of the context necessary to understand the Colorado READ Act legislation. Given my goal to understand how teachers are positioned within the current policy discourse in literacy (reading), I have organized my dissertation mindfully to start with findings related to the range of policy texts I analyzed (chs. 4 & 5), followed by analysis of conversations with Samantha and her experience navigating literacy (reading) policy in this particular school, situated in this specific district and state.

Teacher Collaborator

The granular and vulnerable work necessary for a critical analysis of teacher discourse necessitated a familiar and trusting researcher-participant relationship that would allow for the blurring of both roles (Stevens, 2011). Samantha and I have an established relationship built from our shared experience engaging in the multi-site RPP. On my first visit to the research site in 2019, I was immediately drawn to Samantha, as within the first several minutes she voiced concern that she was going to get in trouble for engaging her students in read alouds in pursuit of the type of

antioppressive pedagogy (Kumashiro, 2002) that fueled her passion as a teacher. This connection to my interest in understanding how high-stakes testing (HST) policies impact teachers' decision-making not only confirmed the pervasiveness of this issue but sparked a relationship with Samantha that grew deeper over the course of the RPP study and has continued into our collaboration on this study. I have witnessed Samantha, like so many teachers, struggle in the complex web of restrictive neoliberal policy discourses. Over the past several years, I have talked with Samantha about her identity as a second-grade teacher, celebrating achievements and lamenting frustrations that reveal the complexity of teaching in an age of accountability while holding commitments to social justice. As I got to know her, I learned of Samantha's work with a nationally-recognized center for gender and sexual diversity in education and her ongoing advocacy as an ally for LGBTQ+ students and communities. She views her expanding collection of books representing LGBTQ+ and racial identities—what she proudly referred to in one of our recorded conversations for this study as “my social equity books”—as an essential tool in fostering a classroom community where students' identities are celebrated. The opportunities she sees for engaging with these rich texts as read alouds are limited, however, by pressures and constraints she feels from accountability discourse and policy mandates. The definitions of success and failure related to literacy as both a student and a teacher circulating in our formal and informal conversations over time have clearly reflected these tensions for Samantha.

Samantha's experience both resonates with my own as a classroom teacher and also diverges in important ways. For example, neither Samantha nor I pursued teacher preparation studies on our respective initial career paths, and we both have

experienced disappointment and, at times, a feeling of helplessness when confronted with the realities of accountability systems while teaching in Title I schools. Unlike my own experience, however, Samantha has faced repeated instances of uncertainty regarding her teaching position and teaches in a sociopolitical climate increasingly hostile to expressions of gender and sexual diversity and critical discussions of race and racism in schools. Because we each bring these experiences and others to our work, the design for this study has been shaped by the particular perspective Samantha brings. Though this research aims to contribute to a broader conversation about how elementary literacy teachers can find spaces of resistance, it would violate the study's theoretical framing to fail to attend to the subjectivities brought to bear by Samantha's unique positionality. As a teacher and collaborator in this work, Samantha strives to consider her complex identities, just as I do, in ways that aim to deepen an awareness of self and others in meaningful ways. For instance, there may be unanticipated assumptions lurking in our talk about students that, when considered within the framework of the discourse of accountability, provide opportunities for us to challenge our beliefs. Thus, the brief description of Samantha I provide here is based on *my* understandings of Samantha and what I've gleaned from her about her trajectory and identities. Much of what I have learned about Samantha comes from conversations recorded as part of the data for either the larger RPP study or my dissertation study. I have learned a considerable amount about Samantha, as she has about me, through additional informal, nonrecorded conversations we have had while traveling as part of the RPP work, in the moments when the recording devices were turned off and we were just catching up, and when we shared quick texts back and forth. Though nothing

we shared that was not recorded with explicit permission is cited as direct data in this study, what I have learned from informal interactions cannot be separated from my understanding of who Samantha is, and is thus drawn upon in my characterizations and analyses that come in later chapters (e.g., 6 and 7).

Samantha is a white, heterosexual, cis-gendered woman who has spent her nearly fifteen-year teaching career in the same district. After student teaching, she got a job as a kindergarten teacher in the same district but was cut after her first year because of budget constraints. She got rehired at the same school for the next school year, starting a pattern that repeated for four years where she would be cut because of budget concerns, only to be rehired when grant funding came through in the fall. The experience of uncertainty was unsettling to Samantha as she started her career, as she noted during a February 26, 2020, interview completed during the RPP, “I don’t remember teachers ever being worried about their job the next year.” She has now been at King Elementary School, the site for this study, for twelve years working as a second-grade teacher. While working together during the RPP, Samantha demonstrated an enthusiasm for the project’s goals of fostering engaging discussions with students around literacy, including both reading and writing. She found particular resonance when the project’s lessons involved reading aloud and discussing texts with students, including *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2009), which tells the story of a young boy who resists normative gender expressions, preferring dresses and sparkly things. With RPP project funds, Samantha was able to order additional books featuring characters and storylines that queered heteronormative messages often present in elementary school texts, a commitment I witnessed Samantha return to with conviction.

Outside of the classroom, Samantha is devoted to her family, often sharing pictures of her husband and daughters. The energy she brings to her classroom and her work with colleagues is undeniable, as her distinctive laugh brings levity to the undeniably important work of teaching in a school situated in a diverse community.

Focal Elementary School Description

King Elementary School serves students in kindergarten through fifth grade as part of a sprawling, mid-sized school district serving several suburban and exurban communities outside a large metropolitan area in the mountain west of the US. During the 2021-2022 school year, 387 students attended King, including a population of students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs who attend the affective needs (AN) center housed at King. Table 3.1 shows the demographics of King's students compared with the demographics of the district. As gleaned from data published on the state department of education website, King's populations of emergent bilingual students, low-income families, and students of color are larger than the district as a whole (not linked to ensure confidentiality of participants). These categories are often used as coded language meant to represent the challenges faced in particular schools as part of a deficit perspective embedded within much of the conversation about school reform and accountability. Rather than presenting this information for this purpose, I highlight these demographics to illustrate the rich diversity of the community with the recognition that standardized assessments and curricula often do not draw on the existing knowledge and strengths inherent in such diversity (Muhammad, 2020). For example, during the school year in which this study takes place, Samantha's students

brought a total of five different home languages to the classroom, creating a tapestry of linguistic repertoires that enriches their literacy learning.

In order to begin to conceptualize how the discourse of accountability circulated in Samantha and my conversations at King, it is important to understand how King has been constructed through the existing and interrelated discourses of academic performance and poverty. In an interview I conducted in 2019 to learn more about King, the school's long-term office manager explained how King's status as a Title I school, which significantly impacts the funding available to the school, has fluctuated over the years. In addition to its fluctuating Title I status, King's academic performance, as measured primarily through academic achievement and growth on the state-mandated assessments, has also wavered over the years (state department of education, 1999-2023). For elementary schools, the state uses a School Performance Framework (SPF) based on achievement and growth on third through fifth grade state-mandated English Language Arts (ELA), Math, and Science (5th grade only) assessments (state department of education, 1999-2023), to assign each school one of four performance ratings, each with a corresponding color: Turnaround (red), Priority Improvement (orange), Improvement (yellow), and Performance (green). Appendix B provides a more detailed explanation of each of these ratings. According to the State Department of Education (1999-2023), these ratings are meant to provide information to schools and their communities to let them "know how well they are doing," as well as to allow the State Department of Education and the State Board of Education to determine the type of support each school needs. As with most neoliberal accountability policies, the intended purpose of the SPF is presented as a neutral

source of information based on an objective rating system that is designed to provide differentiated support to schools. In reality, however, the pressure that results from this system creates the sense of surveillance and fear expressed by Samantha and others at King. Table 3.2 shows King's performance level on the SPF from 2010 through 2019 and for 2022. According to Patricia, the drop in performance level in 2018, along with scrutiny from the Department of Justice to ensure schools within the district, including King, are meeting the needs of their ELL population, has brought heightened anxiety and pressure to the school. The changing status King has experienced within the district's accountability structures provided an interesting backdrop to this study.

Table 3.1
2021-2022 Demographic Data for King Elementary Compared to District

Demographic Category	Percent of Student Population	
	King Elementary	District
Students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch	72	40
Students experiencing homelessness	4	2
Students receiving special education services	14	12
Students identified as gifted and talented	2	12
Emergent bilingual students ^a	29	15
Latine ^b	61	44
White	24	43
Black	4	2
Asian	4	6
Two or more races	6	5
American Indian/Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ^c	<1	<1

Note. Source: Colorado Department of Education

^aThe district and state of Colorado use the term “English language learners” or “ELLs” to identify students who speak a home language other than English and who have not yet demonstrated “proficiency” in English on state-approved language assessments. I am choosing to use the term “emergent bilinguals” instead, as it is a more culturally sustaining term.

^bThe district and state of Colorado use the term “Hispanic” to identify a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American (where their mother language is Spanish) or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. I am choosing to use the term “Latine” instead, as it is a more inclusive, culturally sustaining term.

^cDue to the small numbers for each of these groups, they are combined in this data. This is not intended to diminish either unique identity.

Table 3.2

School Performance Framework (SPF) Level for King Elementary from 2010-2019 and for 2022

Year	SPF Performance Level (Corresponding Color ^a)	Year	SPF Performance Level (Corresponding Color ^a)
2010	Performance (Green)	2016	Performance (Green)
2011	Performance (Green)	2017	Performance (Green)
2012	Priority Improvement (Orange)	2018	Improvement (Yellow)
2013	Priority Improvement (Orange)	2019	Improvement (Yellow)
2014	Performance (Green)	2022	Performance (Green)
2015	Performance (Green)		

Note. Source: State Department of Education, 1999-2023; SPF levels were not reported for the 2020 and 2021 school years due to the impact on public schools caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

^aSPF levels for schools range from Turnaround (red) to Performance (green)

Colorado READ Act

In 2012, Colorado's then-governor, John Hickenlooper signed the Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act, which repealed, reenacted, and renamed the Colorado Basic Literacy Act and replaced the Read-to-Achieve Grant Program with the Early Literacy Grant Program (Abram, 2012; Engdahl, 2012). This was considered quite an achievement at the time, as both Republican and Democratic

legislators came together along with education advocacy organizations and local business leaders to put together a policy celebrated as “a well-reasoned and research-based solution to Colorado’s early literacy crisis” (Guest Columnist, 2012, para. 2). The legislation was premised on the theory that if schools could identify students with “significant reading deficiencies” (the term used in the bill’s text) early enough, “evidence based interventions” could be put in place to ensure the students were reading on grade level by the time they entered fourth grade (Abram, 2012, p. 2). As originally envisioned, the bill would have required students who did not meet reading proficiency standards on state-selected reading tests to be retained, but the enacted version changed this to make retention a preference, not a requirement (Engdahl, 2012). The READ Act also received attention as it was considered a funded mandate, which is rare in education (Engdahl, 2012).

Despite high hopes for large gains in third grade state standardized test scores, no such improvement was seen (Garcia, 2014; Meltzer, 2019). Over the years, the READ Act was amended in 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022. The most significant amendments, and those most relevant to this study, occurred in 2019 when the statute was amended to require teachers to “successfully complete[] . . . evidence-based training in teaching reading” (Colorado READ Act, 2012/2019) and give district boards of education the authority to select the “core reading instructional programs” to be used in schools “so long as they are focused on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency including oral skills, and reading comprehension to ensure that the students educated in the public schools throughout the state consistently receive evidence-based instruction that is proven to effectively

teach children to read” (Colorado READ Act, 2012/2019). The Colorado State Board of Education, in creating the rules to enact the amended legislation, required the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to develop a process by which to review and approve curricula for inclusion on an Advisory List of Instructional Programming maintained on the Department’s website. At this time, the CDE has completed two rounds of review, with a third round in progress as of this writing (CDE, 2024c).

As a result of these amendments, the district of which King is a part, began the process of selecting a new “core reading resource” to use for elementary school instruction. During the second semester of the 2022-23 school year, when I first began collecting data, Samantha was in the midst of implementing a new reading curriculum, thus limiting the time she had available to meet for this project. I was, however, still able to engage in several conversations with her around literacy and literacy instruction that provided insight into how the discourse surrounding the Colorado READ Act was influencing how these ideas, along with the possibilities for teachers and students, were being constructed. The context for this study was not what I had initially imagined, but engaging with policy, media, and Samantha in the midst of policy changes in this time and place set the stage for rich analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection sites for this study include three overlapping spaces where discourse circulates related to the Colorado READ Act, the state-level early literacy (reading) policy I examined. These three spaces are 1) the macropolicy bodies that create and oversee the policy, 2) the local media that describes the social surround and attempts to make sense of the way schools and other actors engage the policy, and 3)

the local elementary classroom context where Samantha and her students respond to and enact the policy. Table 3.3 summarizes these data, providing a high-level snapshot of the types of data analyzed in each chapter along with the general method for collection. In the sections that follow, I describe each row of the table in detail.

Table 3.3
Summary of Data Sources for Chapters 4-6

Data Source	Mode(s) for Collection	Number
Chapter 4: Policy Analysis		
Colorado General Assembly documents	Web search; Website search; Purposive sampling	3
Colorado Department of Education documents	Website search; Purposive sampling	7
Colorado State Board of Education documents	Database search: BoardDocs; Website search; Purposive sampling	4
District Board of Education documents	Database search: BoardDocs; Website search; Purposive sampling	9
Chapter 5: Media Analysis		
Chalkbeat Colorado articles	Database search: Access World News	36
The Denver Post articles	Database search: Access World News	17
The Colorado Sun articles	Database search: Access World News	8
Colorado Public Radio stories	Internet search engine: Google; Purposive sampling	4

Data Source	Mode(s) for Collection	Number
Chapter 6: Local Context Analysis		
Conversations	Audio recordings, typed transcripts, researcher journal	5
Classroom literacy instruction	Field notes, researcher journal	
Artifacts		4

Data Collection: Chapter 4

In chapter 4, I examine the discourse surrounding the READ Act as produced by relevant macropolitical bodies. Here, I am using *macropolitical* to define any policy arena where decisions are made that create rules, regulations, or mandates that have an enforceable impact on teachers and/or classroom practices. In the case of the READ Act, the requirement that teachers complete training in the evidence-based teaching of reading, as well as the requirement that districts use evidence-based core reading programs are both written into state law by the Colorado State General Assembly, and in turn are enforced by the Colorado Department of Education in collaboration with the Colorado State Board of Education. The District Board of Education and Instructional Leadership is held to account by these latter two bodies. Thus, these four entities make up the macropolitical bodies whose discourse I analyzed for this study. In selecting data to analyze, I adopted Ball's (1993) stance in considering policy as both text and discourse. Thus, I considered anything that was produced by these four bodies as open for inclusion in the data set. I began my data search with the websites

for each of the four bodies⁴. I found the amount of data related to the READ Act available across these bodies to be staggering, particularly in the case of the CDE. To create a manageable data set, I undertook a process of purposive and iterative sampling, as my goals for data collection were to find a range of texts that would fit within the contours of my research questions, and purposive sampling allows researchers to make multiple “sampling decisions based on the evidential quality of data collected” (Collins, 2010, p. 360). Purposive sampling allowed me to create a corpus of data to satisfy the following criteria: 1) appropriate for my research questions; 2) representative across the selected bodies, meaning an adequate number of sources from each body; 3) representative within the selected bodies, meaning where appropriate and possible a variety of types of sources from each of the bodies; and 4) sources spanning at least several years. In the following paragraphs, I describe the process I engaged for narrowing down the data sample from each body.

Colorado General Assembly

The process for collecting data from the Colorado General Assembly to include in the detailed CDA protocol was the most straightforward of the four bodies. The General Assembly does not produce an extensive amount of material relevant to enacting policy, as this is the CDE’s and State Board’s job (see Appendix C for a flowchart showing the relationship between the three bodies). The most important data source from the General Assembly is the actual text of the Colorado READ Act, and though I did review each of the amendments that were passed in 2017, 2018, 2019,

⁴ Colorado General Assembly: <https://leg.colorado.gov/> ; Colorado Department of Education: <https://www.cde.state.co.us/> ; Colorado State Board of Education: <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeboard> ; District Board of Education: masked

2021, and 2022, I analyzed the original 2012 text, the 2019 amended version, and an updated version published in 2022 as a cohesive text containing all of the amendments through 2022. For purposes of accounting for sources, I refer to the READ Act legislative text as one source. Each of these documents were available on the CDE's website. In addition, I included an Issue Brief published in October 2019 by the Legislative Council Staff that summarized the 2019 READ Act amendments and one report, the 2023 Annual Report on the Colorado READ Act, which was written for the General Assembly as required by legislation. These last two sources provided a lens on how the READ Act was talked about within the legislative space but outside of official legislative text.

Colorado Department of Education

The CDE had by far the most information available through their website related to the READ Act. In many ways, this is not surprising, as this is the body that works closely with schools and employs staff who develop resources that support district leadership, school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. Though I navigated the CDE's website and looked at many resources, taking note of general impressions and patterns of interest, I used the purposive sampling method (Collins, 2010) to select seven documents to analyze in detail using the CDA protocol. First, I selected the Colorado READ Act Fact Sheet (2017), as I believed it would provide a clear picture of the how literacy, instruction, students, and other ideas were positioned by the CDE in relation to this policy. As this study took place while Samantha was implementing a new curriculum as a result of the READ Act, I looked for resources offered by the CDE that related to the selection of curriculum. I selected

a PowerPoint presentation, complete with detailed notes and audio, titled Selecting an Instructional Program, as well as the website explaining the 2021-22 READ Act Instructional Programming Review Process. Also aligned with curricular choices, I selected the rubric for the 2021-22 Instructional Programming Review Process, which is an Excel document accessed through the CDE's website. I was also interested in discourse around the 2019 amendments, so I selected the READ Act Update document for SB 19-199, which was similar to the 2017 Fact Sheet document in format. As one more additional source for a broad lens on the law, I selected the READ Act FAQs website. The last source associated with the CDE was the Literacy Transparency Act website, which is directly related to the curriculum mandates in the 2019 READ Act amendments but was passed as part of the 2021 amendments to the READ Act, so I was curious to see how discourse of accountability would be visible on this site.

Colorado State Board of Education

When I began the process to select data to include from the State Board of Education, I had already selected materials for the CDE that focused on curriculum resources. I visited The State Board of Education's website, which is accessible through the CDE's website, and accessed the board's meeting archives through a platform called BoardDocs, "the market-leading board portal" (Diligent Corporation, 2024). Although it is not a very sophisticated search engine, I was able to search for "READ Act" and locate the meetings where the board talked about the READ Act (see chapter 4 for more details about searches for board meeting content). The BoardDocs platform includes agendas and attachments to materials, such as PowerPoint slides from presentations for each meeting, so I was able to search through these documents

to find meetings where curricular resources for K-3 were on the agenda. I selected a board meeting in August 2020 that fit what I was looking for, as it occurred shortly after the READ Act amendment in 2019, which would provide a good introductory context for the process. I selected another meeting from September 2023 that included a report from WestEd, the outside evaluator contracted to review the READ Act. This was selected as the PowerPoint attached included coverage of the curricular resources and the teacher training, and I thought the outside perspective and more recent date would satisfy the criteria I was looking for in my sample in terms of representation of time and content. There are recordings of the board meetings available on YouTube with transcripts, so I copied the transcripts into Word documents, watched the meetings, and simultaneously did a rough clean-up of the transcripts, noting excerpts to return to for more detailed clean-up for analysis. In chapter 4. I discuss some particulars of my decisions with regards to transcription, but in general, I was most interested in a word-level analysis and did not include any articulations such as “um” or “er” or nonverbal communication in the videos, nor did I attend closely to overlaps in utterances. For each of the two board meetings I selected, I analyzed the PowerPoint slides used in the presentation and the meeting transcript. I also gleaned some information from the video, though I do not include it in my data set for close analysis, as I did not engage in multimodal analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996),

District Board of Education and Instructional Leadership

In gathering data for the District Board of Education and Instructional Leadership, I engaged in a similar process as that for the State Board of Education. I went first to the District’s website to see if there were additional sources of policy

related to literacy available before locating the District Board of Education's section within the District's site. I did locate a news release on the District's website about the new elementary literacy (reading) curriculum that I used as part of the analysis for this study within the category of artifact. The District Board of Education also used the BoardDocs platform, and I was able to search for meetings related to the READ Act and elementary literacy. I ultimately selected four board meetings to analyze, along with materials from one board work study session. The work study session took place in April 2021, and the meetings took place in September 2021, January 2022, April 2022, and May 2022. I am not providing the exact date for each of these meetings in order to mask the identification of the district. The meetings represent a range of time over which the district was working on the process of adopting a "core reading resource," a term used in place of curriculum, in response to the READ Act amendments. Don, the district's Chief Academic Officer, led the process and was most commonly the lead voice at these meetings, in addition to the board members and the district superintendent, Charles. Each of these meetings included transcripts available on YouTube, where meeting videos were published, and I engaged in the same process described above for the State Board of Education meetings in putting together the transcripts for analysis. The meetings, with the exception of the September 2021 meeting, all had slides, which I analyzed as well. The September 2021 meeting included a document that I included in the data set for analysis. The work study session in April 2021 did not include any recordings, but did include slides, which I analyzed.

When combining the data from each of the four bodies, the data set for chapter 4 includes three documents from the Colorado General Assembly, seven from the CDE, four from the State Board of Education, and nine from the District Board of Education and Instructional Leadership. A summary of these data is displayed in Appendix D.

Data Collection: Chapter 5

For chapter 5, I analyzed the discourse used in local media sources to construct ideas about literacy, literacy learning, teachers, and students in relation to the READ Act. To gather this data, I used the academic search engine Access World News. I decided to start my search by selecting three print sources to keep the data set to a manageable size. As I have lived and worked in the education field in the Denver area for over thirteen years, I am familiar with the education news sources in the area, which helped me in choosing the publications to draw from. *The Denver Post* is the largest newspaper in the state and the 11th largest in the country, as of 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2015, The Major Daily Newspaper section, para. 3), so I wanted to include this source for its prominence and large reach. I know *Chalkbeat Colorado* to be a reliable and consistent source for local education news along the front range, and every educator I talk to is familiar with it so is likely to have seen at least some of their reporting relative to the READ Act. *Chalkbeat Colorado* is a nonprofit news organization that is unaffiliated with a university or other organization (Pew Research Center, 2015, Dedicated Journalistic/News Entities section, para. 14). I selected *The Colorado Sun* as the third source, as it is a unique voice given its independence. It is a journalist-owned nonprofit publication that is only recently launched in 2018 (The

Colorado Sun, 2024, para. 3). They promote themselves as nonpartisan and “committed to fact-based” reporting. Being so new, of course, limits its coverage of historical news related to the READ Act, but I knew I would have plenty of coverage from *Chalkbeat* and *The Denver Post* from those earlier years.

Using Access World News, I searched for the key words “READ Act” OR “early literacy” OR “elementary literacy,” limiting the search to the years 2010-2024. I conducted this search separately to look within each of the three sources (*The Denver Post*, *Chalkbeat Colorado*, and *The Colorado Sun*). A summary of the search results is found in Table 3.4.

From these results, I reviewed the articles, and eliminated articles that focused on the legislative process or were repetitive of something that I had covered in other articles, though of course trends are interesting. I also noted if there were articles taken from other sources I used, which was the case often for articles from *Chalkbeat*, which reappeared in *The Colorado Sun* and *The Denver Post*. For example, an article titled “6 takeaways from a 1.5 million evaluation of Colorado’s reading law” (Schimke, 2021c) is in *Chalkbeat* on July 30, 2021, but in *The Colorado Sun* on August 2, 2021. Once I eliminated articles using these criteria, my resulting data set included 17 articles from *The Denver Post*, 36 articles from *Chalkbeat Colorado*, and eight from *The Colorado Sun*. I decided to add one more source that is an important voice in the news landscape on the front range, Colorado Public Radio (CPR). I used Google and searched for “Colorado Public Radio” AND “Brundin” AND “literacy” to do a purposive sampling, as I knew that Brundin is the educator reporter for CPR. I found a total of four articles spanning the timeframe that I was looking for to supplement my

existing data set. In all, I ended up with a data set of 65 articles to analyze using the CDA protocol I describe below. A summary of these data is displayed in Table 3.4, and the full list of articles can be found in Appendix E.

Table 3.4
Database Search Results: Chapter 5

Publication	Initial Results	Years	Final Number
Chalkbeat Colorado ^a	423	2010-2024	–
Chalkbeat Colorado	147	2012-2024	36
The Denver Post	221	2010-2023	17
The Colorado Sun	39	2018-2024	8
Colorado Public Radio ^b	–	2011-2023	4
Total			65

^a Due to the large number of results from the first Chalkbeat Colorado search, I conducted a second search for this publication without the term “early literacy,” which yielded 147 results, from which I selected the final 36 articles for analysis.

^b Purposive sampling (Collins, 2010), not database, used for Colorado Public Radio.

Data Collection: Chapter 6

Data sources drawn on for analysis for chapter 6 include audio recordings of conversations with Samantha; typed transcripts of recordings; field notes taken during research activities, including visits to King during Samantha’s reading instructional block; researcher journal entries completed after most classroom visits and interactions with Samantha throughout the research process; and a small number of artifacts

produced and engaged with during the course of the research, described in detail in chapter 6.

Audio Recordings

Audio recording provided the primary data collection procedure for this chapter. Transcripts from audio recordings are serve as focal texts for CDA of discursive formations of *literacy* and *literacy instruction*, as well as the positioning of students and a teacher in an elementary literacy classroom in the context of the READ Act policy environment. I engaged in recorded conversations with Samantha on five occasions during the course of this study, resulting in approximately 5.25 hours of recorded audio.

Though all of my transcripts of conversations with Samantha were analyzed using the same protocols I used for the document analysis for chapters 4 and 5, the format for the conversations varied slightly. The initial conversation was a semi-structured interview, as described below. The remaining four conversations served as research meetings, though did not involve a formal or informal structure of any kind.

Pre-Research Interview

I conducted a semi-structured interview with Samantha on May 5, 2023, to establish an initial understanding of her perspectives on literacy and her experiences as an educator. As originally conceived, this conversation would provide insight into how Samantha constructed literacy and literacy instruction, as well as her and her students' roles within such constructions, at the beginning of our work together. At the end of our work, we could revisit this conversation and see what, if anything, had changed. As will become clear after reading my findings and analysis, this was a flawed conceit

from the beginning, and I did not end up using this conversation in that way at all. Regardless of the intent, however, the conversation was just as rich and full of analytical potential as each of the other conversations. The only reason I position it apart from the others is because I shaped it around a semi-structured interview protocol, which can be found in Appendix F. This conversation took place in a one-on-one setting outside of school hours and was recorded.

Transcripts

Transcriptions of all recorded conversations with Samantha were made using the transcription service, Trint, to make an initial, rough version of the transcript. There are many decisions a researcher must make when determining what and how to transcribe. These decisions reflect the transcriber's social and theoretical beliefs and will necessarily forefront particular elements of a speech event while minimizing others. Thus, transcription is an inherently political process, the result of which bears the mark of the transcriber's positionality and theoretical commitments (Bucholtz, 2000). To account for this critical understanding, it is incumbent upon me to acknowledge and explain the decisions I make when transcribing data in what Bucholtz (2000) described as "reflexive discourse analysis" (p. 1463). The choice to use a transcription service is one such decision. I weighed the benefits of personally completing an initial transcription versus the time required to do so, as suggested by Cameron (2001), who notes the affordances of either option must be considered within the context of the study's purpose. For my study, the primary focus is to examine the language choices made by participants during a recorded interaction (i.e., *what* is said). Of less significance is *how* speech is performed. Thus, my concern is accuracy

of words, not attention to stress and other oral discourse features that will not be included in transcripts from a service. I believe that a transcription service met these needs by providing efficiently-obtained initial transcripts, which I used as a form of rough draft. After receiving the service-generated transcripts, I reviewed them as I listened to the original recording to make edits as necessary. Ultimately, I recognize there is no such thing as a perfect transcript that conveys one “true” representation of an interaction (Cameron, 2001; Gee, 2015), and I have attempted to practice reflexive discourse analysis (Bucholtz, 2000), as I have described earlier in this chapter.

Field Notes

Throughout the project I generated field notes as an additional source of data. Field notes are intended to describe what happened during project related experiences as a way of capturing details that were useful to contextualize various interactions. Though description is often considered the central purpose of field notes, the determination of when and how to jot something down is inherently an analytical process. Thus, when analyzing field notes, I attempted to reflect on the significance of the decision to record a note, in addition to its content (Emerson et al., 2011). For my study, I generated field notes during any time spent in Samantha’s second-grade classroom (to the extent possible, given my commitment to being involved in supportive and relational ways during my visits), as well as immediately after classroom visits and interactions with Samantha. Field notes were kept in a physical research journal, when possible, and I recorded a total of five voice memos on a smartphone after visiting Samantha’s classroom.

Researcher Journal

Throughout the process, I reflected on the process of the research through the use of a researcher journal. I adapted Maxwell's (2013) definition of "memos" as any research-related writing done outside of actual field notes. This writing allowed me to process the data as they were collected, as well as begin to describe hunches and early interpretations of findings. The journal also served as space to reflect on my positionality and decisions I made about the research, such as those regarding transcription, which had implications for analysis. I used both a physical research journal, as well as a digital research notebook I maintained through the note-taking application Evernote. Evernote allowed me to utilize functions such as tagging, linking, and keyword searching to maximize the function of this important research tool.

Artifacts

As this study progressed, artifacts were produced and engaged, though are not a primary source of data. Artifacts include a research article about literacy practice that Samantha and I read together (Davis & Vehabovic, 2018), a graphic organizer that we created together to represent the data collection requirements at King Elementary (see Appendix G), a news brief published on the District's website about the new elementary reading curriculum that I shared with Samantha, and the American Education Research Association proposal that Samantha and I wrote and that was accepted based on this research. These are analyzed in chapters 4, 5, and 6, as well as in chapter 7's discussion and implications.

Data Analysis

As this study is grounded theoretically and methodologically in CDA, my analytical blueprint is derived from Fairclough's (2001) approach to critical discourse analysis (see "Fairclough's Approach to CDA: Description, Interpretation, Explanation" above). In this section, I describe the elements from Fairclough's (2001) approach I intend to draw on in my analysis before turning to a description of two other key aspects of my proposed data analysis lens: Fairclough's (1992) intertextuality and Erickson's (2004) microethnography. I close this section with a description of the collaborative CDA process I had hoped to take up alongside Samantha as a reminder of my commitments to the premise of these goals and an aspirational note for future research.

CDA

As introduced in the Overall Research Methodology section, critical discourse analysis (CDA) as described by Fairclough (2001) is the primary analytic tool for this study. Here, I explain how Fairclough's (2001) approach informed my process when analyzing data before explicating two additional elements of discourse analysis that I drew on as additional frames for analysis: Fairclough's (1992) idea of intertextuality and Erickson's (2004) method of microethnography.

Fairclough's Approach

In Appendix H, I present the CDA protocol that I created to analyze the data for this study. I set the first step to be an initial read without annotation to get a sense of the text and set up some initial curiosities before going into subsequent readings framed by Fairclough's (2001) three stages of analysis: "*description of text,*

interpretation of the relationships between text and interaction, and *explanation* of the relationship between interaction and social context” (p. 91, emphasis original). For each of these stages, I drew on Fairclough’s questions, in many cases using them directly as written, though I made important changes to separate multi-part questions to support my understanding of what was being asked, as well as to add in additional questions to layer in elements I was pulling in from other scholarship. For example, to bring forward the idea of troubling binaries from queer theory, I added the question “How are binaries used in this text?” within the second read when attuning to vocabulary. In the next sections, I explain two concepts, the first also coming from Fairclough, that I also layered into the protocol.

Fairclough: Intertextuality

In Fairclough’s (1992) estimation, the central goal of CDA is illuminating how changing discursive practices are both a consequence of, and an instrument for, social change. Fairclough’s (1992) work puts forward an analytical framework for CDA that suggests analyzing discursive events through three dimensions: 1) as texts, 2) as occurrences of discourse practice, 3) and as occurrences of social practice.

Central to this framework is the idea of intertextuality, which derives from Bakhtin’s work considering speech genres. Intertextuality describes the circumstance whereby each utterance is connected to others in a “chain of speech communication” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89; cited in Fairclough, 1992, p. 270). That is, each utterance connects backward to utterances by earlier speakers or writers and forwards to anticipated utterances. This idea provides an important frame for my analysis of discourse throughout the entire corpus of data for this project. For this broader

analysis, I situate the neoliberal discourses of literacy and reading within a larger institutional context through connection to past utterances. In naming the intertextual chains within which a particular discourse exists, the distribution of discourse becomes visible, illuminating how the discourse serves to structure society (Fairclough, 1992). This process is of particular interest in my research, as an important part of making visible neoliberal discourses of literacy and reading in teacher talk is considering how teachers' talk reproduces or resists these discursive formations present in various texts (in the broadest sense of the word) that exist within a school site. The important idea of intertextuality is one way that I can account for the pervasiveness of neoliberal discourses of literacy and reading in education. For Fairclough (1992), the ultimate goal of tracing the intertextual chains of a particular discourse is to understand how social change happens through language. Drawing on Gramsci's notion of hegemony to conceptualize the relationships between language, culture, ideology, and power, Fairclough conceives of discourse as a site of potential social change (Erickson, 2004). Although the "way things are" becomes naturalized through language and discourse, Fairclough (1992) recognizes the instability of such hegemony as creating openings for discursive events to either preserve or transform the social order. Within my analysis across multiple spaces where elementary literacy (reading) is saturated with neoliberal ideology, thinking about how discourse can be "basically conservative, sustaining continuity, or basically transformatory, effecting changes" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 39; cited in Erickson, 2004, p. 131) has been an important component in imagining implications of this study's findings as a potential tool for teachers seeking to find ways to resist restrictive accountability structures. If neoliberal discourses of

literacy and reading are conceived as inevitable and “the way things are” without the additional recognition of the possibility for transformation, the study will be of limited use in driving change. I added a section of questions about intertextuality to my CDA protocol to ensure that I attuned to these ideas while analyzing my data sources.

Erickson: Microethnography

Erickson (2004) draws on a variety of social and linguistic theorists to describe his approach to discourse analysis. Named “microethnography” (p. viii), this approach resonates with my research goals in that he highlights an important dialectical tension within the field between voluntarism and determinism. While voluntarism maintains that what happens in society follows fundamentally from individual choice, determinism takes the other extreme in conceiving society as existing prior to the individual. In considering neoliberal discourses of literacy and reading, a stance in support of voluntarism suggests that teachers have the ability as individuals to operate autonomously in acquiescing or contesting the ideological limits of how reading is constructed. A fully deterministic view, on the other hand, suggests that teachers’ actions are predetermined and fully constrained by a functionalist ideology, thus rendering resistance impossible. These two extremes, as Erickson contends, fail to account for reality, and the tension between the two has not been adequately studied. Microethnography, Erickson’s proposed theory of practices in talk, draws on the work of many social theorists, each of whom offer valuable insight into how reality is constructed and reproduced. He ultimately views discourse as not always innovative, but always practical. Thus, Erickson contends, participants in local social interaction are continually adjusting to the present moment, providing opportunities for these

actors to innovate within an existing discourse. The local social interaction becomes a site of construction, though interactors may not be aware of the ways their adjustments alter discourses, even if just for that moment.

Intrigued by Erickson's (2004) perspectives, I layered his microethnographic lens onto Fairclough's (2001) CDA approach through the addition of analytic questions that attempt to make visible two features of discourse. First, inspired by Erickson's attention to "continual opportunistic action" (p. 162) taken by participants in social interaction, I asked questions of the transcripts to understand the temporal implications of utterances, particularly those that counter neoliberal discourses of literacy and reading. In other words, I sought to determine if an utterance is part of an ongoing, concerted effort to resist neoliberal discourses of literacy and reading that I would expect to carry over multiple interactions through time or if it could be classified as an in-the-moment reaction to something taking place within the interaction. Second, I added sub-questions to reinforce the evaluation questions from Fairclough's (2001) approach that seek to understand if utterances align with neoliberal discourses of literacy and reading or are in contrast to such. Though Fairclough's evaluation questions get at this idea, Erickson's (2004) theory of microethnography pushed me to notice how utterances may move into and out of alignment with neoliberal discourses of literacy and reading over short stretches of time (see Appendix H to see how these questions are embedded in my CDA protocol). Erickson's microethnography provided a helpful addition to my analytical approach in alignment with the elements of queer theory underpinning this study and supported by

discussion and conclusions in chapter 7 in disrupting the notion that teachers are *either* agentic or controlled; *either* operating against neoliberal policies or reifying them.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have laid out how I completed this study. Grounded in methodological commitments shaped by my theoretical framework, I have designed a study that takes up inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) to collaborate with Samantha, a second-grade teacher who strives to engage her students in ways that honor her commitments to her their unique identities as learners while operating in a system shaped by neoliberal discourses of literacy and reading. In the next three chapters, I present the findings from my analysis of discourse surrounding the Colorado READ Act and how it constructs literacy, literacy instruction, students, and teachers.

Chapter 4: Elementary Literacy as Constructed within the Macropolitical Space

This chapter considers the discourse of elementary literacy as constructed within the macropolitical space, which is within the political space where policy is crafted and interpreted in ways that result in directives that influence what is available to teachers in the elementary classroom. The political realm for this study includes the following interconnected bodies, each of which comprises a set of actors who authorize, create, enact, and enforce policies, rules, and regulations related to public schools in the state of Colorado: the Colorado General Assembly (GA), the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), the Colorado State Board of Education (SBE), and the District Board of Education and Instructional Leadership (DBE) (henceforth referred to collectively as “the bodies”). Each of these bodies generates and makes publicly available policy documents meant for various audiences, ranging from the original text of enacted bills from the GA to a handout used to summarize a presentation to the DBE.

In this chapter, I begin with a brief description of the data selection and analysis process specific to this chapter before turning to an analysis and discussion of significant findings. I put the pieces of my analysis together to tell the story that emerges from the discourse in and around the Colorado READ Act policy. What is voiced again and again and what remains unspoken reveals how power operates within a system built on neoliberal and technocratic logics undergirded by an uncritical devotion to science and evidence that ultimately positions reading, reading instruction, and readers in particular ways that silence possibilities beyond binaries.

Critical Discourse Analysis Protocol

I applied the four-round CDA protocol I developed for this study (see Appendix H). Beginning with a first read to note general impressions, I drew on Fairclough's (2001) suggested sequence of analysis, working through the vocabulary, grammar, and interpretation and evaluation-focused questions to attempt to answer my research questions. During early analysis, I coded for most of the questions from the protocol, but as the process progressed, I found that some aspects of each round were emerging more frequently, while others were not present at all. Through this process, I put together a codebook organized around the Second (vocabulary), Third (Grammar), and Fourth (Interpretation/Evaluation) Reads (see Appendix I for full codebook).

Between each analytical round, I completed data journals, which most often consisted of responses to the questions from the protocol that seemed most salient to the piece of data under scrutiny and were of most interest to me in the moment. These memos also included excerpts of text or references to slide numbers I wanted to return to for further consideration. The way I have described the protocol, it sounds like this analysis was orderly. In practice, it was much messier. I did not, for example, apply the four-round analysis protocol to each document in turn before moving onto another document. In fact, I did not have all the documents I ended up using identified from the beginning. At times, I would do an initial read of a document without any coding and be prompted to seek out an additional source referenced in the first document, leading me to do a first review of that document before returning to complete rounds two through four of the original documents. What this iterative and sometimes cyclical process demonstrates is that the documents available related to the READ Act policy

and its implementation are numerous, and sometimes distinct and other times interrelated suggesting the significance of this policy to the state and its consequential nature for teachers and kids.

Findings

In the sections that follow, I present the findings from my critical discourse analysis of the documents produced by the macropolitical bodies. I begin with an in-depth analysis of the opening text of the READ Act. This serves to elucidate the underlying ideologies in the policy at the heart of this study, as well as unearth several key themes that are threaded through many of the other documents. From the policy text, my research questions frame the remainder of the analysis, as I consider how these bodies discursively construct each of the following components of elementary literacy in turn: *literacy*, *literacy instruction*, *teachers*, and *students*.

Opening (READ) Act

There are many possible beginnings to this story. One is to start with the policy, which is where I turn first. The opening Legislative Declaration of the Colorado READ Act provides a sound analytical entry point, as it states the intended goals for the policy, allowing for an early excavation of themes that will continue throughout the remainder of this and subsequent chapters. The remaining text of the bill after this initial declaration consists of definitions of important terms and the requirements of the statute. Appendix J contains the full text of the Legislative Declaration. This excerpt is taken from the most recent READ Act text published to the CDE's website, which contains the bill's original 2012 text revised to include the changes made with each of the amendments made in the years 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022.

Approximately half of the text in the Legislative Declaration was in the original bill, with section (3) and its subsections (a)-(d) added as amendments in 2017 and section (1.5) along with subsections (a)-(b) added with the amendments in 2019.

I have coded the excerpt to show discursive moves that illustrate four themes in the discourse of the READ Act, including the logics undergirding the policy, what is valued, and what is less significant. First, I have bolded reference to literacy practice. This excerpt references a range of literacy practices: *literacy* (broadly), *rich linguistic experiences*, *listening comprehension*, *speaking*, *reading* (broadly), *writing*, *foundational reading skills*, *phonemic awareness*, *phonics*, *vocabulary development*, *reading fluency*, *oral skills*, and *reading comprehension*. From a purely numeric lens, the frequency with which *reading* appears relative to other literacy practices makes clear that reading is prioritized over the others. Though, it is notable that many other forms of literacy practice are mentioned here. Most significantly the reference in subsection (1)(e) to the importance of family literacy seems to signal toward a sociocultural view of literacy, recognizing the “rich linguistic experiences,” that occur outside of school where families engage in literate practices and ways of being (Paris, 2012) that represent the diverse cultural backgrounds that exist across America and within neighborhoods. This turns quickly to a functionalist literacy perspective, however, positioning literacy as a set of skills to be acquired in service of specific ends (Lambirth, 2011), when these home literacy experiences are valued only for their academic usefulness, first as “the foundation for reading and writing,” which are in turn “the main vehicles for content acquisition” (subsection (1)(e))—the real goal.

Continuing with the idea of functionalist benefits, I next employed underlining to denote benefits that would accrue to a student as a result of reading success. Understanding what is valued in this context signals the ideological foundation that elevates reading over other forms of literacy. When attempting to code for this, I found passive sentences and vague nouns result in few concrete outcomes for students. Much of this may be attributed to grammar and structural rules for legislation as a text genre, though I do not think this fully accounts for the lack of meaningful benefits articulated for students. The opening declaration, “All students can succeed in school if they have the foundational skills necessary for academic success,” (subsection (1)(a)) repeats a derivative of “succeed” twice, which immediately raises an ideologically contested idea within education. The purpose for school is not without debate, as education scholars have argued competing beliefs about what it means to succeed and whether education should be considered a public or private good have made implementing policy solutions challenging (Labaree, 1997). Thus, I consider this policy to be situated on ideologically uncertain ground, even though I believe the policymakers tie success to neoliberal logics viewing education as a private, commodified good intended to bring benefits to the individual through accumulation (see for example, Au, 2016). This is seen in the Legislative Declaration and will be clear elsewhere in other policy documents. In the context of the excerpt in Appendix J, success is confined almost exclusively to one’s “educational career” (subsection (1.5)(a)(I))—the only exception is a nod to early literacy education’s role in the production of a “more competitive workforce” (subsection (1)(d))—with vague ideas related to *student*

achievement, academic content/curriculum, and proficiency identified as benefits for students. The following examples illustrate each of these concepts, respectively:

1. “A comprehensive approach to early literacy education can *improve student achievement*” (subsection (1)(d), emphasis mine).
2. The legislature’s goal is for schools to work with educators and parents to “ensure that students, by the completion of third grade, can demonstrate a level of competency in reading skills that is necessary to support them in achieving the *academic standards and expectations applicable to the fourth-grade curriculum*” (section (2), emphasis mine).
3. “The purpose of this part 12 is to provide students with the necessary supports they need to be able to *read with proficiency by third grade*” (subsection (3)(a), emphasis mine).

Limiting the benefits of reading for students to achievement and proficiency aligns with and shows a meritocratic definition of success, as individual student accomplishment is positioned as desirable. Importantly, this accomplishment is tied to the school’s sanctioned curriculum and content standards but has no personal relevance to student interest or imagined possibility beyond the school walls or connection to family or community that was evoked at the beginning of the declaration.

The suggested goals for students are not only vague, but they are also short sighted. The legislation frames the primary purpose for developing reading proficiency as enabling students access to grade level content in fourth grade. A version of this is mentioned explicitly twice:

1. “. . . by the completion of third grade, can demonstrate a level of competency in reading skills that is necessary to support them in *achieving the academic standards and expectations applicable to the fourth-grade curriculum*” (section (2), emphasis mine).
2. “The purpose of this part 12 is to provide students with the necessary supports they need to be able to read with proficiency by third grade so that their academic growth and achievement is not hindered by low literacy skills in *fourth grade and beyond*” (subsection (3)(a), emphasis mine).

In both instances, attaining a level of competent reading by third grade is positioned as necessary to engage in the fourth-grade classroom. Interestingly, in the first instance, this is presented using a positive framing—the reading skills students achieve will support them to achieve the standards—while in the second instance, it is framed negatively, warning that low literacy skills will prevent academic growth and achievement if students do not attain proficiency in third grade. The use of the positive framing here is notable, as warning of the dire consequences of failing to achieve reading proficiency by third grade will be seen throughout the findings in this and subsequent chapters, and it is much more common to find the alarmist language used in the negative framing. As I mentioned above, there is one mention of the early literacy education supporting a “more skilled and more competitive workforce” (subsection (1)(d)), and to be fair, the words “and beyond” are added after “fourth grade” in the second instance of this discursive construction of goals for students, so this opening declaration in the legislation cannot be characterized as fully constraining

literacy (reading) to school. The fact, then, that the bill's authors made so little effort to include reference to the benefits of reading beyond school suggests that it is an authentic representation of ideologies underlying the policy that circulate through discourse across the various bodies interacting with this legislation. Messages about the purposes for and benefits of reading shape what is imagined as a possible reading identity, and what is presented here is exceedingly limited.

Such limited constructions of reading for students reinforce the functionalist views of literacy, which to be clear is reduced immediately to include just reading after mentioning the early literacy experiences developed at home. Even writing, which was given credit, along with reading as one of “the main vehicles for content acquisition” (subsection (1)(d)) is not mentioned again in the remainder of the selection, nor in the rest of the policy in a context referring to students engaging in the practice of writing as a literacy pursuit. Thus, a functionalist view of reading (Lambirth, 2011) is put forth as a set of skills that students acquire in order to achieve proficiency in service of accessing the curriculum and content encountered in school to access or increase something valuable known as *student achievement*. The discursive processes at work here lie on the assumption, which is prevalent in neoliberal logics of individualism and competition, that student achievement is a known commodity that holds value. Thus, nothing more needs to be included in the legislation to convince the public of the worthiness of such a policy. A goal of increasing student achievement is sufficient and any inclusion of additional imagined possibilities for students is unnecessary.

Another idea valued in this excerpt is *science*. I have used a grey highlight to indicate this language in the excerpt in Appendix J. Referred to variably as *science*,

research, or *evidence*, anything that can be shown to be backed by these ideas is highly regarded in this legislation, and throughout the circulating discourse. The word *science* or *scientifically* appears 29 times in the full text of the revised READ Act, while *evidence* appears 54 times and *research*, eight. In the Legislative Declaration excerpt, *evidence* and *research* are deployed to promote the “foundational reading skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency including oral skills, and reading comprehension,” as the necessary focus of any “core reading instructional programs and reading interventions” (subsection (1.5)(b)) that are used in public schools. Interestingly, *research* or *evidence* was not as central to this Legislative Declaration in the bill’s original 2012 text as it is in the amended text added in 2017 and 2019. The excerpt that appears in Appendix J, section (1) is from the bill’s original 2012 text and contains just one sentence deploying the logic of science, which I have partially reproduced here: “. . . instructional programming that is *proven to be effective*, and training and professional development programs, to effectively teach the *science of reading*” (subsection (1)(f), emphasis mine). The 2017 amendment added section (3), a statement about research regarding literacy learning in another language. This section is quite brief and only includes one sentence using the word *research*, as well. Subsection (3)(c) reads, “*Research* demonstrates that a person who has strong reading skills in one language will more easily learn and become literate in a second language” (emphasis mine). The way that the sentence is used is significant given the context in which this amendment was enacted. While it is beyond the scope of this study to go into detail, it is useful to understand that prior to this 2017 amendment, all students, regardless of their previous opportunity to develop English language skills,

were required to take READ Act assessments in English in kindergarten and grades 1-3. This resulted in many emergent bilingual students being identified as having a significant reading deficiency. Many educators, families, community members, and legislators advocated, eventually successfully, to change the READ Act requirements to allow teachers to determine in which language students should take READ Act assessments. Thus, the use of *research* here is being used to validate the multiple literate identities of students. By drawing on a language with currency—that of evidence and research—the recognition of the importance of sustaining a child’s home language (Paris, 2012), and framing it through research as a tool that will advance the goals of the READ Act to support students to read proficiently by third grade in any language, is an important critical discursive move.

The 2019 amendment added section (1.5) to the original bill’s text, using research and evidence to justify the SBE’s oversight of local education providers’ (i.e., school districts’) reading instruction, as well as to grant authority to district boards of education to select the core reading instructional programs and reading interventions to be used in their schools. Again, this is a discursive move that allows the legislature to accomplish its goals of achieving more oversight of local school boards in the face of increasing criticism that the READ Act had cost a lot of money and had not resulted in student achievement as measured by student test scores (more on this later in the chapter and in chapter 5). In a state where local control of instruction is not just part of the libertarian political leanings of this region of the United States but is enshrined in the state constitution (Gaffey & Jones-Rogers, 2022), the GA uses *research* and *evidence* to gain authority and credibility to justify usurping from local district boards

of education a long-held right. This was achieved by first establishing that “*Research shows* that reading instruction that is focused around the [five] foundational reading skills is highly effective in teaching young children to read” (subsection (1.5)(a)(II), emphasis mine). The intensifier *highly* compounds the effect of this statement, while the use of the adjective *young* serves to evoke the stakes, as it has been established through earlier statements that children must acquire reading skills at a young age. Then, the amendment’s authors claim that since the constitution also requires the GA to keep up a “thorough and uniform system of free public education throughout the state” (subsection (1.5)(a)(IV)), an important part of such a responsibility is to ensure that “each child has access through the public schools to evidence-based reading instruction,” (subsection (1.5)(b)). The legislators continue to justify their need to erode local control through an appeal to the need for accountability to ensure the research-based practices are used in all schools. These appeals to the rationality of the truth of research and the requirement that oversight is needed to enforce an efficient system leads to the final theme highlighted in this READ Act text.

The last code I have used in this excerpt brings the previous three together. I have used italics to denote where neoliberal or technocratic logics are evident. Some of the key elements of neoliberal logics evident here are:

1. Meritocracy or individualism
2. Efficiency
3. Education as skills development

And I am layering in the idea of a technocratic solution, which brings in this element:

4. Trust in tools

I return to the opening statement to see both the ideas of meritocracy or individualism and education as skills development as ideological underpinnings. The statement further promotes these ideals as it identifies self-discipline as an additional foundational skill:

All students can succeed in school if they have the foundational skills necessary for academic success. While foundational skills go beyond academic skills to include such skills as social competence and self-discipline, they must also include the ability to read, understand, interpret, and apply information.

(subsection (1)(a))

This legislation is premised from the beginning on the idea that if students are equipped with the needed skills, they can succeed. This is the classic neoliberal logic underlying the accountability movement whereby if you do not succeed, you as an individual are at fault, not the system (Au, 2016). Efficiency and the focus on saving costs and promoting a stronger economy through the means of production follows almost immediately after in the statement, “It is more cost-effective to invest in effective early literacy education rather than to absorb costs for remediation in middle school, high school, and beyond,” (subsection (1)(c)), which is continued in the subsequent statement where effective early literacy education is connected to the “produc[tion of] a better educated, more skilled, and more competitive workforce” (subsection (1)(d)), adding to the idea that the point of education is to generate human capital to drive production, which is foundational to neoliberal theories of education (Becker, 1976; as cited in Lambirth, 2011). The repetition of the evidence base for teaching reading and the specific foundational skills for teaching reading, which are

listed in the exact same way each and every time—"reading instruction that is focused around the foundational reading skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency including oral skills, and reading comprehension" (subsection (1.5)(a)(II))—speaks to a technocratic stance and trust in tools derived from evidence. This is related to the rationality of neoliberal logics in describing an ideology that believes fervently in the results of scientific research, trusting that solutions based on such evidence are infallible. In the case of the READ Act Legislative Declaration, there is unwavering belief in the fact that there are exactly five foundational reading skills, and they are *phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency including oral skills, and reading comprehension*. The certainty the general assembly possesses that these skills are necessary and sufficient to ensure that every child in Colorado will learn to read is so great that they have included in the READ Act a provision that grants authority to local school boards to "hold local education providers accountable for demonstrating that the reading instruction they provide is focused on these five foundational reading skills" (subsection (1.5)(b)). There are two important elements that generally accompany discourse illustrative of trust in tools as part of a belief in technocratic solutions. First, the tool is positioned as context-neutral, meaning it will work in any situation. In the case of the tools offered as solutions in the READ Act—evidence-based instructional programs, identifying and labeling students with "deficiencies," requiring teachers receive additional training—none of these tools require consideration of socioeconomic, systemic, and structural issues that contribute to children's experiences with literacy in school. Thus, in theory, and in line with the

meritocratic logics of neoliberalism, these tools can be used for all children, and if they do not work equally well for all, the children, families, and teachers can be blamed. Second, the tool is presented as easy-to-use and lacking complexity. This is related to the first point in that considering societal factors necessarily introduces complexity to any education policy solution. When technocratic ideologies are present, however, the complexity is ignored in favor of what often comes off as a “quick-fix.” This is evident in this Legislative Declaration’s treatment of the five simple foundational reading skills that are positioned as all that is necessary for children to achieve reading success. It almost sounds too good to be true. Well, that’s because it is.

To summarize, in analyzing this excerpt from the opening Legislative Declaration of the Colorado READ Act, I have shown the following:

1. Literacy is viewed from a functionalist perspective, wherein it is valued as a set of foundational reading skills accumulated in service of accessing primarily grade level content and achieving a vague idea of academic success referred to as *student achievement*.
2. *Evidence, science, and research* are positioned as the authoritative voice that has grown stronger over time.
3. The policy is shaped by neoliberal and technocratic logics, presenting education as a meritocratic system in service of efficiently producing human capital through the use of simplistic, context-neutral, evidence-based tools.

These logics are repeated throughout the documents in my data set for this chapter. As I present findings related to each of the constructions from my research questions, I will illuminate these ideologies.

Literacy is Reading and Reading is the Science of Reading

A central project of CDA is to consider how language constructs reality and makes (im)possible ways of knowing and being. Each of my research questions for this study seeks to do this work in relation to an aspect of elementary literacy. I begin here with the broadest question: *how do the policy documents produced by the various macropolitical bodies construct literacy?* In finding answers to this question, I engaged many of the elements of my CDA protocol and codes, including asking *which classification schemes are drawn upon?*, *how are binaries reified or troubled in texts?*, and *how are words used in ways that may be ideologically contested?* This analysis led to two findings, presented below. First, the macropolitical discourse circulating around the READ Act policy constructs literacy as primarily reading print. Second, reading is constructed as a commodified set of highly-consequential and time-bound skills aligned closely with science of reading discourse.

Literacy is Reading Print

Before I look more closely at the set of documents I selected for analysis that are tied to the READ Act legislation, I want to pull the lens back. As I watched state and district boards of education meetings and perused the seemingly-endless resources available through the CDE's dedicated READ Act website, it seemed as though all the resources of the SBE and CDE were being poured into this legislation and K-3 reading to the exclusion of other aspects of literacy and other grade levels and content, which I found troubling. I recognized that I was deep into an analysis of documents related to this area, and perhaps my perspective was stilted, so I decided to briefly detour to try to get a sense of the attention given to other aspects of literacy beyond the READ Act.

For this process, I used the BoardDocs platform that houses archived documents from past SBE meetings, including agendas, documents and slide presentations submitted by meeting presenters, and meeting minutes. I performed two separate searches using the terms “READ Act” and “literacy,” respectively. I selected all of the available options available for the search: *Meetings*, *Library*, *Minutes*, and *Include Attachments*. The platform is not a sophisticated search tool, so the results returned were not unique meetings, but rather individual items containing the search term. So, if a meeting contained an agenda and four related attachments with the term “READ Act,” five items would be included in the results for that meeting. I used the “find” function of the web browser to search by year—beginning with 2012, the year the READ Act was passed—and recorded each meeting date in a table, ultimately eliminating duplicates to arrive at the meeting counts for a given year. For the “literacy” search, I completed the additional step of reviewing the contents of each result, eliminating it from the count if the item was related to the READ Act or if it was related to adult literacy.

I note that these counts are not meant to be a rigorously conducted element of my research practice, and rather are meant to provide a general perspective of proportionality. I erred on the side of counting an item toward being a non-READ Act related literacy item, rather than eliminating it in an attempt to work against my claim that reading print and the READ Act were being elevated above other forms of literacy. For example, there are four meetings wherein the literacy-related agenda item appears to be exclusively about one school (January 7, 2015; September 10, 2015; March 9, 2016; and April 15, 2021), but I elected to include these in the count.

Additionally, in alignment with my broad view of literacy, I included items related to content literacy, including science, social studies, media literacy, visual arts, and financial literacy standards (August 14, 2014; February 11, 2016; February 15, 2018; November 10, 2021; April 12, 2022; September 14, 2022; and October 12, 2022).

Table 4.1 shows the results of these counts. The number of meetings that included a literacy-related agenda item not related to the READ Act, even with my generous inclusion criteria, is just under half that of the meetings where the READ Act was discussed. Though an admittedly imperfect measurement, I engaged in this process and presented the results here to provide additional context for what I was seeing in the documents I analyzed more closely.

Table 4.1

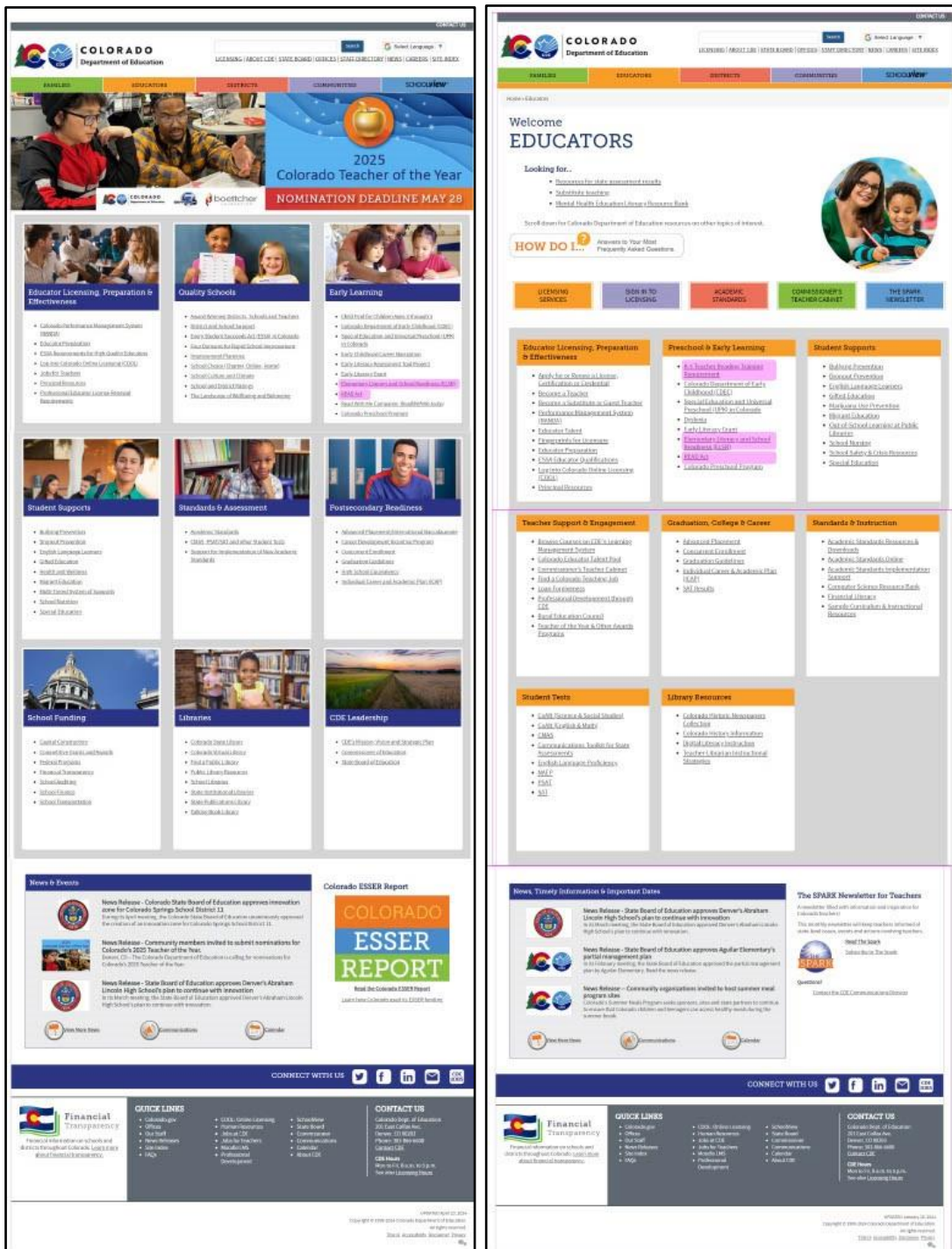
Comparison of READ Act- vs. Non-READ Act-Related Literacy Items on State Board Meeting Agendas 2012-2023

Number of Board Meetings with at Least One		
Year	Item Directly Related to the READ Act	Literacy Item Not Directly Related to the READ Act
2012	4	6
2013	5	0
2014	3	1
2015	7	4
2016	5	6
2017	5	2
2018	4	3
2019	8	2
2020	12	3
2021	7	5
2022	8	3
2023	5	0
Totals	73	35

Other findings of note related to the disproportionate attention given to the READ Act and print reading for grades K-3 include the fact that both the READ Act and the Office of Elementary Literacy and School Readiness have direct links located on the CDE's home website, while none of the words *math*, *science*, nor *social studies* appear anywhere on the homepage. This is true for the CDE's Educators homepage, as well. Figure 4.1 shows images of both of these websites with these links highlighted. This relatively simplistic analysis is significant to my finding that the bodies construct

literacy as reading print because it illustrates the dominance that early (K-3) reading instruction and the READ Act occupy in Colorado education at the highest policy levels. It seems clear that the READ Act and early literacy (reading) have occupied a disproportionate amount of the SBE's time over the past decade since the READ Act was first enacted. It is not surprising in many ways, as early reading has always been an important topic in education and society at large (e.g., Kozol, 1985), but the exclusion of other content and other levels and aspects of literacy should be cause for concern, and, in fact, has been called out in the local media (e.g., Breunlin, 2020; Mazenko, 2013; Meltzer & Asmar, 2022; Meltzer, 2019, ; Osher, 2019c; & Tatum, 2023). This has significant consequences in terms of the messages sent to educators and the public, which will be discussed further in chapter 7.

Figure 4.1
Screenshots of CDE's homepage and CDE's Educator's Homepage



Note. The highlights on the images show the direct links to READ Act and Office of Elementary Literacy and School Readiness. No other content area has a direct link on either site.

Evidence of Literacy as Reading Print in Policy Documents. While engaging my CDA protocol for semantic constructions, a pattern emerged across many policy documents whereby the terms *literacy* and *reading* are used ambiguously and seemingly interchangeably. Classification schemes are significant to consider within CDA, as how ideas are labeled is the first, and perhaps most obvious, way that ideas gain power and possibility. When *literacy* is used as a synonym for reading, other forms of literate practices are rendered invisible. There are numerous instances of this across the policy documents.

Colorado General Assembly Documents. In the READ Act Legislative Declaration text analysis presented above, I pointed out the way elements of literacy beyond reading print are quickly abandoned for a functionalist view of reading as a set of accumulated skills confined to print reading. This is found in additional documents produced by and in relation to the GA. In the text of the READ Act policy, *literacy* has been replaced by *reading* when referring to professionals tasked with supporting children with school-based instruction. The format of amended policy text allows for this analysis, as capital letters are used for new text to easily distinguish what is new from what existed in previous versions of the statute.

Looking at the documents for the 2018 and 2019 amendments shows this shift occurring in just one year. In the 2018 document, literacy coaches were included as part of the amended statute as one of the allowable options for per-pupil intervention money to be spent and as part of a rule for how to distribute early literacy grant money (2018, pp. 6, 8). In the 2019 amended bill text, the former reference to literacy coaches was repealed, while the item that included the latter reference to distribution of early

literacy grant money was changed to include language stating that schools may continue to pay for literacy coaches with grant funds if the coaches are part of “school-wide literacy initiatives that have resulted in significant student academic growth toward *reading* competency” (2019. p. 25, emphasis mine).

It concerns me that this language is being changed in this way. While I understand the legislation’s stated goals, the restriction may have consequences as part of a larger pattern of erasure of elements of literacy beyond reading print. I believe this constitutes an example of language that could benefit from additional explanation, as the way that *literacy* and *reading* are used in close proximity to one another suggests that literacy only comprises reading, rather than a multitude of other elements. At the very least, the CDE’s own Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, and Communicating are broken into four standards: Oral Expression and Listening, Reading for All Purposes, Writing and Composition, and Research Inquiry and Design (CDE, 2019c, p. 7). Yet, I had a difficult time finding references across any of the documents I examined to these other standards defined by the state of Colorado as part of an education in literacy.

Elsewhere in documents related to the general assembly, *literacy* and *reading* are conflated in troubling ways. In the 2023 Annual Report on the Colorado READ Act (CDE, 2023), a document mandated by the READ Act statute, the following statement is made, “The READ Act is the signature *literacy* statute in Colorado. The READ Act prioritizes early *literacy* by ensuring all students achieve *early-grade reading proficiency* for later academic success” (CDE 2023, p. 5, emphasis mine). If the READ Act is the signature literacy law in Colorado, and reading print is the only

literacy practice of concern, other literate practices are silenced and de-prioritized. Even if state education leaders are taking a subjective stance that reading print is the most important literacy practice to develop in order to engage in other literacy practices, failure to name any such practices while using the broad term *literacy* discursively constructs a reality where other practices are marginalized, and students and communities who value other literate practices may also feel less valued within formal school spaces.

This conflation of *literacy* and *reading* occurs again a few pages later in this same document when the benefits of early intervention are reported:

According to CDE data, early detection and intervention for an SRD result in better *literacy outcomes*. Students first identified with an SRD in kindergarten were much less likely to be continuously identified with an SRD by the end of third grade than those originally identified in later grades. (CDE, 2023, p. 9, emphasis mine)

The causal connector *result in* suggests that the READ Act's process for identifying students as having a significant reading deficiency (SRD) and intervening early are responsible for improving *literacy outcomes* for students, but the *literacy outcomes* referenced in this excerpt are limited to a student's continual designation as having an SRD. There are no literacy practices on this page or in the report that I have not included here that could be considered *literacy outcomes*. Thus, the CDE appears to be using *literacy* in a way that limits the possibilities for recognizing students as literate.

Colorado Department of Education Documents. There are numerous examples across CDE documents that construct reading print as the most important

literacy practice for students. In the “Selecting an Instructional Program PowerPoint” (Lay, 2021), *writing* is included in addition to the five components of foundational reading instruction (phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension) and elements of language comprehension (background knowledge, language structure, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge) as components of instruction to evaluate when selecting an instructional program. Including another literacy practice is notable, and when the “Green Flags” (instructional practices that are aligned with the science of reading) and “Red Flags” (instructional practices that are not aligned with the science of reading) for writing are reviewed, writing is, significantly, described as deeply connected to reading. Reading’s primacy, however, is reified immediately, as writing instruction is positioned as an additional tool to support students’ development as readers. Slide 32 states, “The next area we will focus on is writing instruction. Reading and writing draw upon the same body of skills and knowledge. Teaching writing *can help students become better readers* as well as writers” (Lay, 2021, emphasis mine). The modality *can* suggests a lower level of certainty, which serves to subordinate writing as a less effective option for developing students’ reading skills than the proven impact of “the foundational reading skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, including oral skills, and reading comprehension” which research shows “*is highly effective in teaching young children to read*” (The Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 2, emphasis mine). The five foundational components of reading instruction that are repeated throughout the policy documents (and are present in this PowerPoint, as well, as essential to an instructional program) are consistently constructed as certain to develop

students' reading skills, while writing is not given that degree of certainty. Rather, it is seen as something that *can* support students, but does not have the authority of research behind it, as presented here. Further minimizing writing's role as a valid literacy practice with its own merit's, the syntactic construction placing *as well as writers* at the end of the sentence shows that engaging in writing teaching and learning with students to support them to become better writers is an afterthought. The first purpose for engaging in writing instruction in the classroom is to develop students' reading skills. Additionally, students will become better writers, too, but that is clearly not as important.

One of the most recently published websites, the CDE's page for the Literacy Curriculum Transparency Act (CDE, 2024b), contains perhaps the most blatant conflation of *literacy* and *reading*. As is already clear, the site is for the *Literacy Curriculum Transparency Act*, which was passed by the GA in 2021 to amend the READ Act. Among other things, as stated on the website, the law requires each local education provider to send to the CDE, "The evidence-based or scientifically based core and supplemental *reading* curriculum or a detailed description of the *reading* curriculum, by grade, used at each of the schools operated by the local education provider" (CDE, 2024b, "Senate Bill" section, emphasis mine). Despite being called the *Literacy Curriculum Transparency Act*, schools must send only the reading curriculum information to the CDE. When drawing on a classification scheme in this way wherein the category of *literacy* only comprises reading print, the message is clear that other forms of literacy have no currency. Attaching accountability policies to some academic content while excluding others is precisely the type of behavior that

led to a narrowing of the curriculum observed by education scholars in the aftermath of NCLB (Welner & Mathis, 2015). What is at risk when the only literacy of consequence is reading print?

The CDE documents also show *literacy* and *reading* are used in ways that are not explained adequately. Appendix K shows several additional examples to the ones I analyze here.

District Board of Education and Instructional Leadership Documents. In reviewing multiple documents from the District Board of Education and Instructional Leadership (DBE), I also found that *literacy* and *reading* were often conflated. I found both terms used frequently to refer to instruction without additional context that would allow me to definitively know to what was being referred. I focused the majority of my analysis at this level on documents related to the district's adoption of a core reading resource as part of the READ Act's requirements as laid out in the 2019 amendments. An analysis of these materials supports the finding as established in the READ Act and CDE materials that *literacy* continues to be conflated with *reading*, with reading increasingly gaining supremacy over other forms of literacy that clearly were present in the district's understanding of literacy prior to revisions to the READ Act legislation and its full embrace of discourse of the science of reading.

The materials for the first DBE work study session in April 2021 provide a starting point and illustrative example for understanding the district's framework for elementary literacy before the major revisions to the READ Act had significantly impacted districts in the state. This presentation involved members of the District Learning Services team, including those who work in elementary literacy. The

presentation is meant to provide a history and purpose of the elementary literacy curriculum in the district, as well as provide a vision for the next steps in *elementary literacy* and an understanding of the K-2 literacy block. In describing the most recent period of literacy work, the presentation includes the following, “2014 - present - District wide emphasis on *literacy*, specifically understanding the standards, how to intentionally plan instruction aligned to the standards, and a move to align with the *science of reading*” (District, 2021, Slide 5, emphasis mine). In presenting this summary, the district emphasizes literacy, while mentioning SOR. Across several slides, tables depict a timeline of the curriculum development work and professional learning supports that occurred historically in the district from the 2014-15 school year to the 2020-22 school year. Appendix L contains images of these slides with my highlights added to bring attention to the shifts over time supporting a narrowing construction of *literacy* from both *reading* and *writing* to increasingly just *reading*. This construction is clearly tied to policy mandates from the CDE aligned with SOR discourse. Significantly, when breaking down the curriculum development timeline for the district, writing is included along with reading for the 2014-15 school year. Writing is named throughout 2015-2017 as a continued focus for both curriculum development and professional learning, and the 2018-19 school year sees writing included as a target of curriculum revisions along with reading. The 2018-19 school year is also where the “Initial training for K-3 teachers on the Foundational Reading Standards” (2021, Slide 14) appears as the professional learning focus and there is no mention of writing as a focus in curriculum development or professional learning again. “Foundational reading” (2021, Slides 14-15) appears as a phrase in either curriculum

or professional learning in each of the three school years from 2018-2021 and “science of reading” is mentioned once, while “CDE’s training on reading instruction” (2021, Slide 15) is seen once, as well. Despite the fact that the only element of literacy outside of reading fell away from curriculum and professional learning over the preceding few school years, the remainder of the presentation is devoted to the next steps for “Elementary Literacy” (Slide 16) in the district—not just reading. The elements of this plan include, 1) adopting a core reading resource, 2) piloting and evaluating assessment tools for early literacy, and 3) studying and evaluating dyslexia screening tools. Given the context of the READ act, the early literacy assessments are those to be used for READ act screening and thus do not assess anything outside of foundational reading skills. So, nothing in the plan for elementary literacy is related to aspects of literacy beyond reading print.

This presentation concludes with a summary of a K-2 literacy block, which defines the “Reading and Writing Skills” taught during this time as the following Common Core State Standards: “Reading: Literature, Reading: Informational, Reading: Foundational Skills, Writing.” Included on the slide, as well, as skills taught during the K-2 literacy block are, “Minimum Reading Competency Skills,” which are noted as being “Specifically identified in the READ Act Rules” (2021, Slide 29). This slide conveys the district’s construction of literacy for K-2 learners in 2021. Again, it is significant that the block of time is still being labeled as a *literacy* block while containing almost exclusively reading skills. Writing is included here, but as I will illustrate in chapter 6 writing instruction does not remain part of the primary literacy block in Samantha’s classroom once the core reading resource is adopted. The

Common Core contains elements in its English Language Arts/Literacy Standards in addition to those categories listed by the district, namely Speaking and Listening, Language, and Range, Quality, and Complexity. These elements, what is left unsaid, capture important aspects of literacy that are not constructed as valuable through this presentation despite holding not only importance as sociocultural literacy practices, but also well-documented benefits to building the very foundational skills for print reading that the READ claims to be designed to develop in students. This aligns with the neoliberal logic of individualism, as it negates the aspect of reading that recognizes the importance of community learning, focusing rather on discrete skills that can be measured only at the individual level. This is what I turn to next as the second aspect of how literacy is constructed by the policy documents produced by these bodies.

Reading is the Science of Reading

I have established that amongst these bodies, literacy is reading. So, what is reading? What does reading look like? How is reading positioned? What is valued when it comes to reading? My analysis shows that reading, as constructed by these bodies, can best be described as a commodified set of highly-consequential and time-bound skills aligned closely with science of reading discourse.

Reading is a Critical Skill. As I described in my interpretation of the Legislative Declaration in the READ Act, reading is constructed as a critical skill (The Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 2). This is echoed across other documents. In the READ Act Fact Sheet (CDE, 2017), reading is described as “an elemental building block to receive a quality education” (Elemental Building Blocks section). In the READ Act Update document published by the CDE “to support implementation of changes to the

READ Act due to the passage of SB 19-199” (CDE, 2019a, para. 1), the first heading reads, “Colorado knows reading by third grade is critical,” which is followed by the opening sentence, “Reading is an essential skill that must be developed early in a child's educational career” (CDE, 2019a, para. 1). The use of the modal verb *must* and the evaluative adjectives *elemental*, *essential* and *critical* combine with the verb *knows* to make clear the certainty that surrounds this topic. The nominalization of Colorado as an actor who can *know* something serves to invoke an authoritative voice. It is not just the CDE or the head of the CDE but the state that knows the importance of reading by third grade. This calls forth the crisis discourse I described in chapter 2 that brings (perhaps unnecessary) anxiety to a legitimately serious conversation. I think it notable that in the earlier document published in 2017, *elemental* is used, while the 2019 document uses the words *essential* and *critical*, which evoke heightened levels of necessity, aligning with the increasingly alarmist rhetoric that has followed the production of *Sold a Story* (Hanford, 2022) and the resulting SOR discourse (Bomer, et al., 2022).

Reading is Objectively Measurable. Reading print is also positioned as being composed of discrete skills that are measurable using standardized assessments. In this way, the skills of reading are decontextualized and align with a functionalist perspective of literacy (Lambirth, 2011). As required by the READ Act, a student’s reading competency must be measured by an assessment from “the list of approved assessments adopted by the state board” (The Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 5). These assessments measure reading in “the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, including oral skills, and reading

comprehension . . . for the student’s grade level” (The Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 5), signifying that these are the skills that comprise this idea of *reading* and they are measurable and quantifiable. The only other mention of student work provided in the READ Act comes in the definition of a *body of evidence* as, “a collection of information about a student's academic performance which, when considered in its entirety, documents the level of a student's academic performance,” (The Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 4). This definition continues:

A body of evidence, at a minimum, shall include scores on formative or interim assessments and work that a student independently produces in a classroom, including but not limited to the school readiness assessments adopted pursuant to section 22-7-1004 (2)(a). A body of evidence may include scores on summative assessments if a local education provider decides that summative assessments are appropriate and useful in measuring students' literacy skills.

(The Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 4)

Though formative assessments and “work that a student independently produces in a classroom” could comprise reading inventories or student journals, the way that reading assessment or evidence of a student’s reading is constructed in this definition leaves little room for student voice or joyful expression of interest. The story of what is valued is told by what is voiced and what is unvoiced, and again, the idea of reading being measured or evaluated by anything other than so-called evidence-based assessments that are approved by the state and construct reading as discrete skills is unvoiced across this data set, while measurement with standardized assessments is voiced continually. I am particularly disturbed by the way work in class is described as

“including but not limited to the school readiness assessments,” thus what counts as *evidence* of student reading is so limited, so constrained as to boil down in this definition to scores and assessments.

Returning to the READ Act Update document (CDE, 2019a), two pieces of evidence are provided to support the need for significant changes to the READ Act brought about by SB 19-199:

1. Colorado has seen only a 2 percent increase in third graders meeting or exceeding expectations on the Colorado Measures of Academic Success tests in English language arts.
2. Statewide data shows only a 1 percent reduction in the number of students identified with a significant reading deficiency (SRD). (para. 2 a-b)

Both of these are measures using standardized tests. The first is the statewide high-stakes standardized test taken by students in grades 3-8, while the second is the result of the standardized READ Act assessment. The way the state knows that the READ Act has not been successful (i.e., students are not demonstrating they have reading proficiency) is that students have not shown evidence on these tests.

Providing further evidence of reading being narrowed to what can be measured by standardized assessments comes from the SBE meeting transcripts and related documents presented in support of the agenda items. In the case of the SBE meeting on September 14, 2023, where the outside evaluation contractors from WestEd presented the results of the third independent evaluation of the Colorado Read Act, there were no questions in their evaluation that directly asked about reading in any meaningful way (and certainly not literacy more broadly). Rather, the evaluation

asked, among other things that are even further away from actual reading, “To what extent has the implementation of the READ Act led to a reduction in the number of students identified with SRDs?” and “To what extent do students identified with an SRD achieve reading proficiency by the 3rd grade?” (Grogan & Friedrich, 2023, Slide 2). This indicates that reading is constructed as measurable and quantifiable and that this understanding of reading is valuable. There is nothing that comes up in the meeting about any other construction of reading as an enjoyable or sociocultural practice that is dependent on, or connected in any way to, students’ lived experiences. At one point, Dr. Katie Grogan of WestEd shares a finding related to school administrators’ perspectives on the Early Literacy Grant program (an element of the READ Act that does not feature in my study), making this statement:

Dr. Grogan: They [the grants] were again very impactful in terms of what they [the school administrators] felt was going on in their classrooms. They felt that the grants led to improved K-3 teacher instructional practice and *improved student performance on literacy assessments*, and when they were asked to attribute, you know, what about the grant was so successful they really highlighted the work of those external literacy consultants.” (CDE, 2020c, 1:43:34, emphasis mine)

This reinforces the perception that reading is only significant if it can be measured on assessments and quantified. I did not come across anything in my analysis that pointed to reading being discussed for its own sake as an edifying experience for children to engage in without the need to quantify it in some way, leaving reading to be positioned as discrete skills measurable by decontextualized assessments of these skills.

Reading is a Commodity that is Consequentially Time-Bound. Constructing reading as discrete, measurable, and decontextualized sets up another significant aspect of reading that is present in the discourse circulating throughout the documents I analyzed. This argument relies on the neoliberal logic that education is viewed as a commodity that separates the learner from the learned content/knowledge (Labaree, 1997). In this way, skills and knowledge may be acquired and possessed. The READ Act and associated policy documents sort collections of reading skills into grade levels and associated categories called variously *proficient* and *competent* such that a collection of reading skills can be classified according to a binary judgement as on grade level, or not; and these skills can be classified as competent, or not. Note that this is distinct from, but intimately connected to, a *reader* being considered competent, which will be discussed in a later section. I am making this important distinction, however, as it is fundamental to the positioning that circulates through the discourse in these documents and bodies. Further and related, reading print proficiently/competently on grade level is positioned as timebound. That is, there exists a set of reading skills that are classified as proficient for third grade such that if they are not acquired by that time, they are discursively constructed as consequentially and drastically less valuable. It is as though reading print is constructed as having an expiration date. This is clear in the READ Act text, where teachers or others in the school are instructed to share information with parents, including the following:

The state's goal is for all children in Colorado to graduate from high school having attained skill levels that adequately prepare them for postsecondary studies or for the workforce, and research demonstrates that *achieving reading*

competency by third grade is a critical milestone in achieving this goal. (The Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 7, emphasis mine)

Reading competency is a thing to attain and it is meant to be attained by a specific time, and that time is third grade. Thus, reading is positioned as a commodity, satisfying the neoliberal values of the marketization of education. This is further made clear as the information to be shared with parents continues:

(III) If the student enters fourth grade without *achieving reading competency*, he or she is *significantly more likely* to fall behind in *all subject* areas beginning in fourth grade and continuing in later grades. If the student's reading skill deficiencies are not remediated, *it is likely that the student will not have the skills necessary to complete the course work required to graduate from high school.*

(IV) *Reading skills are critical to success in school.* (The Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 7, emphasis mine)

Again, reading competency is positioned as something one either does or does not achieve before entering fourth grade.

I found this same nominalization on a slide during one of the DBE meetings. This presentation occurred in April 2021 where members of the instructional leadership team presented information about the science of reading. On a slide showing the simple view of reading, the text reads, “If the student is missing either decoding or language comprehension they cannot achieve reading comprehension” (Slide 30). Here, *decoding*, *language comprehension*, and *reading comprehension* are

all processes that have been nominalized into nouns, which elides the agency of the reader/student (Fairclough, 2001), making it seem as though the student simply needs to attain these concrete bits of knowledge to become a skilled reader. Literacy educators know that each of these three processes are complex and develop with one another, often at different rates. In fact, the reading rope's design emphasizes the symbiotic nature of these processes. It is not, as the district slide suggests, an all or nothing prospect where each of the three aspects of reading can be isolated. Students develop at different paces, which if acknowledged would result in different language appearing on the slide, such as, "Decoding skills and language comprehension together support reading comprehension, and all three processes are mutually reinforcing of one another." Here, that is not what is presented. Lacking this achievable commodity by fourth grade makes further success in school significantly less likely to occur. I will return to how students (i.e., readers) are positioned here later.

The majority of what I found while analyzing my core data set can be classified as normative with respect to members' resources, in that the actors—whether named or unnamed—contributing to the discourse draw on ideologically consistent ways of knowing that privilege a technical understanding of both reading and policy solutions (Fairclough, 2001). I did, however, encounter somewhat of a hybrid discourse while straying from my primary data. As I was not seeking additional data for analysis, I did not record the specific purpose for clicking around on the CDE website, and thus do not remember how I came across this page. It bears repeating that the number of resources available through the CDE's site related to the READ Act and the science of reading is vast, and jumping from site to site through connected links,

one can get (sometimes productively) lost. Regardless, I found myself on the “Science of Reading Myths and Misconceptions” page (CDE, 2022b), which is where I encountered the first instance of a creative discourse. The language challenged the normative messaging I had seen in everything else I was analyzing (though it was located within the normative space of reifying some of the elements of the science of reading discourse I have been critiquing). Thus, I analyze some of the text on this “Myths and Misconceptions” page to be a hybrid of both normative and creative discourse. Table 4.2 shows the text for Myths #4 and #8, where I have coded for normativity in bold and creativity using underlining. The creative discourse I found is the idea that the goal for students is to be able to read a book of their choice and enjoy it. There is still normativity here, however, in the fact that this is framed as *the* goal (i.e., there is one goal for all) and, in the case of the response to Myth #4, the goal is to read the book *successfully*. As a literacy educator, I prefer the idea of a student reading a book with interest and enjoyment, not to be only considered in terms of *success*.

I found further hybridization between creative and normative discourse, that is between resistant and reifying discourse, when each element of reading, including the use of authentic text, is described from a functionalist perspective. The language suggests that engaging with text or with others about text is not worth doing for the sake of connection, interest, or human social interaction, as is valued from a sociocultural perspective of literacy. When it comes to time spent in the classroom, educators have been conditioned to believe that every minute of every day must be filled with intention and enactments of purposeful moves toward a content or academic standard or a measurable outcome. I see this in my own instruction at the

university level when I have students working in a group. I often find myself walking up to a table and saying, “When you are done, you can look over the next part of our class plan or work on something for another class.” I have become more mindful in catching myself before I say anything and reminding myself and the students that they are allowed to rest their brains for a moment, that we do not have to fill each moment with goal-driven content.

With the thought in mind of resisting fully-structured classroom time, I initially was drawn to underline without bolding the text that states:

Authentic text is used with beginning readers in read-alouds to build vocabulary and background knowledge, model complex sentence and text structure, and build other language comprehension skills like inference or learning figurative language. When students master decoding skills, authentic text becomes decodable and can be used to build word recognition and language comprehension skills.

This seemed to be purely creative discourse in its advocacy of reading aloud with children. I recognize all of the things mentioned here are, in fact, possible results of sharing a text with children and engaging in a conversation along the way. I paused, however, as I was troubled by something I might be missing in that interpretation. Upon further reflection, I zeroed in on that word “to.” That was the problem. The normative perspective tells us as teachers that we read authentic texts with children in order *to* do all of those things. The creative perspective tells us that we read authentic texts with children because we know how much we love it and how much they love it. We know that they will learn new words and they will learn about complex language

structures because some of our favorite books have playful phrases. We also know that it can be both/and. The language used on the CDE's webpage deploys the always-lurking false binary that convinces teachers that reading a book with students just for fun is unsanctioned behavior that does not support students' academic development if it is not explicitly tied to a standard—if it is not attached to a *to*, as in, "I am reading this book *to* build students' vocabulary." The reality is, as Kumashiro (2002) reminds us, teachers can never fully know what students have learned from our instruction, and even when we think we are teaching one thing, they are always learning so much more. When reading is always centered on an academic standard, students learn limited purposes for reading (Davis & Vehabovic, 2018).

This leads to the second myth I included, number eight. In this myth, the first line repeats the creative discourse from Myth #4, but actually maintains a nearly pure creative phrasing, "The goal of science-based reading instruction is for students to be able to pick up any book of their interest and enjoy it" (CDE, 2022b). The statement assigns agency to students with the phrase *be able to* and the descriptive phrase *of their interest* to describe the book a student would pick up. Finally, the statement includes the important goal for students to enjoy the book they read. The creativity stops here, however, as the remainder of this response is fully in line with normative discourse. In fact, this is discourse I have not seen elsewhere to this extent. In refuting the myth "Science of reading-aligned practice kills the love and joy of reading," the concluding statement reads, "there is no joy or love of reading without being able to read" (CDE, 2022b). The certainty of the construction *there is no* involves no hedging or indirect language. This statement posits that without *being able* to read, one cannot

have a joy or love of reading. There are several words and phrases within this short statement that I classify as requiring additional context or explanation. The definition of *being able to read* and *reading* as intended makes a difference to how this statement is interpreted. If this is meant to refer only to independent reading at a particular level of proficiency for both *being able to read* and enjoying *reading*, I would still not concede the certainty with which the statement is made, though it can be interpreted more generously. If, however, reading is considered as a social activity in which one is being read to in a live interaction or from a recorded story, I believe it is absurd to make a claim that “there is no joy or love of reading without being able to read” (CDE, 2022b).

Table 4.2

A Hybrid Text with Normative and Creative Movement

Excerpts from the CDE’s “Science of Reading Myths and Misconceptions” webpage

Myth #4: Science of reading-aligned practice does not promote independent reading of authentic literature.

The goal of evidence-based reading instruction is for students to be able to read any book of their choice successfully. Science of reading-aligned practice promotes the use of different texts for different uses. Students are encouraged to engage with the books that interest them for pleasure reading. During instructional time, specific texts are chosen for accurate practice and application of concepts taught in the lesson, as a model of text structure, and to build vocabulary and background knowledge.

◆◆Follow-up question: What is decodable text used for?

Decodable text is the type of text that focuses on the phonetic code and presents words to students that follow the concepts that they have been taught. In this way, students are encouraged to attend to the code and use their phonics knowledge to decode words. **When**

correctly employed the use of decodable text is a method that helps all and harms none. It provides a reliable pathway to moving students to accurately and successfully read authentic literature of their choosing. When students are able to apply their decoding skills with fluency, they are able to transition away from decodable books to less phonetically controlled, authentic text. Decodable text is purposeful and temporary as students build and practice their skills.

◆◆Follow-up question: How is authentic text used with beginning readers?

Authentic text is used with beginning readers in read-alouds to build vocabulary and background knowledge, model complex sentence and text structure, and build other language comprehension skills like inference or learning figurative language. When students master decoding skills, authentic text becomes decodable and can be used to build word recognition and language comprehension skills. Authentic text is always encouraged for enjoyment reading whether independently, via audiobook, or with the support of another reader.

For more information visit the Text Types: Decodable, Leveled, & Authentic webpage.

(Beck & Juel, 1997; Foorman, B.R. et al., 1997; Jenkins, J. R. et al., 2003)

Myth #8: Science of reading-aligned practice kills the love and joy of reading.

The goal of science-based reading instruction is for students to be able to pick up any book of their interest and enjoy it. In order to enjoy and love reading, one must have the skills to read. Practices aligned with the science of reading utilize read alouds to enjoy stories, build background knowledge, and develop comprehension skills. This transfers to independent reading as students build their decoding skills and ability to read independently.

A body of research shows a unidirectional influence of literacy skills on enjoyment. Better readers are more motivated to read, including finding reading enjoyable and engaging and reading more often. Literacy skills impact enjoyment, but not the other way around.

We have the tools to promote the joy of stories and the joy of reading for those students who are good readers, but there is no joy or love of reading without being able to read.

(Wolf, 2008)

Note. Source: CDE, 2022b,
<https://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradoliteracy/sormythsmisconceptions>

Reading Instruction

The second part of my first research question asks, *how is literacy instruction constructed in the discourse surrounding the READ Act?* As I have already established, literacy is constructed as reading in this discourse. The most clearly valued aspect of reading instruction that circulates across these bodies is that reading instruction must be scientifically or evidence-based. The science of reading is positioned as the answer to reading instruction that has been elusive for decades and has finally been brought into schools to fix what has been broken in reading instruction. The key elements of reading instruction that are elevated consistently are:

1. Scientifically and evidence-based
2. Explicit
3. Systematic
4. Consists of foundational reading skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, including oral skills, and reading comprehension

In nearly every source I reviewed for this analysis, reading instruction and/or curriculum is referred to as scientifically- or evidence-based (see Appendix M for excerpts from each source in my data set referencing instruction in this way). In the

“Rules for the Administration of the Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act (Read Act)” (Colorado State Board of Education, 2022), section 2.16, *Instructional Programming* is defined as:

Scientifically-based or evidence-based resources in reading instruction that local education providers are encouraged to use including but not limited to interventions, tutoring, and instructional materials that adequately teach students to read and may include materials used within a multi-tiered system of support including the universal/core level. (p. 2)

This foundational definition within the READ Act rules leaves no doubt about the importance of scientific evidence when it comes to instructional practices in reading. The READ Act rules document also describes the “Attributes of Effective Universal Instruction” as including the five components of reading and references explicit instruction (p. 13).

Additionally, a minimum of 90 minutes of instruction are suggested, and universal instruction should be “driven by the Colorado Academic Standards,” (p. 14). This last element is noteworthy, as it is also mentioned in the slides presented by Dr. Floyd Cobb and Dr. Melissa Colman to the SBE at the meeting on August 13, 2020. The slide, titled “Instructional Programming Advisory List Requirements,” includes, along with the predictable text, “Provides explicit and systematic skill development in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency including oral skills, and reading comprehension,” the requirement that the instructional programming on the list be, “Aligned to the Colorado Academic Standards,” (Slide 7). This is odd, given that, as I previously mentioned, these

standards include other elements of literacy beyond reading foundational skills and reading print, and yet there is no mention of these other elements of literacy anywhere across the documents that I reviewed, despite the fact that these documents are focused on the Instructional Programming Advisory List review process and its use by a district.

Also on this slide, the language around one more required element strikes me as salient. The staff at the CDE must find and recommend core reading programs that are, “Proven to accelerate student progress in attaining reading competency” (Slide 7). This is another example of agency distortion, as the instructional programming is doing the action here. The instructional programming accelerates student progress toward that tangible and concrete thing—reading competency—while the student and the teacher are positioned passively. This suggests the technocratic stance that has been seen throughout much of this policy discourse where the tool—the curriculum in this case—is the fix, not the teacher drawing on their own knowledge and expertise along with the curriculum as a resource and not the students who are actively engaging with the curriculum to build on their own existing literacies.

This portrayal of reading instruction as a simple set of logical steps that if followed in order results in reading competency is also clear on the “Colorado READ Act FAQs” website (CDE, 2023). Here, the answer to “What is the READ Act?” includes:

READ Act starts by making sure all students receive instruction in the foundational skills of reading. In kindergarten, students learn to discriminate sounds in words and map them to the letters they represent. This continues

through the grades until each third-grade student can read with ease, understand the materials and think critically. (What is the READ Act? section, para. 2)

This paragraph begins with READ Act taking on agency as an actor who *makes sure all students* have access to instruction in—unsurprisingly—the foundational skills of reading. The positioning of the READ Act with a modal phrase demonstrating certainty is significant, as the policy itself has been ineffective by its own preferred measurements, as discussed above. Thus, the READ Act has not been able to make sure of anything. The knowledge and skills necessary for the functionalist view of literacy (reading) favored by the policy documents I have analyzed are condensed here to just the “foundational skills,” with phonemic awareness and phonics called out, though not by name. Oddly, those two skills are said to “continue through the grades,” which is only matched in lack of specificity by the idea of “understand[ing] materials.” What materials? This excerpt has removed all agency from teachers and students and put the power into the READ Act as an actor responsible for ensuring all students learn to “read with ease.” This is an example of language that holds no meaning but sounds great and cannot be argued against as desirable outcomes for education policy. The policy is positioned as a tool that can be implemented easily with no discernable complications and with a few easy steps, results are guaranteed.

This stance toward trusting in a policy tool—in this case *evidence-based* curriculum—to drive results in students’ reading proficiency is also visible during the August 13, 2020, State Board of Education meeting when board member Joyce Rankin

directs the following series of questions to Dr. Floyd Cobb, the CDE's Executive Director of the Teaching and Learning Unit:

Rankin: And there is no one to evaluate that particular program?

They just- if they say it is evidence-based, then because of the way the law is written- and they can use it?

So really the outcome and the proof of whether that is- works- is a student outcome?

How the students are doing. I mean, that would be the way we could- we could evaluate it, *because in every incident- in every instance where this scientific program is being used, evidence-based, there is improvement.*

So that's kind of a clear-cut evaluation of the program, correct? (CDE, 2020c, 2:22:12, emphasis mine)

Rankin uses the phrase *in every instance* to express certainty about the *scientific* and *evidence-based* instructional programs that were discussed during this board meeting, ultimately drawing the conclusion that when these programs are used *there is improvement*. There is no hedging used in her utterance. *In every instance, there is improvement*. She uses a hedge in the phrase *kind of* to express her next utterance of *kind of a clear-cut evaluation of the program*, but I interpret this as only a slight reduction in her level of confidence in the authority offered by the science and evidence behind an instructional program. In the earlier portion of this excerpt, Rankin asks about schools who use ostensibly evidence-based instructional programs that have not been vetted by the CDE, and she concludes that student outcomes will be the only way to evaluate whether the curricula are, in fact, evidence-based. She is,

essentially, working backward based on the strength of her belief in evidence-based instructional programming to assert that if students make progress using a curriculum that a school or district claims to be evidence-based, then it must be the case because, *in every instance, there is improvement* when using an evidence-based instructional program. This is an exemplary utterance demonstrating a technocratic trust in tools as context-neutral, reliable policy solutions.

Looking through the critical lenses inherent in my analytic method, the language positioning these scientifically and evidence-based instruments of reading instruction as unimpeachable leaves little room for humanizing instructional practices. Several examples can be found in the “Selecting an Instructional Program” PowerPoint from the CDE (Lay, 2021), which is designed for district and school employees to use to help select a reading curriculum. When describing findings from academic reading research, the presentation states, “Reading doesn’t happen by osmosis from being read to or being in a literacy or print rich environment – it needs to be explicitly taught” (Slide 4). Here, the implication seems to be that print rich environments and being read to are not beneficial to learning to read. This same document warns, “Be on the lookout for programs that emphasize independent reading and book choice and where there is no evidence of direct instruction of comprehension strategies” (Slide 31), and similarly states, “Programs which emphasize student choice and where teaching of foundational skills is implicit, incidental, or embedded should be avoided” (Slide 43). I recognize that the word *emphasize* is significant here, as explicit, systematic instruction is valued over other more process-oriented models. What concerns me, however, is the juxtaposition in each of these examples, which

implies a binary relationship that does not exist. In the first example, if research suggests explicit instruction supports print reading, print rich environments and reading to children should not be eliminated, as these are practices that are beneficial to children and adults in myriad other ways. In the second example, using the phrase “be on the lookout for” in reference to programs that emphasize independent reading and book choice sets up an unnecessary negative association with the idea of choice and independence, both practices that have been shown to increase motivation and interest in reading (Allington, 2002). Finally, if it is the case that teaching foundational skills implicitly is not a sound practice to support students in learning to read print, that certainly does not equate to taking away student choice.

Across the policy documents, literacy instruction is generally constructed as a set of practices based on scientific evidence that are best delivered through an approved curriculum focused on the five foundational reading skills. The instructional programming offered through such curricular tools is positioned as infallible and capable of delivering effective instruction, regardless of the context in which it is applied. This discursive construction is disrupted, at times, however, by competing discourses that place teachers ahead of evidence-based instructional practices as the most important driver of results toward the goal of third grade reading proficiency, which is where I turn next.

Who’s Teaching This?

As is clear from the data presented above, reading instruction in Colorado is ideologically based on the principles of the science of reading, including systematic, explicit instruction in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary

development, reading fluency including oral skills, and reading comprehension. It is also a legislative mandate that teachers of students in grades K-3 must complete evidence-based training in reading instruction. As a key lever in the state’s carefully calibrated machine tuned to teach reading, I turn to part of my second research question to ask how is the discourse that circulates through the macropolitical bodies constructing the role of teachers? How are teachers positioned?

Looking across the data, teachers are, at times, positioned as knowledgeable experts, as when the CDE’s (2021) “Selecting an Instructional Program” PowerPoint states:

Teaching reading is complex and *may* be challenging—it requires *considerable knowledge and skill*. Teaching reading is a job for an expert. No instructional program can replace teacher knowledge and skill. Choosing an instructional program that aligns with the science of reading provides a framework – there is no perfect program, every program has strengths and weaknesses – *expert knowledge is needed to identify gaps in skills and knowledge in students and also gaps or weaknesses in programs and then how to remediate or supplement what has been identified*. (Lay, 2021, Slide 4, emphasis mine)

Here, *expert* is used twice to describe the job of teaching reading. The words *complex*, *knowledge*, and *skill* are also used to describe the work of teachers. In other places, as on the “READ Act Fact Sheet” (CDE, 2017), teachers are similarly held up as holders of knowledge, “Teacher *knowledge* and *practice* are critical. Educators must have a *deep understanding* of the *art and science of reading* to help every child become a lifelong reader” (CDE, 2017, “Teacher Knowledge” section). Again, *knowledge* is used

along with the phrase *deep understanding*, which carries an intensifier in the term *deep*, discursively signaling respect for teachers as professionals. The use of the word *critical* to describe teacher knowledge and practice is also significant, as this term has been used to describe the importance of students reading on grade level by third grade. Assigning significance to teachers in this way cannot be minimized. Further, this document positions the type of knowledge teachers must have about reading as both *art* and *science*, which is indicative of a range of skills representing sophistication beyond a technician simply following the steps of a scripted curriculum. This is somewhat creative discourse relative to the neoliberal discourse that positions teachers as technicians (Ball, 2017).

Teachers' expertise and value is recognized not only in print, but also at district board meetings. On the slides presented at the April 2021 DBE Work Study Session, slide 6 presents the district's theory of action, "Invest in teachers and provide them with the tools and resources they need to do an incredibly hard job." This statement acknowledges the difficulties of the work with the use of the relational intensifier *incredibly*, while also expressing the recognition that support in the form of tools and resources are needed. At the September 2021 meeting, Don noted, "The importance of *craftsmanship* and *instruction* alongside the resource—and it's *really* the *power of both* of those that *really drives* great outcomes for our students" (District, 2021, 00:42:24, emphasis mine). Don's use of *craftsmanship* to describe teacher practice as an important component alongside *the resource* (i.e., the core reading resource) is another instance of seeing teachers as more than technicians enacting a scripted curriculum. The use of the intensifier *really* twice conveys Don's attempt to make his point come

across emphatically. This is particularly important given the stress on teachers of adopting a new curriculum, so constructing teachers in this way as valued professionals would have likely been a central goal of Don and his team, a goal further conveyed through the imagery evoked with *power* and *drive* to convey how it is the teachers and the resource together that create an engine to generate outcomes for students.

A district literacy team leader echoed Don's message at a district board meeting in May 2022 as she described the professional learning plan for the recommended core reading resource:

I think one thing that's important for you all to know- a value that we have on our team is- the *importance of curriculum and instructional materials*, but we *value more how the teacher uses those materials* and that curriculum in their classroom. And as such, all of our professional learning that we have designed so far really will be in service of supporting teachers and principals as we move toward this implementation, not just of the resource but the evidence and scientifically based reading instructional practices, and so in May we have our initial educator training. (District, 2022, 2:04:15, emphasis mine)

Later in that same meeting, she continued:

We're going to go a little bit deeper. We'll spend half the time really thinking about the high-level learning around evidence and scientifically based reading practices what to look for; how to set up the conditions in your building so that

teachers feel psychologically and physiologically safe to start to take those risks and be in a learner's stance. (District, 2022, 2:07:15)

In the first excerpt, the literacy leader's words evoke almost an identical image to Don's in that she emphasizes how the core reading resource and the teacher together make the implementation a success. In the second excerpt, the reference to safety is interesting, as the intertextual chain suggested here implies discourses where teachers have not felt safe to take risks when new mandates have been implemented in schools.

Although teachers' knowledge is recognized in some policy talk and text as holding value, at other times, teachers are positioned as technocrats to be controlled and actors within the closed and carefully constructed system to be monitored for compliance. On the 2021-22 READ Act Instructional Programming Review Process website, an explanation for the existence of the process states:

The main purpose of the READ Act Advisory List of Instructional Programming is to provide districts and schools with a choice of instructional programming *that adequately enhances teacher quality* and is a major vehicle that schools/districts can utilize to *upgrade* their capacity as it relates to the implementation of evidence-based literacy practices. (CDE, 2022, Background section, para. 2, emphasis mine)

This statement constructs teachers as a problem within the reading instruction ecosystem that the CDE's advisory list is designed to counteract. The evaluative verbs *enhance* and *upgrade* position the instructional programming choices as offering a benefit that will counteract the deleterious effect teachers have on *evidence-based*

literacy practices. This is, in effect, sending a message to schools and districts that even if they are unable to find qualified, knowledgeable teachers, these instructional programs will pick up the slack. Interestingly, this statement was copied verbatim onto the document accompanying the DBE work study session in 2020 despite positioning teachers in such a negative light. This demonstrates the contradictory tone that teachers can experience when the impact of policy changes. The way discourse constructs their professional identities adds to the already-challenging work of adjusting to evolving expectations and new materials that come with policy shifts like those implemented with the READ Act amendments in 2019.

As another example, in the following excerpt from the August 13, 2020, SBE meeting, the Chair of the Board, Dr. Angelika Schroeder, expresses her admiration for what Mississippi⁵ has been able to accomplish, but expresses a desire for more control over teachers in Colorado, as they have in Mississippi:

Schroeder: I love looking at Mississippi, but Mississippi has a whole different structure that allows their department and their board to require things that we are asking districts and teachers to actually do self-motivated, right? So, we don't we don't have the same *control mechanism*. So, for that reason, I think we need some kind of a study mechanism to help us figure out the where's and the what's when we're not seeing the results we want. Or the opposite, when we

⁵ Between 2013 and 2019, Mississippi's fourth graders made substantial gains in scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading and math, enough to bring formerly well-below average scores in line with national averages. Many have attributed these increases to an early reading law passed in 2013 similar to the READ Act, but with more stringent requirements for retaining students in third grade. Some commentators have referred to this as the "Mississippi Miracle" (Barnum, 2023).

are, in fact, seeing the results that we wanna see. Can you comment on that?
(CDE, 2020c, 2:27:41, emphasis mine)

In this excerpt from the SBE meeting on September 14, 2023, Dr. Floyd Cobb discusses how teachers were in need of guidance from an expert, “particularly the sites who are part of the Early Literacy Grant noted that coaching support that they received in terms of actually being able to make sense of--so they've had the opportunity to have new curricula, they've been trained, but there is sort of this overall need to be able to have some sort of expert to be able to guide them along in terms of how they go about changing their practices.” (CDE, 2023c, 2:16:09)

This movement between acknowledging teachers as knowledgeable and trusted professionals and the neoliberal technician capable of achieving the desired results with students only when implementing a highly-scripted curriculum illustrates Erickson’s (2004) theorizing about normative and creative discourses existing within close proximity to one another. It is not the case that these macropolitical bodies produce just one form of discourse about teachers. The result is a confusing landscape that has the potential to create distrust on the part of teachers who are trying to navigate constantly changing policy and public messages while simultaneously balancing elements of their teacher identity (Reeves, 2018).

Readers

At last, I have come to consider the readers at the heart of all of this. It is the readers, after all, for whom the READ Act was written. It was the young readers in Colorado who, by failing to demonstrate third grade reading proficiency on high-stakes, standardized state tests by third grade motivated the Colorado General

Assembly to write the original bill in 2012. In turning to my second research question, I ask, how are readers positioned within this discourse? How are readers constructed in the legislation? In the myriad documents available on the CDE's website? In the conversations about instructional programming? In the science of reading discourse? In the findings of the outside evaluators who studied the entire machine of the READ Act? I have saved this analysis for last because these texts are disturbingly silent about the readers. I said earlier, what is voiced again and again and what remains unspoken reveals how power operates, and that remains true. Though the readers are largely passive, they are not *completely* silent. Ultimately, and perhaps not surprisingly given neoliberal logics, they are the reason for all of this discourse yet seem to be of little consequence within it.

To begin, I have not yet addressed the troubling label that is at the center of the READ Act discourse: significant reading deficiency. The READ Act legislative text defines this as occurring when:

a student does not meet the minimum skill levels for reading competency in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, including oral skills, and reading comprehension established by the state board pursuant to section 22-7-1209 for the student's grade level. (The Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 5)

As I previously discussed, the discourse surrounding the READ Act positions reading competency as a commodity, as a thing that is attainable and that is either attained, or not. Thus, if you do not attain reading competency, you have a significant reading deficiency. As such, readers are positioned as either having a significant reading

deficiency, or not. You cannot be a reader who does not possess reading competency in certain areas and does not have a significant reading deficiency. You cannot be in second grade, for instance, and meet the minimum skill level in phonics and vocabulary, not yet meet the minimum skill level in reading fluency and reading comprehension (thus not attaining reading competency), and not have a significant reading deficiency. Stop and think about that for a moment. This is how readers are positioned within this discourse. There is no room for nuance within this construction. The force of the word *deficiency* is, in my interpretation, breathtaking. It conjures up inadequacy to a degree that has no place in any school setting, but especially among the youngest learners who are full of nothing but imaginative potential that adults are prone to place limits on in the best of circumstances. This is intensified by the adjective *significant* seemingly to ensure there is no mistaking the severity of the situation for a child so identified as having an SRD. There appears to be little concern for the potentially crushing impact of describing a child as having a *significant reading deficiency* throughout the policy documents. On the contrary, children (readers) are most often abstracted as test scores or other quantifiable measures, and agency is rarely attributed to human actors, making it easy to anonymize the children for whom this policy was designed to help.

One moment did arise, however, where the use of such a heartbreaking term for children was questioned, but it hung in the air for just a split second before being dismissed. During the September 14, 2023, SBE meeting, as student test results were discussed—again, one of the few contexts in which students are mentioned—and board member Dr. Lisa Escárcega says:

Escárcega: That was one thing that, um, greatly impressed me. I think then the second thing we would want to ask—and this is what you've gotten to—so of the students who are an SRD, who started as a severely reading deficient, whatever—I don't like the name but whatever—um what is their growth?

(CDE, 2023c, 2:05:45)

For just a moment she interjected to express within this formal setting—where everyone has agreed to use this term for years—that she did not like it. And that was it. No one seemed to react. Due to the quality and angle of the video recording, I could not see many people in the audience or any of the other board members' faces, but no one made an audible reaction. The meeting continued. Escárcega ruptures the normative discourse in this moment to express her displeasure—*I don't like the name*—but immediately dismisses herself—*but whatever*—as though she knows how deeply rooted this term has become and deems it futile to start resisting now. It is part of the language of the READ Act, and it is entrenched in so many layers of documents. This is how discursive construction works, in the Foucauldian sense. Language constructs a reality, and when society agrees to continue using the language as constructed, it makes possible some conditions while foreclosing others. There is no such thing independent of the READ Act as a *significant reading deficiency*, but this term has become part of the lexicon through repetition. On the Colorado READ Act FAQs website (CDE, 2023), in response to the question “What is a Significant Reading Deficiency?” the answer reads, in part, “When students are identified as significantly below grade level (called a ‘significant reading deficiency’ or SRD), teachers administer a diagnostic assessment to determine specific areas of need for

reading improvement” (What is a Significant Reading Deficiency? section). This is a perfect example of how the term *significant reading deficiency* is being naturalized into everyday speech, as the parenthetical phrasing *called a* suggests the introduction to an existing term, when in reality being *significantly below grade level* is not simply called a *significant reading deficiency*; this is a term that was made up by the Colorado General Assembly and repeated by the State Board of Education and now the Colorado Department of Education. In this case of Escárcega’s momentary rupture of normativity, she is in a position to change the reality, as she is part of the very body that constructs the reality of the READ Act. Though the policy was written by the Colorado General Assembly, the State Board of Education was responsible for writing the rules for the enforcement of the statute.

Another point of interest I noticed when it came to how readers are positioned within the discourse can be described as seeing readers more as an abstraction, rather than real kids with genuine interests and unique personalities. I saw this in an analysis of two utterances by Don at two District Board Meetings where he contradicted his position. In the first meeting, in September 2021, Don updates the board on the process for selecting a core reading resource and shares the following:

Don: I’ll continue to update you as we go forward and we’ll have the committee also provide updates for you in that space. The other element I want to share with you tonight that I think is important is, CDE is scheduled to release a second set of approved materials in the first quarter of 2022. We are really interested to see those materials because the rubric which they’re using to look at materials has been revised based on feedback from round one. In

particular *the rubric has more elements in it that speak to the resources being representative of a multitude of perspectives and lived experiences throughout our community and so knowing that that is something we are interested in and committed to as a system*, there's going to be some interest in making sure that we look at materials that are approved in the second round before we make a commitment and a recommendation to a resource long term. We don't know what those resources will be or the exact timeline when that list will be released, but we're very interested in seeing that list and making sure that we do our due diligence with the additional approved resources before we make this decision. So, I just want to get that out today as we move forward.

(District, 2021, 00:44:25, emphasis mine)

Here, Don expresses a commitment to seeing additional resources that might be available for the express purpose of attaining a resource that has a variety of perspectives more representative of the community, which can be interpreted to mean the students, or the readers. This would demonstrate an attention to students as real children with interests and who represent diverse perspectives that should be considered in selecting a core reading resource. At the next meeting in January 2022, Don shares another update on the process:

Don: We also know that we have several partnership districts along the front range that are already utilizing uh resources on CDE's advisory list, and we are going to take advantage of our proximity and their current use of resources that we're also interested in to go out and do some visits. We want to be able to hear what their experiences have been, what they've liked, what they've learned

about their process, *data impacts that they may be seeing with kids*. There's a whole host of questions we're going to have for people that have already started down this road that we want to be able to learn from uh and apply to our own work. (District, 2022, 1:33:51, emphasis mine)

In this update, Don's emphasis is on the data outcomes that other districts are seeing with the curricula that they have already implemented. Here, Don's stance shifts to a concern about how children will be measured as data points, or *data impacts* as he phrases it in the excerpt. As this is from a meeting that is closer to the time when the core reading resource is selected, and based on what my analysis brings forth in chapter 6, I believe this to be more representative of how children are more commonly positioned in relation to their role as readers. It is certainly the case that the core reading resource that the district adopted did not come from the newer set of approved materials released in early 2022, so the commitment to looking at additional options more representative of diverse perspectives did not hold, leaving me to conclude that the concern about data outcomes was more salient in constructing readers within this policy discourse.

The most significant example of viewing readers as abstractions came in the September 14, 2023, SBE meeting during an interaction between Dr. Katie Grogan, one of the outside evaluators and board member Kathy Plomer. I have reproduced the excerpted text from the transcript to show this exchange in Table 4.3. It begins with the evaluator, Dr. Grogan, describing the results of her team's site visits to schools.

Table 4.3*Exchange During SBE Meeting Demonstrating Abstraction of Readers/ Students*

Speaker	Utterance
Dr. Grogan:	Um and people really pointed to a couple of things during site visits in terms of how this training they felt impacted what was going on in classrooms at their school. First, they really felt like it grounded teachers uh in the knowledge of the five components of scientifically based reading, and, again, kind of gave them that common language. They also felt that it changed their classroom practice that again they were using those approaches. And that, lastly, it improved their ability to differentiate instruction for students based on specific deficits they had that they were able to better understand as a result of the training. And the last point I'll make; there is something else that we heard in the site visits pretty consistently that ongoing coaching and dedicated time through things like professional learning communities were cited as really effective structures for supporting implementation of those new practices that, again, it wasn't just the training but also these additional supports that were making the difference.
Board Member Plomer:	Just a question about—was this all self-report? So, there was no—when you did the evaluation—you couldn't see if the implementation of the new practices was occurring but it's how they felt and perceived?
Dr, Grogan:	Yes, these are all perceptions at this point. There were no other independent measures or obser—like formal observations that would have allowed us-
Board Member Plomer:	Okay, will those be in another report—or is that ever planned—or is that too, too beyond the scope of the ability to--?
Dr. Grogan:	It was beyond the scope of this, unless we were to do it in a small sample.

Note. Colorado Department of Education, 2023c, 1:41:38

This exchange illustrates several interesting things, but in the context of how readers/students are positioned, it appears that the evaluators only view them as an

abstraction. As the recipients of the teachers' reported instruction, it does not matter what the students' experiences have been. They are meant to be the passive beneficiaries of the teachers' new learnings, and it does not appear to matter how the students are experiencing the reading instructional practices or whether the reported practices are, in fact, happening in the classroom where the students are located. Just hearing about them, it seems, is enough.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described findings from applying my CDA protocol to policy documents produced across multiple macropolitical bodies in relation to the Colorado READ Act. This analysis has yielded insights into how the discourse surrounding this policy has constructed literacy, literacy instruction, teachers, and students. I have demonstrated that neoliberal logics favoring technocratic solutions undergirded by a profound trust in simplistic, context-neutral tools backed by scientific evidence have worked to construct literacy as reading print in particular ways that often position teachers and students as passive relative to curricula and instructional programs that take on agency within this system. In the next chapter, I turn to local media sources to show if and how the discourse circulating in that space reproduces what is seen in the policy realm.

Chapter 5: Elementary Literacy as Constructed within the Local Media

The national popular media discourse surrounding reading education has recently been characterized as experiencing a “crisis” (Aukerman, 2022, para. 1) wherein journalists’ failure to understand the complexities of the field result in consequential, and often biased, errors. MacPhee and colleagues’ (2021) metaphorical frame analysis of media portrayals of reading education supports such a characterization, finding within articles dominant themes of conflict presenting stakeholders entrenched in a “dramatic battle to save children” (p. S151). Such reporting, the authors argue, generates political spectacle (Anderson, 2007) and a belief that a quick fix based on *the* science of reading is available, minimizing the situatedness of reading and teaching. In this chapter, I turn to the local media landscape to ask how the discourse surrounding the READ Act policy constructs literacy, literacy instruction, teachers, and students. Do local journalists take up these constructs in the same distorted ways as the national media? How are the neoliberal logics present within the policy documents analyzed in the previous chapter present in media texts? Do ruptures to normative discourse exist within this discursive space?

In this chapter, I begin with a summary of the data set for this chapter before turning to an analysis of my findings, where I start by considering how literacy is constructed across two broadly divergent categories: 1) a measurable set of functionalist reading skills and 2) a situated sociocultural practice. I then turn to literacy instruction as conceptualized through a curricular conspiracy lens and the deployment of unnamed experts. The second half of the chapter considers first teachers, then students, utilizing a creative data tool to process the troubling

intertextual thread that constructs certain futures for some students within the media discourse.

Local Media Data Summary

As described in chapter 3, I analyzed a total of 65 local media texts from four different publications. As I reviewed the data set, patterns emerged in terms of what received attention as a topic for reporting. In Table 5.1, I present the seven distinct categories, plus the addition of a catchall “Other,” into which I sorted the 65 texts based on the focus of the article. I also included the names of the publications that were represented within each category and the date range for coverage, as present in my data set. The uneven numbers of articles I reviewed from each publication limits the conclusions that can be made from such information, though I do find it interesting that, for example, *The Denver Post* is the only publication in the data set to have covered outside of school literacy experiences. It is also interesting to see that the topic of curricula is only covered by *Chalkbeat Colorado* and only between the years 2020 and 2022, which aligns with the enactment of the 2019 READ Act amendments and Emily Hanford’s audio documentaries, including the 2022 *Sold a Story* series, as I will discuss in the findings below. The findings that emerged through the application of my CDA protocol in response to my research questions frequently crossed over these categories, though of course, I found significant constructions of literacy instruction within the category of curricula. In the sections that follow, I present findings relevant to each of the elementary literacy concepts raised as part of my research questions: *literacy, literacy instruction, teachers, and students.*

Table 5.1
Summary of Local Media Article Data Set by Category

Category	Number of Articles	Publications	Span of Years
Pre-READ Act	2	The Denver Post, CPR	2011
Legislation	11	Chalkbeat Colorado, The Denver Post, The Colorado Sun	2012-2019
Test Scores	13	Chalkbeat Colorado, The Denver Post, The Colorado Sun, CPR	2011-2023
Curricula	15	Chalkbeat Colorado	2020-2022
Opinions / Commentaries	12	Chalkbeat Colorado, The Denver Post, The Colorado Sun	2011-2023
Outside of School	5	The Denver Post	2013-2018
WestEd Evaluations	3	Chalkbeat Colorado, CPR	2019-2023
Other	4	Chalkbeat Colorado	2016-2022

Literacy

A portion of the media discourse is explicitly in reference to the READ Act policy, and as such reproduces discourse either directly or indirectly from policymakers discussed in chapter 4. It is not surprising, then, that this subset of media texts construct literacy in a similar way, namely as limited to reading print, restricted to a set of discrete foundational reading skills aligned with a functionalist view of literacy. There are voices within these texts, as well as additional texts within the full data set for this chapter, however, that present alternative representations of literacy. In

this section, I examine two broadly divergent views of literacy present in the media discourse that circulates contemporaneously to the READ Act policy. These are a) a functionalist view that literacy is a set of objectively measurable reading skills and b) a more expansive sociocultural view of literacy embracing multiple and situated literate practices. Regardless of the specific construction of literacy or reading across these texts, the importance of the concept is never questioned. In one of the earliest articles in the data set, describing the debate over the original READ Act as it moved through the legislative chambers, Engdahl (2012a) reports, “A wide selection of Democratic and Republican members rose to speak in favor of the bill, some saying that even if the bill is imperfect, *improving early literacy is too important and can’t wait*” (The debate section, para. 8, emphasis mine). As the story of the READ Act has played out over more than a decade, resulting in limited constructions of literate possibilities, I wonder how the discursive landscape—and resulting lived experiences of teachers and students—would be different if more time had been taken on crafting better policy. Or, perhaps the discourses circulating at that time, as visible elsewhere in literacy policy, constrained what was possible from the start.

You Can Measure It

I cannot overstate how frequently within the media texts literacy is restricted to the measurable set of reading skills that students must acquire by third grade in order to be successful, primarily in school, but also more broadly in life. Data and numbers are invoked to describe literacy (reading) far more frequently than descriptions of engagement with oral or print literacy practices. To be clear, the READ Act policy is based on neoliberal policy and logics that value the rationality and false simplicity of

numbers and is therefore designed to not only be evaluated through metrics outside of the policy (i.e., standardized test scores on the state's third grade English language arts assessment), but also functions to reduce children's reading skills to discretely quantifiable skills such that literacy is no longer a complex and integrated set of sociocultural oral, aural, graphophonic processes that reinforce and implicate one another. Thus, any article that reports on this policy will likely take up this logic in discussing literacy. The repetition of it and the exclusion of other possibilities is overwhelming across the data set.

Just after the READ Act was passed in 2012, Engdahl, reporting for *Chalkbeat Colorado*, briefly summarized the new legislation, including this bullet point, "Starting in 2013-14 districts will annually assess K-3 students' reading abilities with CDE approved tests" (Engdahl, 2012b, para. 6c). This aspect of the READ Act effectively (re)defines students' reading abilities as those skills that can be measured by the CDE approved tests. At this time (2012), the approved tests had not been identified, but in the early years of the READ Act, as a teacher in Denver Public Schools, I used the Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA2, Pearson), which consisted of completing a running record of oral reading to analyze students' errors. Thus, students' reading abilities were quantified as the number of errors and rate of reading, resulting in a calculation of their reading level, which was compared to the state's classifications to sort students into categories of reading proficiency. Interestingly, the nominalization of *districts* here minimizes the significant burden this placed on teachers in terms of time (I was a teacher in Colorado responsible for this work, and the *districts* did not carry out any of the tasks).

From this early identification of reading as consisting of measurable skills, another example can be seen in the excerpt below from an opinion piece written by a former teacher advocating for new teacher licensure rules that would require elementary, early childhood, and special education teacher candidates to pass a more specific reading assessment aligned more closely with the science of reading principles. In describing how science of reading-based practices benefited her and her students, she states:

Perhaps most importantly, using an explicit and systematic approach to teaching foundational skills allowed me to clearly *identify roadblocks* for a particular reader. I could better *identify a gap in a student's knowledge or skill set* (whether phonemic awareness or phonics) and *craft lessons and interventions that targeted the specific skill a student needed to master in order to progress*. (Batchelder, 2021, para. 14, emphasis mine)

The way this teacher frames her instructional approach suggests she views literacy (reading) from a functionalist lens as a set of discrete skills that students must simply acquire individually and sequentially in order to become competent readers. In her description, she describes herself as a technician identifying gaps within students and filling them in with the needed lessons. This is an application of context-neutral tool aligned with the neoliberal, technocratic logic that refuses to acknowledge the complexities inherent in situated realities of reading as process, favoring the rationalization of abstraction.

In this example of the functionalist view of literacy as a set of measurable skills comes from a 2022 *Chalkbeat Article* providing an historical perspective of

Colorado's efforts to improve early reading outcomes for students. Here, Mississippi is held up as a model for what Colorado hopes to achieve:

One promising case study comes out of Mississippi, where state officials launched a slew of reading initiatives starting a decade ago, including teacher training on the science of reading.

In 2013, the state was at the back of the pack for fourth grade reading achievement on a test called the National Assessment of Educational Progress. By 2019, Mississippi ranked first in the country for reading gains, with its fourth graders matching the national average for the first time. (Schimke, 2022e, Checking the to-do list section, paras. 2-3)

Positioned as an exemplar for what reading achievement can look like, the results are limited to standardized test scores, in this case the NAEP assessment. There is nothing included about how Mississippi sees these improvements in reading tied to larger conceptions of reading beyond quantifiable skills.

A final example that powerfully shows how discourse surrounding the READ Act policy limits possible constructions of literacy for students comes in a 2020 article that shows how not even the COVID-19 pandemic could disrupt some of the sedimented neoliberal logics. It is important to remember that this is shortly after the READ Act amendments in 2019 had reinvigorated the intensity of oversight related to early reading practices in schools. As the 2020-21 school year approached, *Chalkbeat Colorado* reported, "State Board of Education members on Wednesday *resisted* suggestions that Colorado schools *delay identifying struggling readers* until winter,

instead of sticking to the usual fall timeline” (Schimke, 2020e, para. 1, emphasis mine). The associate commissioner for student learning from the CDE shared concerns from some educators that “they won’t be able to properly administer the required reading assessments early in the school year if classes aren’t meeting in person” (para. 6, emphasis mine), but:

board member Rebecca McClellan said that could happen in the winter too, derailing reading assessments even more.

“Then *we lose that opportunity altogether to find out what’s happening with those kids,*” she said. “We have to jump in while we can.” (Schimke, 2020e, paras. 7-8, emphasis mine)

This illustrates the way neoliberal trust in measurement and data above all else, as well as the insistence on accountability, leaves no room for commonsense. As students and teachers prepared to return to school after the collective trauma of COVID-19 and the uncertainties of instructional mode and fears about continued transmission of the illness were top of mind, the state board was unwilling to consider flexibility in delaying assessments of children. The idea that delaying the assessments equates to losing *that opportunity altogether to find out what’s happening with those kids* is truly beyond the realm of rational thought even if one puts the context of what was happening aside. This statement by McClellan shows a binary understanding of what it means to know what is happening with *those kids*. Without test scores, there is no understanding. Literacy educators know that interacting with a student for just a short time would reveal myriad information about that child, including signs that the child may be a *struggling reader*, as the board is concerned with knowing.

Reading is Situated and Interactive

The other broad view present in the media discourse, though appearing much less frequently, sees literacy as a sociocultural historically relevant practice that is richly situated. In this first example, published four years after the READ Act was signed into law, teachers relate their experiences adjusting to the relatively new policy to *Chalkbeat Colorado*:

“I just don’t want *the skills to kill the desire to read*....I guess that would be my one worry,” said Rita Merigan, a reading interventionist at Gunnison Elementary School. “*Reading is so much more than these targeted pieces.*” Ewert-Lamutt, [a teacher] from Jeffco, has related concerns, worrying that few of the state-approved strategies address the *literacy needs of English learners*.

“Most of the interventions really focus on *discrete ideas*: This is a ‘t’, and it makes this sound ‘ta, ta, ta ta’....*It’s not going to do it for them,*” she said.

“They need *connections to real text.*” (Schimke, 2016, “Discrete skills” section, paras. 1-5, emphasis mine)

These teachers construct reading more expansively than discrete skills. The first teacher, Merigan, uses *so much more than* to compare reading to *targeted pieces*, where the intensifier *so* emphasizes the contrast, and the word *pieces* does not connote an officially sanctioned part of learning, suggesting a dismissal of the discrete skills she named earlier. She uses evocative, emotional language in the verb phrase *kill the desire to read*, positioning the nominalized discrete reading *skills* as capable of committing the act of *killing* what she wants for children, *the desire to read*.

The second teacher, Ewert-Lamutt, brings the important perspective of English language learners, focusing on their *literacy needs*. The phrase *literacy needs* is indirect text, not a direct representation of Ewert-Lamutt's words, but the journalist's choice of this phrase may point to Ewert-Lamutt's desire to distinguish what she values as a teacher from what is available within the framework of the READ Act based on her interactions with this teacher. Ewert-Lamutt, like Merigan, contrasts *discrete* aspects of reading with a more authentic view of text, described as *connections to real text*. The use of the adjective *real* serves as an intensifier and a label within a classification scheme that differentiates between authentic and inauthentic interactions between text and reader. This is in alignment with sociocultural perspectives of literacy, including reader response theory (Brooks & Browne, 2012; Rosenblatt, 1982). Ewert-Lamutt says about the discrete instructional practices in relation to her students, *It's not going to do it for them*. This phrasing has a colloquial tone that I interpret as a weary expression of a teacher familiar with evaluating ever-changing initiatives who can recognize what her students need. This is where I am highly conscious of my positionality and am bringing my subjectivities to bear, as I can imagine this utterance from years of experience working in schools where my colleagues and I made similar judgements about new mandates and their relevance for our students.

Outside of the above excerpt, literacy (reading) is rarely constructed outside of the functionalist perspective across the media texts. The exceptions occur in articles published concurrently with media coverage of the READ Act that is not directly about the READ Act policy or about school literacies. As described in chapter 3, I

included these texts in my data set, as I was interested in how ideas related to elementary literacy are constructed in media discourses surrounding the READ Act policy, and I was curious to see if and how literacy practices for early elementary-aged children outside of school might be influenced. The excerpts below provide insight into how outside of school spaces have potential to serve as less restrictive environments where expansive ideas about literacy have room to grow.

An article in *The Denver Post* reports on the Early Literacy and Writing program within the Bridge Project, a multifaceted collaboration between the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work and the Denver Housing Authority. The Bridge Project began in 1991 and, according to this article, supports “underserved K-12 students through comprehensive after-school programs” (Gassman, 2017, para. 4). The excerpted text begins with one of the program’s youth participants, 10-year-old Fartuna, explaining why she has enjoyed participating in the program:

"I liked it because *we got to write what we wanted to*," Fartuna said, recalling her most recent writing class. "They *inspire you* to do different things."

The Early Literacy and Writing program, just one of Bridge Project's many educational components, *focuses on reading and writing fundamentals for K-5 students.*

[. . .]

This year, elementary education coordinator Jacquelyn Scranton is *emphasizing writing*. For many kids at Bridge Project, *English is a second language*. The *ability to formulate stories*, from a simple outline to a satisfying conclusion, has *helped them become invested in learning.*

"I found the *biggest thing is within personal narrative*," Scranton said. "Where they are *able to write from their experiences and their cultures and interests*."

(Gassman, 2017, paras. 7-8; 11-12, emphasis mine)

The construction of literacy through the Bridge Project excerpt expands beyond reading print and beyond a context-neutral perspective. Fartuna expresses agency with *got to write what we wanted to*, suggesting that not only has she enjoyed the program, but it may also be the case that this stands in contrast to what she experiences at school. The coordinator, Scranton, recognizes the sociocultural nature of literacy / writing when she says the *biggest thing is personal narrative*. While *biggest thing* is vague and it is not clear to what she is referring, I can infer that she believes that the personal narrative has been a point of success for students in the program. She continues by stating students are *able to write from their experiences and their cultures and interests*. Including the verb phrase *able to write* suggests she measures success as a function of the writing skills, but coupling this with *from their experiences and their cultures and interests* with no subordinating clauses implies a belief that the students' identities are equally valued in this definition of success. Thus, there is some normativity relative to functionalist approaches to literacy here, further expressed earlier where the focus is on *reading and writing fundamentals for K-5 students*, though the discourse constructs success as including these *fundamentals* as well as a sense of student self-efficacy and connection to community and culture as expressed by Fartuna and the invocation of students being *invested in learning*. Importantly, when I looked up the Bridge Project, using Google search, I could not find evidence that it still exists in this form. The READ Act's expansion into libraries and launch of a

public information campaign with the 2019 amendments causes concern that the same limiting discourses about literacy seen in my analysis will spread to out of school spaces.

In another example from outside of school, a 2018 article in *The Denver Post* describing the One Book 4 Colorado program positions reading as an interactive activity meant to be shared and enjoyed together:

“One Book 4 Colorado *puts books into the hands of children and families* across the state,” [Colorado Lt. Gov. Donna] Lynne said via email. “There’s a *lot that comes with actually holding a book along with your small child and reading it together*. By giving every 4-year-old the same book, this *collaborative program is creating a strong culture of literacy* in Colorado.”

(Wenzel, 2018, para. 3)

Later in the article, the rationale for that year’s book selection, Eric Litwin’s *Groovy Joe: Dance Party Countdown* (2017) is provided, “The book was chosen in part for its *playful nature*, which encourages adults to *sing the words to their kids*” (Wenzel, 2018, para. 10). Here, a state-wide literacy initiative that provides a free children’s book for pick up across the state conveys a creative discourse around reading that stands in contrast to the functionalist perspective of literacy. There is nothing in these excerpts, nor anywhere else in this article, that positions reading in service of anything beyond enjoyment, play, and reinforcing human connection. The Lt. Governor’s represented discourse from the article states a goal of the initiative is creating a *strong culture of literacy* in the state, but, importantly, she does little to define or restrict what literacy can or cannot be. She places one literate activity—a parent reading aloud with a

child—as the idealized version of an interaction between parent-child-text, saying *there's a lot that comes with* this interaction, though even this characterization contains no evaluative language—the reader of the article is not certain what there is a lot of and can fill that in for themselves. She uses the intensifier *actually* along with the verb *holding* to invoke a specific image of such an interaction that privileges oral reading skills and children who are not hard of hearing. The book chosen for distribution to be shared and enjoyed across the state also seems to be intentionally selected to be inclusive of the diverse population in Colorado, as the characters are nonhuman (dogs). The article does not indicate if the book was available in languages other than English, however, or in audio formats. Ultimately, what is important for my analysis is the fact that reading is positioned as a social, playful task promoted for its entertainment value. Though there are undoubtedly calculated motives behind this governmental initiative, started by John Hickenlooper when he was mayor of Denver and expanded into a statewide initiative when he was elected governor, related to raising children's reading abilities, the construction within this text does not reify such goals, and thus presents an alternative to the discourse that reading must be measurable in some quantifiable, discrete way.

Literacy Instruction

Within my data set, details regarding literacy (reading) instruction do not feature prominently until after the passage of the READ Act amendments in 2019. Prior to this time, reading instruction was implicit as an element of the READ Act policy but was not a focus of reporting. As the READ Act faced a reckoning for failing to produce desired results, leading to the 2019 amendments, closer attention was paid

to instruction, as the new law required schools to report the scientifically-based and evidence based instructional programming for reading to the state. Even after 2019, three of the four news outlets did not include significant reporting on literacy instruction within my data set. *The Colorado Sun* published an article to report on changes to the READ Act (Osher, 2019c), CPR has two articles related to elements of the policy that include instruction (Brundin 2023a, 2023b), and *The Denver Post* has two opinion pieces plus an editorial that include elements of reading instruction (Anthes, 2019; Denver Post, 2020; Mazenko, 2013). *Chalkbeat Colorado*, however, engaged in significant reporting about reading instruction in Colorado, publishing 15 articles directly addressing this topic between March 27, 2020, and October 18, 2022 (see Table 5.2 for a list of these articles). In these articles, reporter Ann Schimke responds to the new READ Act policy mandates for schools to use scientifically and evidence-based reading instructional programming by launching investigations into how districts are complying with the law. Though she frames the project like this:

I imagined a service-minded final product. We'd ask school districts to report their reading curriculum — the roadmap for what and how teachers teach. Then, we'd link up those names with ratings, and make it all available to readers. With a few clicks, parents and the public would have an easy way to find out key details about how Colorado kids are learning to read. (Schimke, 2020a, para. 2)

As I explain in my analysis below, the tone of her reporting mirrors that of Emily Hanford's (2018, 2019, 2020, 2022), pitting parents against schools and schools against the CDE in an artificial and unhelpful conflict that seems to be in the service of

drama, not students. After presenting this analysis, I briefly discuss how the entire *Chalkbeat Colorado* data set (as well other texts within the larger local media data set) deploys the ambiguous term *experts* to further create issues related to the trustworthiness of its reporting on reading instruction.

Curricular Conspiracies

Through the fifteen articles listed in Table 5.2, Schimke positions schools and districts as acting willfully against the CDE, using an often-conspiratorial tone, heightening a narrative of conflict seemingly for the spectacle (Anderson, 2007) and drama, rather than based on any genuine tensions.

Schimke’s construction of reading instruction is influenced directly by Emily Hanford’s audio documentary series, which has been called out as divisive (Bomer et al., 2022). In an article titled “Reading Instruction is Big News These Days. Teachers, Share Your Thoughts with Us!” Schimke (2018) states:

Lately, lots of people are talking about reading. Specifically, how it’s taught (or not) in America’s schools.

Much of the credit is due to American Public Media reporter Emily Hanford. In September, she took an in-depth look at what’s wrong with reading instruction in the nation’s classrooms and how explicit, systematic phonics instruction could help. (paras. 1-2)

Schimke makes no effort here to question Hanford’s claim that there is something wrong with reading instruction in the nation’s classrooms or even to suggest that there may also be some things right. In this article, Schimke includes links to six blogs or other online sources, and just one of them takes a position that is slightly at odds with

Hanford's. Starting from this explicit support for Hanford's reporting, there is no doubt within the 15 articles within Schimke's instructional programming reporting that she believes Hanford's position that, "neither whole language nor balanced literacy is based on science" (Schimke, 2018, para. 4) and that the CDE's approach to approving "evidence-based" instructional programming is beyond reproach. Across the 15 articles, many of which Schimke characterizes as part of a "Chalkbeat investigation" (e.g., Schimke, 2020c, para. 6), schools and districts are interrogated about the curricular resources used to teach reading, and Schimke reports any mention of *discredited, unacceptable, rejected*, or otherwise marginalized curricula used by schools. Here is an example of such a report in an article about Schimke's investigation into Aurora Public Schools' (a large, diverse district east of Denver) curricula:

Wonders, the most widely used reading program in Aurora schools, is one of the programs approved by state reviewers. But a second program called "Units of Study for Teaching Reading," or more commonly "Lucy Calkins," didn't make the cut. The same is true of a supplemental phonics program called Fountas & Pinnell Phonics, which is used at all of Aurora's Lucy Calkins schools.

That means that one-third of Aurora's district-run elementary and K-8 schools, enrolling more than 5,000 students, use unacceptable reading curriculum and are out of compliance with the law. (Schimke, 2021a, A look at the law section, paras. 4-5)

The article continues with Schimke calling the district and learning that they “had no plans to switch away from Lucy Calkins and questioned Chalkbeat’s interpretation of the law” (A look at the law section, para. 6). This continues with the district contacting the CDE and Schimke eventually reporting that the district hears back from the CDE, vindicating Schimke’s position. In a later article, “Aurora District Pivots, Reveals Plan to Drop Discredited Reading Curriculum” (Schimke, 2021f), as the title suggests, Schimke reports on the district’s moves to switch to new curricula. Schimke includes in the update that district officials, “were slow to divulge their plan to replace unacceptable K-3 curriculum when asked by Chalkbeat about the issue starting in November. They didn’t answer emails, issued a vague statement about the district’s literacy efforts, and otherwise sidestepped questions” (para. 3), seemingly oblivious to the possibility that the district may have more important things to do with their time than communicate with *Chalkbeat* while trying to adopt new curriculum, amongst the many other responsibilities involved in running a large school district.

The tone of this reporting, as I interpret it within the set of articles where Schimke investigates other districts’ curricula, feels conspiratorial and suspicious, attempting to stir up controversy where there is none. Looking at the headlines in Table 5.2 reveals a pattern of phrases, rhetorical questions, questions and answers, and click-bait formations that sound unsupportive and evoke “got ya” journalism. Schools and districts, for the most part, are doing the best they can with the limited resources they have. Purchasing new curricula is incredibly expensive, which Schimke raises in one of her articles (2021e), not only in monetary costs but also in the time investment and psychological burden required of teachers to adjust. Schimke positions herself as

advocating for Colorado's children, even aligning herself with advocates like Lindsay Drakos, a co-chair of the statewide dyslexia advocacy group COKID, who is quoted in one of Schimke's articles as saying, "We have to have some accountability to help these kids" (Schimke, 2021a, A look at the law section, para. 12). However, her binary construction of curricular resources positions them as "right" or "wrong," ignoring the nuance inherent to any instructional material or practice, as there is always an interplay between what is present in a classroom full of uniquely embodied children and their teacher and what statically exists within instructional materials. Materials that bring an illuminating experience to one classroom may fail to engage another, making such binary judgements of good/bad meaningless. Additionally, the tone Schimke employs, like Hanford (2022), is divisive where unity is needed.

Table 5.2*Headlines from Schimke's "Investigative" Reporting Related to Curriculum*

No.	Date	Headline
1	2020, Mar 27	Why do so many Colorado students struggle to read? Flawed curriculum is part of the problem
2	2020, Mar 27	Behind the story: Here's what happened when we started asking about reading curriculum
3	2020, Apr 23	Colorado wants schools to use reading curriculum supported by science. Here are the ones that made the cut
4	2020, Jun 25	Colorado is cracking down on reading curriculum. Here's how Denver's made the cut
5	2020, Sep 25	What do Jeffco schools use to teach reading? District leaders don't know, and neither does the public
6	2020, Oct 15	Many Jeffco schools use discredited curriculum to teach students how to read
7	2020, Oct 26	Colorado parents, here's what to ask your child's school about reading instruction
8	2020, Dec 14	Denver says this reading curriculum supports English learners. But the state says it's not based on science and has to go
9	2021, Mar 1	Colorado's rules on reading curriculum apply to Aurora, but that was news to district officials
10	2021, Mar 30	Nearly all Cherry Creek elementary schools use state-rejected reading curriculum. Change is coming
11	2021, Sep 10	New reading curriculum for some Jeffco schools, a step toward bigger changes
12	2021, Nov15	Colorado cracks down on schools using weak reading curriculum. Advocates worry about backpedaling
13	2021, Dec 10	Aurora district pivots, reveals plan to drop discredited reading curriculum

No.	Date	Headline
14	2022, Jan 26	Colorado's reading curriculum crackdown advances, districts commit to change
15	2022, Oct 18	How a Colorado district changed its reading curriculum to better reflect students

Experts

Across my data set, a group of ambiguous actors appears to whom a lot is attributed, yet about whom nothing is known. I am referring to *experts* (see Appendix N where I present a full accounting of these ambiguous experts). I include my analysis of this discursive subject here, as it is often deployed in relation to curriculum, though not always. Similarly, it is often used within *Chalkbeat Colorado* articles, though, again, not always. The use of the generalized “expert” when it comes to education policy and practice is a well-documented element of the neoliberalization of education that sees teachers losing professional standing (Ball, 2017; Hargreaves, 2000), while voices outside of the school and classroom are privileged as authoritative when it comes to not only what should be going on in *all* classrooms in order to meet the needs of *all* students but who also seem to be aware of what actually is going on in these classrooms. In the media texts I analyze, teachers are present, though they are not positioned as experts. This point is emphasized by the fact that the unnamed *experts* are frequently referenced in the same sentence as *teachers*. For example, Meltzer (2019a) writes, “That law also convened *experts* to study the methods *teachers* are using to help struggling readers and make recommendations for policy changes,” (para. 16, emphasis mine). “*Experts* say well-trained *teachers* are critical to teaching

reading well, but that high-quality curriculum can make that job easier,” (Schimke, 2021e, para. 14, emphasis mine) is another example of the same point. What is interesting in these two examples, as well as others in Appendix N, is that teachers are positioned as significant—in the first example, they are the object of study from which *experts* can learn effective methods for teaching *struggling readers*—and consequential—in the second example, one can conclude that *effective reading instruction* is possible, though more challenging, with a *well-trained teacher* absent a high-quality curriculum, but it is not so with a high-quality curriculum without a *well-trained teacher*—yet do not merit the designation of *expert* within either of these articles or anywhere across the entire set of 65 articles.

Looking carefully at the dates of the articles in which the term *experts* appear, despite this full data set including 28 of the 65 (43%) articles published between 2011 and 2018, only three of the 17 (18%) articles that include the use of the completely ambiguous term *experts* were published in this time frame. This means that the use of the depersonalized *experts* increased over time, which I would argue can be attributed to an intertextual chain related to the science of reading discourse, which is itself a part of the increasingly polarizing discourse permeating the educational landscape at this time.

Deploying a group of unnamed, and thus unverifiable experts, within the media discourse is a tool of neoliberalism which reinforces the strength of the discursive formation positioning *science* as an unquestionable source of authority that is then able to make claims without the need to back them up with any actual science or legitimate evidence (Lather, 2018). Importantly, positioning teachers outside of the category of

experts minimizes the credibility of teacher voice when teachers are positioned closest to where practical evidence of effective literacy practices occur, namely the classroom. If teachers are not constructed as experts within the media discourse, how are they positioned? I turn to that now.

Teacher Constructions

Whereas teachers were talked *about* at the macropolicy level, there was limited space for their thoughts, values, and beliefs to be authentically reproduced. At most, indirect speech (Fairclough, 1992) attributed to teachers came up occasionally at state and district board of education meetings, as in the self-reported aspects of the WestEd evaluators findings I examined toward the end of chapter 4. By contrast, the local media articles contain a significant amount of discourse representation (Fairclough, 1992) from teachers where their own words are used to construct understandings of literacy teaching and learning. Across these articles, teachers have space to position themselves, including in one instance in an opinion piece (Batchelder, 2021), and they are likewise able to position their students. They are also positioned by the journalists who write about them and by discourse representation from policymakers and parents. Though, as I discussed above, teachers are not included in the discursive formation *expert*, and their relationship to knowledge about reading instruction is frequently framed by neoliberal logics, it is crucial to note that they are also often positioned as learners. Equally as important, teachers clearly convey a genuine care for students that is not always present in other stakeholders' utterances. In the sections below, I highlight these nuanced positionings, considering teacher knowledge framed as both

problem and solution, teachers as learners, and teachers' articulations of care for children.

Teacher Knowledge as a Problem

Limited teacher knowledge of evidence-based practices for teaching reading is consistently cited by state legislators, the CDE, and the media as one of the primary reasons—along with the lack of oversight for funding and the absence of scientifically and evidence-based instructional programs—for the failure of the READ Act to produce the desired outcomes in students' reading scores (CDE, 2019a; Osher, 2019c). Thus, it is not surprising that teachers' minimal understanding of the so-called scientific methods for teaching reading is often constructed in media discourse as a barrier to improvements in reading outcomes. The following examples from across the data set highlight this construction:

- 1) "*Evidence-based, proven science has not been applied routinely,*" said one of the bill's lead sponsors, state Sen. Bob Rankin, a Republican from Carbondale, on why the legislation requires schools to use specific methods when teaching reading. "It can make a big difference." (Osher, 2019c, para. 3, emphasis mine)
- 2) Though outcomes weren't what we had hoped, we adults learned a lot during the first six years of the READ Act. We learned *more teacher training in evidence-based reading instruction is needed to raise student achievement. Some of our greatest teachers haven't received the latest training in scientifically based methods for teaching reading, and we need*

- to support their learning in this area.* (Anthes, 2019, para. 7, emphasis mine)
- 3) Eric Hirsch, executive director of EdReports, said weak curriculum *can lead teachers to try to fill the gaps by “hunting and pecking across the internet.”*
- “Without a strong curriculum what often happens is teachers go out and create their own,” and often it’s not on grade level,* he said. *“They’re going to non-curated sites like Google, Pinterest, and Teachers Pay Teachers.”* (Schimke, 2020b, “Here’s what’s considered” section, paras. 11-12, emphasis mine)
- 4) The shift to *better curriculum aligns* well with a *requirement* that Colorado’s 23,000 K-3 teachers *get training on the science of reading* by next summer, said Melissa Colman, associate commissioner of student learning at the Colorado Department of Education. (Schimke, 2022a, para. 8, emphasis mine)
- 5) But the *gains often faded* after the grants ran out, sometimes because of staff or principal turnover. Program leaders also said *some teachers didn’t have the grounding in the science of reading that they needed* to sustain the coaching and other help they received through the grant. (Schimke, 2022e, Checking the to-do list section, para. 5, emphasis mine)

In these excerpts, policymakers or other powerfully-situated voices discursively position teachers as missing some discrete knowledge, skill, or concrete resource that would enable them to effectively teach reading. This aligns with the neoliberal

separation of learner and content often talked about in relation to students, but equally applicable to teachers.

Interestingly, the level of bad faith or incompetence attributed to teachers varies in these excerpts. The speaker's role and relationship to teachers and schools is significant in this variance. In the case of example one, Sen. Rankin's use of the past tense of the verb *apply* suggests he may believe that teachers have knowledge of evidence-based practices but have not used them for some reason. This would suggest a less generous interpretation of teachers' behavior, reinforced by the passive syntax where teachers are the implied subject, serving to distance Rankin from his comments, a tactic used as a politeness strategy to make accusations land less harshly. Sen. Rankin, a Republican politician, does not have anything to lose in taking such a stance against teachers, as Republicans in the state have typically favored such accountability in the form of testing and oversight, but he does maintain a level of expected decorum.

Example two is from an opinion piece in *The Denver Post* written by then-Commissioner of Education Katy Anthes, who uses language that positions teachers as well-intentioned but not-yet informed of science-based practices. She uses the collective possessive determiner *our* when describing teachers to signify her allegiance with this group of professionals, and she further conveys her intent to minimize harm and show respect by using the adjective *greatest* to describe them, creating the phrase *our greatest teachers* as a descriptor of the group of individuals who are not knowledgeable in science-based reading practices. Stating that this is a group who *haven't received the latest training in scientifically based methods for teaching reading* further demonstrates her work to remove any blame from the teachers by placing them

in a passive role. While leaving unnamed the actor who may have been responsible for providing such training in the past, thereby shielding herself from potential backlash, Anthes continues with the plural possessive *we* in identifying those responsible for this work moving forward. Importantly, the verb used, *support*, suggests a collaborative effort, thus restoring a degree of agency to the teachers. These discursive moves allow Anthes to place teachers' (lack of) knowledge at the center of the READ Act's disappointing results while maintaining a supportive stance toward the teachers that she is closely aligned with in her role as an educational leader.

Anthes' statement that teachers should be supported to learn about evidence-based reading instructional practices leads into a related construction of teacher knowledge as the solution to the perceived problem of reading proficiency.

. . . And a Solution

While the examples highlighted in the previous section representing teachers as lacking key knowledge in science-backed reading were all utterances from voices other than journalists, the excerpts below, positioning teacher knowledge as a solution come from the journalists' writing:

- 1) While *most educators agree that well-trained teachers are the most critical part of the reading equation*, they say *high-quality curriculum can help*. A 2019 law meant to strengthen the state's 2012 reading law — the READ Act — seeks to *use both levers to get more kids reading at grade level*. (Schimke, 2020i, "Prioritizing reading" section, para. 1, emphasis mine)
- 2) Along with *new oversight of reading curriculums*, the 2019 READ Act revision *mandated teacher training* on reading instruction for all K-3 teachers — about

23,000 educators statewide. The intent of that 45-hour training is to *increase teacher knowledge of the science underpinning reading development and instruction, a piece of the reading puzzle that experts say is even more critical than a high-quality curriculum.* (Schimke, 2021d, para. 17, emphasis mine)

- 3) School districts often adopt new curriculum every six or seven years. Such purchases can be expensive, but the *influx of federal COVID relief money means schools now have extra cash* that can cover such one-time expenses. *Experts say well-trained teachers are critical to teaching reading well, but that high-quality curriculum can make that job easier.* (Schimke, 2021e, Districts put on notice section, para. 11, emphasis mine)
- 4) *Experts say well-trained teachers are the most critical ingredient* for good reading instruction, but that high-quality curriculum makes that job easier, *especially for new teachers.* (Schimke, 2021f, para. 9, emphasis mine)

All four of these excerpts come from *Chalkbeat Colorado* between 2020 and 2021. The journalist points out in each illustrative example that *well-trained teachers* are “*critical to teaching reading well*” (Schimke, 2021e). In all but the first excerpt, the phrase *experts say* is deployed to bring authority to this statement. Interestingly, the first example uses the phrase “*most educators agree*” (Schimke, 2020i) rather than invoking experts. I do not think it is coincidental that this is the earliest of the four examples, as the use of unverifiable experts in relation to the discourse surrounding elementary reading instruction has only heightened over recent years (Shanahan, 2020).

I further find the choice of phrase *well-trained* in these four excerpts to support the neoliberal, technocratic ideologies that circulate through the discourse of the READ Act policy and related ideas. Describing teachers as *well-trained* in contrast to an array of other adjectives—skillful, masterful, talented, experienced, ingenious, adept—distills the complexities of teaching to rote practices that can be applied equally in any context with any students, which is the opposite of the realities of teaching. In her critical discourse analysis of one of three Reading Leadership Academies supporting the Bush administration’s Reading First initiative, Stevens (2003) notes this same discourse, citing then-Assistant Secretary of Education Susan Neuman’s belief that “the path to equity in instructional opportunities and engagement comes through a singular approach, with a teacher who has been *well trained* to implement the program” (p. 667, emphasis mine). Interestingly, Neuman is a prominent voice in episode three of Hanford’s (2022) *Sold a Story* audio documentary series, titled “The Battle.” In the same section of analysis featuring Neuman, Stevens describes a session at the Academy where Louisa Moats, a well-known reading researcher whose work is considered authoritative on the side of the science of reading in the current discursive battleground, as it were, discusses professional development. Stevens characterizes Moats’ construction of a teacher as one “whose job is to closely follow the reading program, reading the script” (p. 666), and she provides a direct representation of Moats’ utterance from the Academy: ““The teachers told us that when you don't have someone coming into your room to observe, you don't give your best effort”” (p. 666). In addition to presenting these striking examples of utterances from professionals in the field of reading education—leaders at the time who are now

invoked as experts whose research and viewpoints are amongst those cited as *the* science of reading—Stevens makes the critical point that during the Academy these constructions of teachers were not backed by the same scientific evidence demanded in relation to reading instruction. Rather, these portrayals of teachers were based on anecdotes. Constructing the primacy of a scripted reading program that requires teachers to follow with little pushback and embrace a culture of surveillance is much easier to sell, however, when teachers are constructed as preferring this reality. It is troubling, as with many things in this study, that Stevens witnessed the same stories over 20 years ago that Schimke and others reproduce today.

Perhaps it should not be surprising, then, that these pronouncements of the critical importance of teachers to the effective teaching of reading are all accompanied by reference to *high-quality curriculum*. In two of the examples (3 and 4), such a curriculum is connected with the adversative connector *but*, and the first example uses the concessive *while* as though trying to convince the reader that a curriculum is still important. This makes sense, as I discussed above, given that much of the *Chalkbeat Colorado* reporting I analyzed buys fully into the state's binary construction of instructional programming as good / bad, evidence-based / discredited. The articles where all four of these excerpts are printed are part of *Chalkbeat Colorado's* subset of my data corpus classified as "investigative" in which the journalists, primarily Ann Schimke, attempt to uncover the curricula used across various districts in Colorado.

The most striking thing about these four examples is how similar the language is across articles. While I have noticed from my analysis it is not uncommon to reuse similar phrases across multiple articles, particularly in the *Chalkbeat Colorado*

publication, I think it is most interesting to consider the possible significance of small changes made between versions of such similar text. In this case, examples 1, 2, and 4 contain phrases that are close to one another comparing “well-trained teachers” to a) the most critical part of the reading equation, b) a piece of the reading puzzle, and c) most critical ingredient for good reading instruction, respectively. In example 2, the phrase *more critical than* is used shortly after the phrase I have copied here, but not quite in parallel syntax with the other two. Describing teachers as “the most critical” part, though, is significant. It reifies the functionalist view of literacy (reading) as a set of discrete skills that can be transferred to students, positioning the teacher as the holder of this knowledge until it is bestowed onto the child/student/learner/reader. In sociocultural views of literacy, both student and teacher (and environment, history, other children, families, communities, etc.) are valued equally or perhaps more accurately in ever-shifting waves of significance that are different for every child in every moment and could never possibly be predicted. The metaphors used here are a) reading as a mathematics/science equation, b) reading as a puzzle, and c) reading as a recipe. Each of these metaphors continues the discourse of technological and tool-based solutions and simplifying complex processes to rational or discrete steps. None of these metaphors stray from this framing. There is no suggestion that learning to read could be anything other than the application of a simple, context-neutral tool, following a set of orderly steps. If, for example, “well-trained teachers” were described as “skilled teachers” positioned as valued members of a vibrant tapestry of a learning community, this would break loose from the technocratic bonds that limit the possibilities and positionings of the subjects taking part in literacy learning.

Teacher as Learner

The above analysis demonstrates how teachers are all too often positioned as technicians in neoliberal discourses, so it is encouraging to see teachers also constructed as capable and knowledgeable professionals. The fact that teachers are not portrayed as a monolith across my data set is a credit to the journalists, though, as I will return to briefly in the conclusion to this chapter and in more detail in chapters 6 and 7, it is important to be mindful of the degree to which reductive representations of teachers—and students, as well—get reproduced in discourse. Also, it is significant that in the examples presented below, *teachers*, not journalists, voice their experiences learning about new reading practices associated with *the science of reading*. These include, primarily, explicit and systematic approaches to teaching phonics, as well as adopting curricula that incorporate more vocabulary and content knowledge building instruction. An example is the portrayal of Karen Ernst, a kindergarten teacher included in a lengthy *Chalkbeat Colorado* article titled “Why do so many do so many Colorado students struggle to read? Flawed curriculum is part of the problem” (Schimke, 2020b), whose experience with learning a new curriculum is described as follows:

All of it has *made her realize that her previous approach* — which *she described* as giving students a “little taste” of phonics — *was not working*.
“What I have done in the past was not the best route,” Ernst said.

[. . .]

“*Before we went wide and not deep, but that doesn’t seem to work. Superkids spends eight days on the letter b, for example,*” Ernst said.

Now, kids are “*believing in themselves as readers,*” Ernst said. “*The progress is so much faster*” (The Lucy Debate section, paras. 16-17, 19-20, emphasis mine)

Ernst, who the author of the article points out is a 23-year veteran teacher, is not positioned as an ineffective or terrible teacher for neglecting to change her practice from the wide, not deep approach earlier. She is not ridiculed for her failure to know any better, as is often the case with circulating science of reading discourse (Hanford, 2018, 2022). In the excerpted text, the journalist gives space for Ernst’s own words to describe her experience. Ernst takes ownership with the expression *what I have done in the past*. Explicitly naming *the past* signifies her desire to leave that part of her instruction behind and move forward, and describing it as *not the best route*, using *not* to negate a positive adjective rather than labeling it directly with a negative adjective suggests she may be making a face-saving move (Goffman, 1955) to minimize her possible guilt, which has been expressed by teachers in popular media (Hanford, 2022a). She also uses personal pronouns *I* and *we* to refer to the past *not the best* approach, while attributing the success she sees now to Superkids with the phrasing *Superkids spends eight days on the letter b*, nominalizing Superkids into an actor and essentially giving credit for the children’s success to the program, rather than herself as the instructor implementing the program and responding to her students. Ernst recognizes the benefit of her learning as its impact on her students, naming their belief in themselves and the increased pace of their progress as two specific ways she sees

change. I think it is significant that she names students' belief in themselves as *readers* first, before turning to the more neoliberal-aligned, quantifiable change of *faster pace*. This suggests Ernst has internalized some of the circulating discourse, though, as many teachers do within the neoliberal surround, her discourse represents a hybrid construction of creative and normative views of reading and instruction. The positioning as a learner is here, though, as Ernst's enrollment at a local university to earn a Culturally & Linguistically Diverse Education endorsement and her school's process of adopting new literacy curriculum is the *all of it* that begins the excerpt and is what has led to her realization that her previous approach *was not working*. She is therefore positioned as an agentic learner who has incorporated new learning into her existing values as a teacher and invested in her students as learners, not just producers of test scores.

In another text, an opinion piece published in *The Colorado Sun*, former teacher turned curriculum designer Heidi Batchelder (2021) constructs herself as "teacher as learner." Writing in support of a State Board of Education proposal to add a more specialized reading test to the elementary education, early childhood, and special education teacher licensure requirements in an article titled "Opinion: It's Time for Colorado's Teachers to 'Know Better' About the Science of Reading," Batchelder describes her own process of learning about the reading practices she refers to as the science of reading after hearing about them on one of Hanford's (2018) audio documentaries:

Early in my teaching career, *like many other educators*, I used a balanced-literacy approach and *believed* that using the "three-cueing" theory of reading

instruction was *sufficient* for teaching my primary grade students how to read. (As the journal *EducationWeek* recently defined it, three-cueing is a strategy that "involves prompting students to draw on context and sentence structure, along with letters, to identify words.")

Unfortunately, years of using these approaches with fidelity left me feeling frustrated as I observed many capable and eager students fall further behind grade-level benchmarks.

In the words of Maya Angelou, "Do the best you can until you know better.

Then when you know better, do better."

[. . .]

Learning about the science of reading can change the outcomes for students, and teachers, across Colorado.

Twelve years into my career as an elementary educator and literacy interventionist, I received a gift through the radio: Emily Hanford's American Public Media radio documentary, "Hard Words: Why Aren't We Teaching Kids to Read?" It was through this that I learned about the "science of reading," which refers to the body of over 40 years of research that reading experts, especially cognitive scientists, have conducted on how people learn to read. Coincidentally, hearing this story coincided with my first year teaching at a school in Denver that had recently adopted a curriculum rooted in this same science.

I turned off my radio after the hour-long program and made a new commitment to my students. If I claim to be a life-long learner, then I need to trust the

science behind this evidence-based approach that has been growing and confirmed for decades, and *dive in*. (paras. 1-3; 7-10, emphasis mine)

There is much to analyze in Batchelder's words, including her deployment of *science* and *evidence* in order to persuade her audience, as is the intention of this opinion piece. My focus here, however, is on how Batchelder positions herself as a teacher, and hopes to offer herself as a role model for other teachers. The benefits of this genre of text—the opinion piece—are that it is a first-person piece written to persuade, thus the perspective of a teacher who believes in the science of reading as a settled science and *the* instructional method to drive student outcomes is presented using language intended to convince readers, i.e., teachers, to share the same beliefs. I am including this in this section because Batchelder utilizes two discursive processes, rhetorical and metacognitive, to appeal to emotion by narratively reflecting on her own learner's journey to (ideally) connect with readers'/teachers' self-conception as learners. This begins immediately in the opening line with a wistful call back to *Early in my teaching career*. She then uses the aside, *like many other educators*, to rhetorically connect to her audience before confessing to what is now framed as a sin in the popular media, teaching using a balanced literacy approach. The preemptive connection to *many other educators* has shielded both her and her audience from the shame of this admission, however, because there is now a shared understanding that none of *us* knew better, and *we* are in this together. Her use of *sufficient* here and *fidelity* in the next paragraph serve to emphasize that the fault lies not with teachers utilizing the three-cueing theory or the balanced-literacy approach but the system itself; as teachers, we were told it was all that was needed and if we used it as instructed, how could we be blamed?

The next paragraph describing Batchelder's frustration in seeing *many capable and eager students* failing to learn to read with the flawed approaches continues the emotional appeal to teachers who likely can relate to such feelings, and shows Batchelder's careful positioning of students as victims, not of sociopolitical and historical systems of inequity that have left unpaid education debts (Ladson-Billings, 2006), but of the same lies about balanced literacy teachers like us have believed for too long. Batchelder ends this section with a classic rhetorical device, a quotation from a respected luminary, Maya Angelou, espousing the importance of learning and moving forward: "*Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.*"

I pick up my analysis a couple of paragraphs down where Batchelder continues the metacognitive narrative of her learning as a model for Colorado's teachers. She includes a simple, one sentence paragraph, *Learning about the science of reading can change the outcomes for students, and teachers, across Colorado*. She uses a modal verb *can* that does not express complete certainty, but importantly positions not just the science of reading but *learning about* the science of reading as the cause of change for students and teachers. This is a departure from much of the discourse that circulates about the science of reading which nominalizes it as a powerful force acting with agency to drive change. Here, a human subject is not explicitly named, though it is implicit in Batchelder's overall message, teachers are the ones doing the learning, thus, it can be inferred that once teachers learn about the science of reading, implementing the practices can make change. (Importantly, agency is still elided in this construction as well, which will be discussed in chapter 7). Learning about the science

of reading involves action and agency on the part of teachers, which is effective in appealing to teachers, who often position themselves as lifelong learners.

In the next paragraph, Batchelder employs a critical move in naming both the longevity of her career (*twelve years*) and her position titles (*elementary educator and literacy interventionist*). This move serves to add credibility to her argument. If she can still learn twelve years into her career, all teachers can. Similarly, if she is both an elementary teacher and a literacy interventionist, the latter of which holds authority as an expert in reading, she must know a lot about the topic, and it shows humility and drive to first admit to flawed practices and second, want to develop still more expertise. These character traits may appeal to young teachers who want to have a long career in the field and may demonstrate to older teachers that it is not too late to learn. This positive positioning of learning is bolstered by Batchelder's use of *received a gift* to describe how she learned about the science of reading from Emily Hanford's audio documentary. Using such hyperbolic language to describe this aligns with the critiques leveled at this and other popular media portrayals of the science of reading (Aukerman, 2022), but the salient point here is that the passivity suggested by receiving a gift makes the idea of learning seem like a pleasant experience that taps into a common trope of learning as a gift—one popular among educators that serves as a relational move to connect Batchelder with her readers.

Finally, this excerpt ends with Batchelder continuing her narrative by painting a picture of herself in the moment, turning off her radio. She continues her appeal to emotion and what will connect with teachers by making *a new commitment to my students*. The use of *new* here is significant, as she is throwing off the flawed practices

she has described previously and seems to be creating a feeling of excitement. This continues when she reproduces what she may have said to herself in that moment, as though she is psyching herself up, *If I claim to be a life-long learner, then I need to trust*. This rhetorical move has the effect of calling on teachers as a challenge. It says, “Are you a lifelong learner? You need to trust, then.” She ends this portion with *dive in*, again, evoking excitement and uncertainty. This is somewhat odd given the preceding statement of the supposed certainty of the science supporting the practices for which she is advocating but is not uncommon as found by scholars who have analyzed recent discourses related to the science of reading (Aydarova, 2023).

Expressing Care for Students

When teachers’ voices are present in the media texts, they naturally share their experiences with students, bringing life to the children who should be centered in this discourse but are too-often represented only as test scores. In the following excerpts, we see how students and teachers navigate literacy learning in their classrooms, and through these utterances, we see how complex the interactions between student-teacher, student-text, student-skill can be.

In this first example, Cassandra Ewert-Lamutt, a teacher whose concerns about the limits of discrete skill instruction I explored earlier, shares how the READ Assessments have landed on one of her students:

For Cassandra Ewert-Lamutt, seeing some of her young students **crumble** from the **relentless push to become better readers** is **heartbreaking**.

One little girl—a second-grader whose first language is Spanish—recently **broke down crying** during a reading test.

“She said, ‘I just know I’m not as good as the other kids. **It’s because I speak Spanish, too,**” recalled Ewert-Lamutt, who works with English language learners at Parr Elementary School in Arvada. (Schimke, 2016, paras. 1-3)

The child present here is distraught, and it is felt through her teacher’s recollection of the *heartbreaking* testing experience. The opening sentence is not represented in discourse, so it cannot be directly attributed to Ewert-Lamutt, but the words *crumble* and *relentless* are evocative and surface emotions. The juxtaposition of these two words with the phrase *push to become a better reader* is troubling. The goals of the READ Act, as I have discussed, are not without merit. Children should have the opportunity to develop as skilled and joyful readers. But the words *relentless push* evoke a market mentality associated with neoliberal values of competition. In fact, this child’s comparison of herself to her peers aligns with that competition. At such a young age she should not be forced to compare herself in this way, particularly as she is interpreting her unfavorable comparison to her peers to her native language. Such messages do not come to children from nowhere, and this teacher is gravely concerned about the impact of a policy that has the power to introduce these ideas to her students.

Other examples of teachers expressing care through their discursive constructions of students come from teachers sharing how instructional approaches have brought or have the potential to bring about student. Here, a teacher describes adopting a new curriculum that was further modified by Denver Public Schools to be more culturally responsive. Though she does not describe individual students, Molly Veliz says about the changes made to make the curriculum more representative of the district’s diverse population and commitment to anti-racist pedagogy:

“I’m really glad because for the strengths of [Core Knowledge Language Arts] ... the weaknesses are pretty glaring in that it’s very Eurocentric and [takes] a settler viewpoint,” she said.

Veliz said she’s also happy about the focus on evidence-based reading practices in the new curriculum.

“Hopefully we’re going to be teaching way more of our students how to read,” she said. “That’s really equity in action right there.” (Schimke, 2022d, “Some history topics cut” section, paras. 3-5)

In a final example, Diana Roybal, Cherry Creek’s executive director of elementary education, describes her experience bringing the Lucy Calkins Units of Study curriculum to the district:

Before the adoption of Lucy Calkins, there were no classroom libraries and children learned to read using an anthology, she said.

“There wasn’t lots of literature at kids’ fingertips where they could just immerse themselves in literature and all kinds of genres of literature,” Roybal said. “What I appreciated about Units of Study is it really helped kids develop an academic identity as readers and writers.” (Schimke, 2021b, “Literature” section, paras. 3-4)

Roybal positions her students as children developing layered identities as readers and writers. Identities that she believes benefited from having authentic literature *at kids’ fingertips*.

The varied and nuanced perspectives teachers bring to what matters for students developing as literate beings are consequential and should be considered just as much, if not more, than the unnamed *experts* who do not provide any sense of their experiences with real children in situated sociocultural settings. I turn to those readers for one final section in this chapter.

Students

In the same way teachers are constructed with more nuance within the media discourse relative to the macropolitical discursive positioning, students are portrayed within these texts with more dimension when voiced by their teachers. This is not to say, however, that the discourse fully makes space for the types of literate possibilities celebrated by educators adopting a sociocultural view of literacy, nor that the majority of the text produces complex views of students as literate beings. In this section, I show how the intertextual thread of *third-grade reading proficiency as the predictor of success* employs now-familiar discursive moves based on the authority of *data* and *evidence* to create an illusion of certainty to predict and limit students' futures. This discursive formation also serves to minimize the importance of the sociopolitical and economic contexts where learning to read takes place, diverting attention and resources from policy solutions that would address the lived experiences of real children, rather than statistical abstractions favored by so many policymakers (Aydarova, 2023; MacPhee et al., 2021).

Intertextual Chain: The Third Grade Thread

As I discussed in chapters 3 and 4, the READ Act was put in place to boost reading achievement in Colorado. In the year before the READ Act was signed into

law, then-education Commissioner Robert Hammond is quoted in *Chalkbeat Colorado* reacting to that year's state-wide test scores in reading, writing, math, and science: ““We wish the results were better,”” (Mitchell & Hubbard, 2011, What state officials are saying section, para. 1). The article continues, “Hammond predicted that as state education reforms such as the Colorado Achievement Plan for kids kick in, ‘I think you’re going to see significant differences’ statewide” (What state officials are saying section, para. 3). Lt. Governor Joe Garcia’s words close this article, ““Now more than ever, we must implement the significant education policy reforms passed in the legislature these past few years to ensure success for all students across the state”” (What state officials are saying section, para. 10). These comments by policymakers explicitly name increases in student test scores on the state-wide achievement tests as goals for policy reforms. In the case of READ Act legislation, state test scores at a single grade level—third grade—serve as the benchmark by which success will be measured. This can be seen in a May 8, 2013, article in *The Denver Post* reporting exclusively on third-grade reading results from that year’s Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP), the statewide accountability assessment taken by third through eighth graders. The article reports, “The percent of third-graders who were proficient or higher in 2009 was nearly 73 percent. That number dropped to 70 percent in 2010 but has remained between 73 and 74 percent since then” (Torres, 2013, para. 4). The article also quotes the executive director of assessment for the Colorado Department of Education summarizing these third-grade reading proficiency trends:

“We've been, in terms of the proficient and advanced, hanging out in the low 70s for years now. ... I think that's why, in part, you will see that Colorado has

made a commitment to early literacy because we want to see those numbers change.” (Torres, 2013, para. 5)

These statements make clear the consequential positioning of third-grade reading scores for state policymakers and education leaders and place these texts—alongside many others in this data set and countless others across years of elementary literacy discourse—within an overt intertextual chain (Fairclough, 1992) claiming with certainty that third-grade reading proficiency is the single most important predictor of future success. In fact, the text of the READ Act legislation is part of this chain of utterances, as Fairclough (1992) described, that are shaped in response to texts that have come before and, in turn, anticipate future texts (p. 270). Included within the legislation’s requirement that teachers and other school personnel share a student’s READ plan with parents is the directive to articulate the state’s goal for all children to graduate from high school, including the important message “research demonstrates that achieving reading competency by third grade is a critical milestone in achieving this goal” (the Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 8). The bill’s text that teachers and other personnel “shall communicate and discuss with the parent” continues:

If the student enters fourth grade without achieving reading competency, he or she is significantly more likely to fall behind in all subject areas beginning in fourth grade and continuing in later grades. if the student's reading skill deficiencies are not remediated, it is likely that the student will not have the skills necessary to complete the course work required to graduate from high school. (the Colorado READ Act, 2022, p. 8)

Though tracing the origin of the intertextual chain that positions something conceptualized as *third-grade reading competency or proficiency* as necessary to attain *by the third grade* in order to achieve a series of measures of success including a) access to grade level content past third grade in all subject areas, b) graduation from high school, and c) a range of generalized or specific quality of life enhancements is beyond the scope of this study, a relatively contemporary foundational source for this idea is the Annie E. Casey Foundation's (AECF) 2012 report "Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation" (Hernandez, 2012). As stated in the Acknowledgements section of this paper, "This report updates a 2011 research brief with new data on graduation rates for students living in concentrated poverty" (Acknowledgements section), and the report also cites as a reference another AECF report published in 2010, "EARLY WARNING! Why Reading by the End of Third-grade Matters." Thus, it is possible that Colorado legislators drew on these earlier reports in incorporating the idea about third-grade reading proficiency's impact on students' future success. What's important to my discussion here, however, is that with almost no citation of external sources⁶, a significant number of the media texts I analyzed are connected as part of a consequential intertextual thread positioning young readers in troubling ways. Appendix O contains a table of all of the excerpts from my data set that demonstrate this intertextuality. Here, I highlight a few that illustrate the way this discourse positions students. I end this section with a data poem, drawing on Meyer's (2008) use of found poetry.

⁶ There are two exceptions, both of which cite the 2012 AECF "Double Jeopardy" report.

Writing four years after the passage of the READ Act, *Chalkbeat Colorado's* Ann Schimke (2016) states:

Part of the reason Colorado and so many other states have passed reading laws in recent years is because *third-grade reading proficiency plays a big role in future success*. Children *who can't read well by the end of third grade* are more likely to drop out of school, which can lead to other problems like *unemployment and criminal activity*. (para. 10, emphasis mine)

This statement is included in the article as an unquestioned truth about third-grade reading. The noun phrase *third-grade reading* is connected causally to *future success*. Though it is not positioned as the only factor leading to future success, the use of the phrase *plays a big role* gives third-grade reading agency as the actor, taking away the agency of children, who are reintroduced in the next sentence. Children *who can't read well by the end of third grade* are given a subject position as a monolith, as though all children who are not yet at the state's proficiency bar are not unique in their identities as readers (and otherwise). The consequences here are hedged slightly with the phrase *more likely* and the modal verb *can*, which takes some of the certainty out of the message, which would read more prescriptively without the *more* or *can*. The next paragraph in this article, however, continues, “‘The *data is there that shows that third grade reading proficiency is huge*,’ said Bruce Atchison, director of early learning at the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, which tracks research and advises state education policymakers” (Schimke, 2016, para. 11, emphasis mine). The use of *The data shows* is a stronger, more direct statement indicating a causal relationship, but the use of *huge* is meaningless in terms of what third-grade reading

proficiency impacts. Placing this statement, attributed to what sounds like an authoritative voice, after the journalist's words serves to convey a message that *The data shows students who cannot read proficiently by third grade likely will drop out of high school and have issues with employment with criminal activity.*

The next excerpt of note comes from a 2018 *Chalkbeat Colorado* article reporting on Denver Public Schools' publication of early literacy (reading) data as part of its school rating system (Asmar, 2018). The article gets into the weeds in a way that would be somewhat difficult to follow for those unfamiliar with reading assessments and accountability systems. In providing context about the assessments students take, the following paragraph is included:

The state requires students in kindergarten through third grade to take the early literacy tests as a way to identify for extra help students who are struggling the most to learn to read. *Research shows third graders who don't read proficiently are four times as likely to fail out of high school.* In Denver, most schools administer an early literacy test called iStation. (Asmar, 2018, para. 8, emphasis mine)

What is striking about this example is how the sentence I have emphasized, the one relevant to this intertextual chain, is unnecessary to the meaning of this paragraph, and certainly to the remainder of the article. It is not completely unrelated, of course, and it is intended, I believe, to justify the state requirements. The fact that it is one simple declarative sentence that draws on the authority of research illustrates how intertextuality can, in some ways, disrupt the coherence of a text (Fairclough, 1992), yet may go unnoticed by readers who are used to seeing this idea reproduced in this

publication and others reporting on education topics in the state. This is one of the two texts in this intertextual chain that references an external source in support of this claim, as the phrase “Research shows” is hyperlinked to the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s 2012 “Double Jeopardy” report. Perhaps the choice to link the reference here is related to its jarring inclusion in this story. Since the journalist is not offering any additional context, the link will.

In an article reporting on the legislature’s efforts to significantly amend the READ Act in 2019, Sen. Bob Rankin repeats an almost identical quote to one he gave in an article several weeks earlier. In the earlier article, Rankin states that reading at grade level in third grade “makes a difference in the rest of [kids’] schooling and then their whole life” (Meltzer, 2019b, para. 3), clearing relating a cause (reading at grade level in third grade) and effect (makes a difference in life). In the later quote, Rankin says:

“What we really want to do is help our kids,” said state Sen. Bob Rankin, a Carbondale Republican and co-sponsor of the bill. “This can literally keep kids out of jail. The average prisoner only reads at a fourth grade [*sic*] level.” (Meltzer, 2019c, para. 2)

The consequence, *keep kids out of jail*, is clear here. The cause, however, is not as obvious: “The average prisoner only reads at a fourth grade [*sic*] level” (para. 2). Were it not for the connection through this intertextual chain, it might take some time to decipher: If the average prisoner reads at a fourth-grade level, it follows that the majority of those who read beyond a fourth-grade level are not in prison. Thus, if as a society we would like to reduce the number of people who are in prison, and by

extension reduce crime, we would want to ensure all children are reading beyond a fourth-grade level. Working within this intertextual frame, however, readers can arrive at this conclusion much more quickly because the thread to research claiming that attaining third-grade reading proficiency significantly reduces students' likelihood of dropping out, thus reducing other consequences such as crime and poverty, is within reach.

In the set of media texts I analyzed, one thing stands above all else as clear: if students do not read on grade level by third grade, there will be consequences that will be difficult, if not impossible, to overcome.

As a former classroom teacher and current elementary literacy researcher, I have engaged in the rich, brilliant literate lives of many students in grades 1-6. In that time, I have sat next to too many children—all of them children of Color whose families had at some point experienced poverty and many of whom were bilingual, speaking a language other than English at home—who were not yet able to fluently decode a printed text deemed to be at their grade level. I will not minimize the challenges that come with this reality for these former students. I also know that when children are positioned as deficient from such a young age and an idea like *third-grade reading proficiency as the predictor of success* is given the force of such certainty, the already impossibly difficult path toward one's dreams is made that much more difficult. Gay's (2000) call for culturally responsive teaching begins with the premise that "Success does not emerge out of failure, weakness does not generate strength, and courage does not stem from cowardice. Instead, success begets success" (p. 24). Following the intertextual thread through this data set made me angry. Though I think

even one utterance of statements like these is unacceptable, the repetition is devastating. I believe it is essential to bring forth this discourse, not only that it is present, but to place it physically in such a way where the impact cannot be ignored. For this reason, I have chosen to draw on Meyer's idea of data poetry (2008). I have pulled out language directly from nearly all of the sources cited in my data set without significantly altering the phrases as written. I invite you to sit with this poem before continuing to this chapter's conclusion.

Successful in third grade

successful through graduation

tools to succeed and stay in school after that

all other learning becomes an uphill battle

read by the end of third grade without excuse or exception

get kids on track

before it's too late

set off a domino effect

academic delays, disengagement, even the decision to drop out

unemployment and criminal activity

the data is there

third grade reading proficiency is huge

research shows

four times as likely to fail out of high school

crucial milestone

extensive research shows

students with reading woes

may never catch up

most in danger of dropping out of school

at stake is the academic fate of students

with 'significant reading deficiencies'

so far behind on their reading skills

in danger of never reading proficiently

in danger of never learning to read

research shows

shout the message: Read by Third Grade, Every Colorado Child.

The results are clear. Companies will have more literate employees; prison numbers will drop; graduation rates will increase; post-secondary education will see more prepared students and diversity; poverty/public assistance will decrease

We have to do something

it makes a difference in the rest of their schooling

and then their whole life

This literally can keep kids out of jail

The average prisoner only reads at a fourth grade level

Study after study shows

challenges greater than Captain Underpants and Ramona ever faced

Students who cannot read by the end of third grade

are four times more likely to drop out of high school

High school dropouts make up 75% of citizens receiving food stamps

Experts agree that reading proficiently by the end of third grade

is critical

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented a critical discourse analysis of a set of local media texts related to the READ Act policy and its surrounding context. From this analysis, I found that many of the same constructions present in the macropolicy discourse also circulated within the media texts. This is unsurprising given that several texts included represented discourse (Fairclough, 1992) from the same policymakers producing or implicated in the texts analyzed in chapter 4. I also found that within local media, outside of school spaces are presented as alternative environments for more expansive views of literacy to take shape. Also, when teachers are given space to

voice their own experiences, and those of their students, more possibilities for seeing the complexities of a sociocultural and situated literacy are available.

A troubling finding is the incessant reproduction of the false construction of *third-grade reading proficiency as the predictor of success*. The insidious nature of this pessimistic and harmful refrain, even when there is reasonable justification for its presence, demonstrates the way overt intertextual threads can become mantras that become part of the accepted standards for the genre of elementary literacy reporting. Creative constructions, such as found poetry, can jar us out of complacency by using physical space to evoke unexpected emotional responses.

I now turn to the final findings chapter to explore the discursive constructions of elementary literacy as they emerged through conversations with my collaborator, Samantha.

Chapter 6: Discursive Constructions within an Elementary Literacy Classroom

The research questions framing my study ask about the discursive constructions of literacy, literacy instruction, students, and teachers in the spaces around a state-level early literacy (reading) policy. In each of the two preceding chapters, these ideas could be considered separately without significant overlap. In this chapter, however, that is not the case. In analyzing my conversations with Samantha as she navigates the enactment of the READ Act, it quickly became clear that there are few utterances within our speech encounters where it is possible to isolate one of the elementary literacy concepts for analysis. When Samantha discursively constructs the idea of *literacy*, whether in response to me asking directly for her understanding of the concept or in the course of our wide-ranging (though inherently literacy-centered) conversations, talk of students and instruction are almost always explicitly or implicitly present. Similarly, in the context of our conversations, *students* are constructed in relation to the literacy (primarily reading) instruction they were—or in many instances, were not—receiving. Their lives outside the classroom are considered, at times, but they remain tied, in important ways, to discourse about reading and instruction. Regarding how *teachers* are constructed in this chapter's analysis, Samantha's utterances about anything, I argue, can never be separated from the idea of *teacher*, as it is central to her identity, not only in the work of this study, but to her core self. Thus, this chapter is not organized cleanly into sections aligned to each of the elementary literacy concepts analyzed in this study.

While discursively positioning the ideas of *literacy*, *literacy instruction*, *teachers*, and *students*, Samantha frequently reproduces normative discourses relative

to the SOR and the READ Act policy. At the same time, she does not adhere exclusively to these constructions, positioning these concepts creatively throughout our conversations. In this way, Samantha constructs hybrid texts that illustrate the tensions she feels operating within an already-confined teaching environment made even more restricted with the enactment of the READ Act amendments in 2019 and her district's subsequent adoption of the Benchmark Advance Curriculum as its core reading resource, followed by its 2022-23 implementation in elementary schools. The way her district and school leadership elected to enforce teachers' application of the Benchmark curriculum created restrictive conditions regulating the (im)possibilities Samantha had access to in her classroom.

As I engaged with this study, I continually grappled with the question, "To whom am I answerable?" (Patel, 2016). As a former elementary school teacher with deep commitments to critical, queer, and anti-racist pedagogies, my instinctual response is *students whose complex, intersectional, and ever-shifting identities are marginalized by a public school system founded on and existing within a system of white supremacy that replicates heteronormativity*. As a literacy education researcher who chose to design a study in partnership with one collaborator, Samantha, an elementary school teacher working within an unjust and impossible system, I am profoundly inspired by Samantha's engagement in critical work and her ongoing efforts to bring a queer lens to her pedagogy, I am without question answerable to her. Thus, as I progressed through each stage of this work, up to and including writing these words, I have grappled with how to reconcile what I perceived as deficit constructions of students within Samantha's utterances in the data set for this study

with the obligation I feel toward presenting Samantha in a fair light given what I have gotten to know about her over the course of our five-year relationship. Striving to minimize misinterpretation of her words, or my analysis thereof, this conflict weighed heavily on me through numerous rounds of analysis and drafts of writing up findings until the moment of consolidation when theory, method, and data merged into a (partial) understanding I had missed. Rather than seeing Samantha's utterances as decontextualized statements, as I desperately worried those who do not know her would do and pass judgment, the critical poststructuralist theories of discourse and queer lenses I bring to this work demand that I consider the intertextual threads woven within and through Samantha's utterances that connect what she says both to a particular moment in time and to discourses that have come before and are yet to come (Erickson, 2004; Fairclough, 1992). Further, I needed to stop looking at Samantha's discursive positionings as certainties, recognizing instead the always-subjective nature of human interaction. I could not remain satisfied with one possible interpretation for Samantha's utterances. This is not to say that I reexamined Samantha's and my conversations until I found an acceptable interpretation. Rather, I recommitted myself to my theoretical frameworks to make space for new possibilities. I paid closer attention to power and emotion, asking first, how Samantha's utterances position her as relatively more or less powerful in relation to other actors, and second, what emotions seem to be motivating Samantha's discursive constructions. What is clear in this analysis is that Samantha, like theories of teacher identity put forth by Clarke (2009), Reeves (2018) and others suggest, expresses seemingly conflicting views about elementary literacy that I believe are related to misalignment in aspects of her

identity as a teacher. Where I saw seemingly irreconcilable positions about literacy, literacy instruction, and students' literate identities, it appears the underlying thread tying the narrative together is a dual desire for both her and her students to be positioned as knowledgeable and successful. In alignment with queer theory's resistance to stable categories, the definition of *success* shifts depending on the context of our conversations, thus shifting the construction of each of the elementary literacy concepts. When normative (i.e., aligned with neoliberal, technocratic logics and SOR practices) views of success are centered, Samantha's constructions of literacy, literacy instruction, and students appear markedly different than they do when creative constructions of success are made visible and offered as legitimate. Interestingly, the shift from normative to creative happened, at times, within moments during our conversations, demonstrating the instability of these concepts and the ways aspects of identity surface and submerge during "moment-by-moment conduct of social interactions" (Erickson, 2004, p. 148). Erickson importantly reminds us that content of talk is both local and global and the situated context in which participants interact in talk brings much to bear on how subjects are positioned. In other words, we are always saying something to someone with particular purposes in a particular moment in particular relationships (p. 16).

In this chapter I surface these differences within this frame, considering first Samantha's discursive (mis)alignments with SOR and READ Act policy discourses positioning reading print as the most important aspect of literacy instruction and as a linearly developing set of skills. I then turn to sources of authority, including the use of assessment data at King and the science of reading and curricular authority present in

Samantha's classroom. I end the analysis of our conversations with a look at two key critiques Samantha explicitly levels at literacy instruction as constructed through READ Act policy discourse: discussions about text and reading comprehension standards. First, I set the scene as we walk into Samantha's classroom.

Welcome

When you walk into Samantha's second-grade classroom, the first thing you will probably notice is that there are unicorns and rainbows everywhere. The smiling faces of her students greet you from a poster to the left of the doorway, frozen in time at the beginning of the school year. Each student's name is written on a unicorn pasted to the door, an incredibly helpful tool for me when it has been a long time since my last visit and I need to brush up quickly before the inevitable chorus of, "Miss Emily!" I always receive, peppered with, "Do you remember my name?" In the library nook are some stuffed animals and a collection of books that include Samantha's treasured "social equity books." An aromatherapy diffuser dispenses essential oils into the colorful classroom, and it is one of a host of student jobs to maintain care for the small machine at the end of each school day. There is so much to love about Samantha's classroom, and spending time there with her and her second graders during their reading block over the past two school years has brought me much joy. It has also reinforced the feelings of great frustration and anguish I harbor toward the policymakers and education leaders who have become so comfortable with neoliberal logics that they are unable (or unwilling?) to recognize the consequences of policies that limit the possibilities within children's imaginations nurtured by sociocultural literacy practices that engage children's existing cultural, linguistic, and uniquely

personal brilliance. This mix of emotions parallels the layers of complexity present in Samantha's discourse about literacy in her second-grade classroom.

Reading Print

A central argument of this study warns of the potential consequences of SOR and early reading policy discourses that limit literacy to reading print in ways that devalue diverse ways of knowing and being that undergird sociocultural views of literacy. This is, of course, an extension of the general narrowing of the curriculum seen as a result of neoliberal reform policies (Au, 2016; Welner & Mathis, 2015). Samantha's expressions of literacy and literacy instruction during our conversations, at times, suggest that the SOR discourse has impacted how she thinks about literacy instruction in her classroom.

During our initial interview for this research study on May 4, 2023, I asked Samantha, "How do you define literacy, and, kind of, thinking about it first, maybe personally. And then in relation to school and instruction?" Samantha responded with the following (I have removed any repeated words or filler words for clarity and bolded discursive features I analyze below):

Literacy. **There's** so many aspects. You know, **there's** the phonics. Like, learning the letter formation. And then **there's** the sounds that go with it, the phonemic part, the phonics parts, and then it's putting the sounds together, you know, and then moving on to the different vowel teams and different patterns and rules and then eventually decoding and then putting them into sentences. You know, **there's** all **that**. The shared reading. Guided reading groups. Read aloud. And **then** the **written aspect, too**, once you're finally- **once you're**

finally a reader, you can become a writer. So, I include that in the literacy realm.

Anything with letters.

Letters and sounds.

Putting them together and making sense of it.

When I asked, “Are there any differences in how you would just define literacy if you weren't talking about school or instruction?”, she responded, “Probably just reading. I would just say, ‘Oh, it’s reading.’”

What strikes me initially about these responses is the contrast in detail and length between the two. The first answer describes the elements of a literacy block as defined in many sources describing “best practices” for literacy instruction, including detailed steps in a process, namely those central to the research supporting the science of reading (Scarborough, 2009). The second response, Samantha’s personal view of literacy, is brief and limited to “just reading.”

When I reviewed the transcript for this conversation, I realized that Samantha did not identify her immediate response to my question as defining literacy in relation to school and instruction, but it is unmistakably so. The wording of my question is indirect and includes features of relational modality (*kind of, maybe*), either a result of nervousness or an attempt to compensate for the formal quality of the interview despite our established relationship, which, in addition to our focus on school-based literacy, may have pushed Samantha toward beginning with this response. The use of technical jargon (*letter formation, phonemic, phonics, etc.*) and the way Samantha

recites these steps evokes a response to an oral exam, proving her knowledge of the science of reading. In fact, I jotted a similar note in my researcher journal after this interview: “S defined literacy connected directly to instruction.” There are some discursive moves within this response, however, that suggest Samantha may be distancing herself from her words, as though she knows this to be the correct answer but is not fully committed to it. An example is Samantha’s repetition of *there’s* as she recounts the elements of literacy, which I have made bold in the excerpted transcript above. Using the spatial deictic expression that signifies distance in this way could indicate Samantha is placing a symbolic distance between herself and these ideas, as though they are not core beliefs. This is not meant to imply that Samantha’s response is inauthentic, but rather that she holds complex beliefs about literacy and literacy instruction. In fact, later in this conversation, Samantha explains how much she has learned about teaching “young kids who don’t know how to read,” and she states her belief that decoding is “the most important part of literacy” for these students but does not “think there is an exact science” and is “finally confident in [her] teaching” to be responsive to every student. In Clarke’s (2009) model of teacher identity he describes the “authority sources” of teacher identity as those ideas or sources of information from which teachers accept messages about what makes a “good” teacher. With her first response, Samantha indicates she believes the science of reading discourse—whether from her school-based trainings, state-mandated training or elsewhere—are sources of authority she believes she should consider valid. While her later, less rehearsed sounding responses indicate she values her position as a capable,

knowledgeable teacher who has integrated new learning with existing knowledge to be responsive to her students, an element of teaching she values.

Samantha's response to her personal definition of literacy as just including reading is noteworthy, as there is a pattern of Samantha privileging reading print across our conversations about literacy. Even in the first response analyzed above, Samantha explicitly sets writing apart as an aspect of "the literacy realm" that is available only after one is a reader. Using the words *then, finally, can, and written aspect* all work to position writing as separate from the complex and detailed processes and instructional routines that are involved in learning to read print. In contrast, Samantha's description of writing does not include detail of either the process of learning to write or the instructional components one might see in the classroom related to writing.

Examples from other conversations where Samantha subjugates writing as a less important element of literacy include the following:

(A) Emily: How do you feel about teaching literacy relative to other content areas?

Samantha: Literacy is my favorite. Writing is not my favorite of the literacy. If you consider writing a part of literacy.

(B) Samantha: Because they [school administrators] wanted the morning to all be, like, literacy—I guess writing is literacy—but just, like, reading stuff.

Emily: Yeah. So, it's- so with that, does it feel like reading is the priority over writing? Would you say?

Samantha: Yes.

Emily: Okay.

Samantha: Which I think makes- I do think makes sense because they can't write until they know how to- my kids don't even know how to read these articles.

Emily: Right. (July 12, 2023)

Taken together, these excerpts suggest Samantha considers literacy to include both reading and writing, with reading viewed as holding primacy within the construction of the concept. This is most clearly seen in the first excerpts where she defines literacy for herself outside of school and instruction as just reading, without the inclusion of any other elements. It is significant to see, however, that there are two distinct instances, taking place two months apart, where Samantha's discursive moves position writing within her definition of literacy, though holding a lower status than reading print.

In considering the discourse circulating around SOR and the READ Act policy where reading print is positioned as the most important aspect of literacy, taking up significant attention at the state and district macropolicy level, as well as within the popular media, Samantha seems to align in this moment—consciously or unconsciously—aspects of the authority sources that tell her what it means to be a good teacher with these messages.

Samantha's last utterance in the excerpts above is an example of how the decontextualized text can be read as deficit framing of students. When viewed within

the full data set of our conversations as part of locally and globally situated discourse, the interpretation changes. Samantha's framing of what her students *can't* do is important to see as a thread throughout our conversations where she expresses concern about the texts her students are asked to read independently as part of the Benchmark curriculum. When Samantha begins part of this utterance with, *they can't write until they know how to* and stops mid-sentence before finishing with *my kids don't even know how to read these articles*, she reveals what is truly of concern. It is not her students' inability to read, broadly, but rather the way the curriculum has defined reading for them as existing only within a certain text level that troubles her. This is repeated in other utterances throughout our conversations. For example, this excerpt from our June 19, 2023, conversation shows Samantha speaking again of how the text available to students—in addition to time constraints—prevents students from getting anything useful from reading experiences in class:

Samantha: Like overall, we want students to enjoy reading and now we've just scared them because they're like, there's going to be so many things they don't understand. Well, I think the end purpose is you need to read to enjoy it and to learn things. And there's not enough time to learn things from reading right now. Because again, the lack of discussion. Because that's when you learn things through discussion and think alouds and science of reading does not offer that time nor the appropriate text to actually get their thoughts. They don't understand what they read, so they can't talk about it.

Again, in Samantha's utterance, the line *They don't understand what they read, so they can't talk about it* can be read as deficit positioning of her students when

decontextualized from the rest of this excerpt and from the remainder of our conversations. Attuning to intertextuality surfaced additional layers of Samantha's construction of both her and her students that makes visible her deeply held desire for her students to enjoy the literate practices they share in the classroom as a place where she and her students build knowledge together through discussions. Samantha's constructions of what her students *can't do* are dependent on the realities of her curriculum and the texts offered, not her students.

Linearity of Literacy Development

A consistent theme seen across our conversations is Samantha's portrayal of literacy as a linearly developing process whereby elements must be mastered, or at least adequately grasped, before moving onto more complex skills. Phonemic awareness, followed by phonics and decoding skills, are the foundation that seemingly must be developed before students are able to engage in critical thinking around comprehending text. Samantha often expressed during our conversations that her students were not able to read independently, which prevented them from thinking about text as directed by the Benchmark curriculum. While it is fair to say that students' difficulty decoding the print texts included with the Benchmark curriculum did act as a barrier to independent work, students do not need to read print to talk about complex ideas in text read aloud to them, as Samantha is certainly familiar with, based on our experiences during the larger research project where we first met, as well as what she says in excerpts I analyze in the Creative Constructions section. In the excerpt from our conversation on June 19, 2023, Samantha described her concerns with the Benchmark curriculum:

I feel like, yeah, I feel like comprehension is a huge thing that **science of reading** is about. But **my kids aren't there yet**, and the **second-grade curriculum is really heavily focused on the comprehension standards**.

Where I'm like, **my kids aren't at that depth of thinking yet**. Like, just I'm trying to think of what the standard- where it was really difficult for my kids.

Here, Samantha appears to construct her students as lacking the ability to think deeply about text, which is a fair interpretation of her utterance. Within the context of SOR discourse, as is explicit here, I believe that Samantha is positioning her students on a linear path that is a discursive formation as part of the technocratic logic undergirding SOR beliefs about reading and related literacy practices. As will become evident in excerpts below, Samantha is interested in constructing herself and her students as successful, and using a phrase like *my kids aren't there yet* is effective in achieving this image, as it positions students as working toward the expectations, rather than as simply not capable. Using *my* evokes a desire to protect her students, while *yet* frames this utterance as aspirational, demonstrating Samantha believes her students will achieve the necessary skills for comprehension, they just have not done so, *yet*.

As mentioned above, although Samantha does include writing within her construction of literacy, according to some of her utterances, students are positioned to begin writing, or encoding, only after learning to decode: "I feel like that's [phonics] the most important part because my kids, when they go to writing and they- they don't know how to like, decode a word to spell or encode." In my conversations with Samantha, it became clear that writing was not prioritized at King at all, as there was no accountability attached from an administrative perspective, and it was not included

as part of the literacy (reading) block where the Benchmark curriculum was taught. This may be part of the reason Samantha expressed ambivalence toward writing, though in past interactions within the larger research project, Samantha was interested in writing as an opportunity for students to express themselves.

This idea of linearity is also implicated in the stubbornly entrenched belief amongst literacy educators that there is a clear delineation between *learning to read* and *reading to learn*, the former occurring in kindergarten through third grade and the latter continuing from fourth grade on. Despite research beginning in the 1960s to the contrary (Tierney & Pearson, 2021), this idea circulates prominently within both the macropolicy and media discourses analyzed in chapters 4 and 5 and can be seen in Samantha's utterances, as well. In the following simplified (i.e., the repeated words and phrases and fillers have been removed, along with all of my reactions) excerpt from our conversation from July 26, 2023, Samantha states:

I just feel like this whole taking apart words is so important, and I feel like my kids who don't know how to read, don't know how to manipulate words and the sounds- And I feel like **The Benchmark already expects them to know that.** I feel like everything there [in the Benchmark curriculum] is necessary. I feel like **it's two years ahead.** And **obviously the whole point of reading is to understand what you've read.** I always tell my parents, **there's learning to read and reading to learn, and I feel like Benchmark is reading to learn.** **And they're still learning to read.** And I feel like the whole phonics- I could teach phonics all day. I feel like that's the most important part.

In this simplified excerpt from later in the same conversation, Samantha gets to the heart of my argument that underlying her seemingly contradictory constructions of *literacy*, *literacy instruction*, and *students* is a desire for herself and her students to feel successful:

Samantha: I feel like **in my perfect world**, I feel like **I need to teach my kids phonics. all day**. Because **that's when it clicks for them**. That's when **I see the joy** and they're like, "Oh, I used this." Or, "I know the like this is the ING brothers. I know that's the ING brothers. I know that this is the suffix, and this always says 'ing.' I know this is a sight word and so I should just remember this is the heart word. I should just memorize this as 'do'."

And seeing that transfer like "Ding" like.

Emily: Yes. And I've seen that, too. I definitely have seen that. "Oh, here's a schwa," or whatever.

Samantha: That's them learning how to read.

And then then let's move on to like those critical thinking questions like, "What was Hansel's perspective on his dad?"

I feel like I'm so productive, and I get like the happy teacher feeling when my kids are reading and they're connecting rules and stuff into words.

The emotional language used in these excerpts stands out from other utterances Samantha uses, particularly when talking about her instruction using Benchmark curriculum. In the first excerpt, she nominalizes *The Benchmark* saying they *expect*

her students to already know how to decode text, this phrase conveys frustration, as do her categorizations of the curriculum as *two years ahead* and it being a curriculum that is *reading to learn*. Juxtaposed with the second excerpt where the emotional language includes *joy* and *happy* creates a stark contrast. Samantha positions herself as having the ability (power) to teach her students skills that she can immediately see them apply. She describes this as *that's them learning to read*, which suggests a limited view of reading that could be interpreted as Samantha holding deficit views of her students, positioning them as only capable of basic skills. When looking across our conversations, however, it is clear that there are so few spaces for Samantha to position herself or be positioned by others as successful—and the same can be said for her students—that Samantha seems to be grasping for any tangible evidence of success, preferring to linger there rather than move into a place where she believes she and her students are certain to be positioned as failures. Largely contributing to such a belief is the pervasiveness of a data culture that seeks to measure and sort students, and by extension teachers, according to their performance on a range of assessments. In the next section, I consider how data practices around reading contribute to tensions in Samantha's identity as a teacher and in relation to her students.

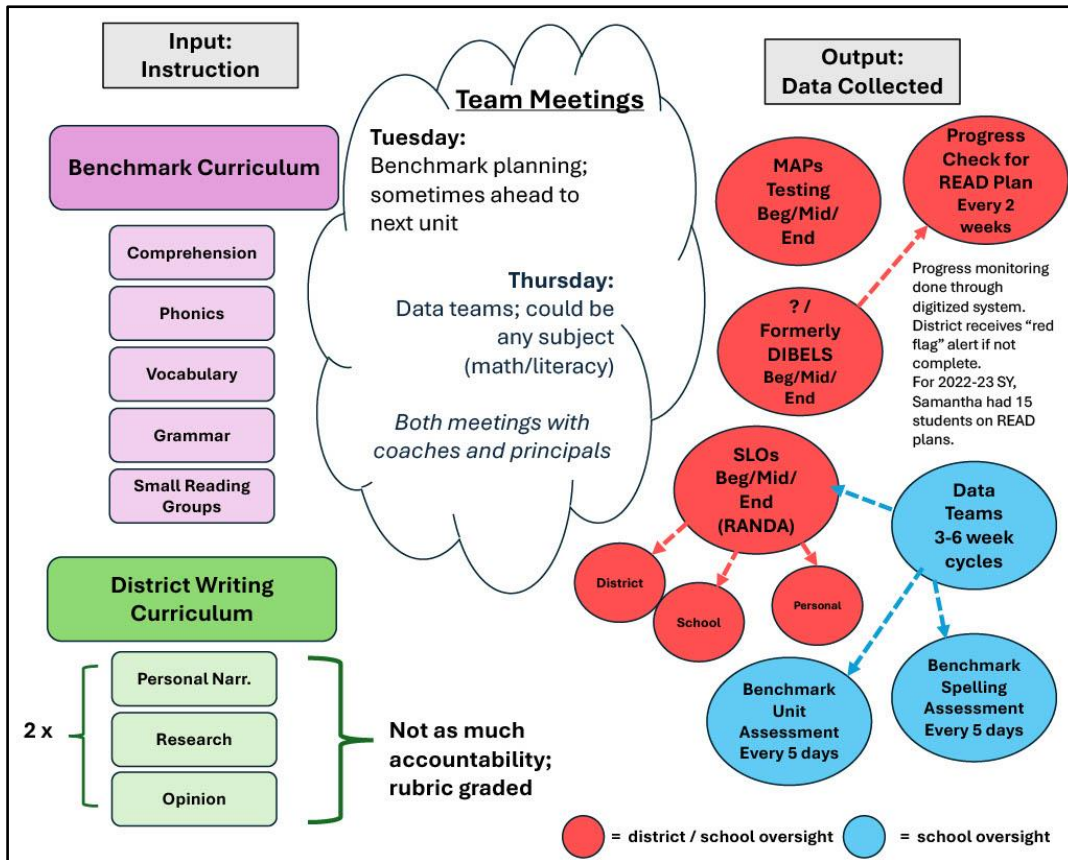
Data Collection

In chapters 4 and 5 data appeared as a dominant theme. This is not surprising given the importance of measurement and data to accountability policies and discourse related to neoliberal logics in education. This chapter is no different. Throughout Samantha's utterances, data circulates in such a way that its influence on her practice and identity as a teacher is unquestionable. Samantha seems, at times, to have to

convince herself that students' scores on assessments are not important to her, so steeped in data culture are her school and district. When Samantha talks about her students in relation to data, the discursive moves she makes reveal the tensions she feels between not only the aspects of her teaching identities, but also larger tensions related to normative discourses about equity within neoliberal accountability systems.

To set the context in analyzing Samantha's discourse around data and students, it is useful to understand that Samantha is required to gather a wide range of data measuring her students' performance, which is used for multiple purposes, including the accountability measures related to the READ Act, her own professional district evaluation (called RANDA), and school-based accountability structures. During our July 12, 2023, conversation, so many different data systems had been raised, I suggested we map out King's data collection requirements. Figure 6.1 shows the result of this mapping. The original diagram we developed with markers on paper can be found in Appendix G.

Figure 6.1
Map of King's Data Collection Requirements



Note. Samantha and I co-created this map during our meeting on July 12, 2023. The Inputs signify the learning (content/curriculum) meant to be produced, or output, by students and measured using the tools in the circles on the right.

During the conversation we engaged in to create this diagram, it became clear how irrelevant the data collected were to Samantha's instruction and therefore they had essentially no impact on her students. In Table 6.1, I present an extended exchange between Samantha and I after we had completed the data diagram. I was stunned when Samantha said, "And there's no, like, stop and, like reteach, like, there's no- I'm getting all this data. But why?" It was concerning to see the amount of data Samantha was required to collect from her students, as each assessment takes time that could be spent

engaging in a more enriching practice that Samantha values, such as a read aloud and discussion, and testing of any kind is stressful for students. To learn that the data were not even used to adjust instruction was almost too much to bear, and my response to her question of why—“So that I see- so that I see in a number what I already see, like, in front of me?”—is indicative of my disgust. In my utterance, though I am being sarcastic, I position test scores as legitimate representations of students, and I am uncomfortable with this language when I see it on the page and hear it in the audio recording. This is not an aspect of my identity as a teacher that I put forward as valid, though it appears in my interaction with Samantha in a momentary exchange. It illustrates the point I am making throughout this analysis that a reading of Samantha’s positioning of students, at times, in deficit frames, is partial and must be understood within the context of the larger discourses that circulate, as well as the emotional and psychic toll that results from tensions between aspects of teachers’ identities (Reeves, 2018).

Table 6.1*Excerpted Text Expressing Tension About Data Collection and Use at King*

Speaker	Utterance
Emily:	Right, right, right. Okay, wow. Because I do think- Because as you were, like, as you were talking about all of these things, it did make me just think, like, does this [pointing to the output side], like, support this [pointing to the input side]? Which is, you know, if you're going to be using-
Samantha:	Kind of, I just feel like it's very- too much.
Emily:	Yeah, there's too much over here and there's, kind of, also too much over here. In the sense that, like, sure, like, you know, this phonics piece is like, you know, here and, whatever. But it's- it just- it just- it just seems like too, like, you're just doing too many things. And then of course, by doing that, it's, like, how are you gonna do any of them well?
Samantha:	And there's no, like, stop and, like reteach, like, there's no- I'm getting all this data. But why?
Emily:	Ooh. That's. Yeah, that's a really great question of just, like- Because in theory, it's supposed to be, like, a cycle.
Samantha:	You want this data, but yeah, you're not giving me time to, like-
Emily:	Right.
Samantha:	It's obvious if my kids aren't getting [Emily: Right.] this, it doesn't matter. Because there's no time to reteach it. So why collect the data? Just so I know I'm, like, a shitty teacher? I know my kids don't get it?
Emily:	Like, so that I already know- So that I see-
Samantha:	Because tomorrow's day three, and I have to teach text features no matter what.
Emily:	So that I see- so that I see in a number what I already see, like, in front of me?

In our conversation in June 2023, Samantha and I were talking about the expectations for literacy at King when Samantha said the following:

They [the school administrators] expect the **same thing for every learner**. They don't, like- They [the students] **all are given the same test**. Right. So, I guess the expectations are very high. . . . Even though they come from all different places, **which is so not right**. And I don't understand why that still keeps happening. And **I think those tests are catered to middle class white kids**.

She continued by describing the test, “It's just passages, and they are **required to read it and write about it**- about what they read. And **my kids can't read or write**. Or- a lot of them are- **Don't even know the native language**.” Samantha articulates her emotions in reaction to her students having to take this test in this way:

And it's just **so frustrating as a teacher** because **we have no power** in that, so you just **have to kind of** put your **pride** aside and say I- I don't care about scores. I want to make sure my kids leave with the tools that can help them in third grade survive—and confidence at the same time.

Much is revealed in these few sentences that show Samantha's ideological stance toward teaching, as well as the power relations she navigates within her classroom. First, Samantha opens with an intensifier *so* to emphasize her emotion, *frustration*, which is an emotion that expresses anger or annoyance at an inability to make a change or act. Using the phrase *as a teacher* immediately after expressing frustration makes it clear that the frustration comes specifically as part of Samantha's identity in

this profession, and even though, of course, I know she is a teacher, her choice to state it here is a form of intensifier and a way of emphasizing this aspect of her identity.

When she states *we have no power*, using the pronoun *we*, rather than *I* importantly links herself with all other teachers in expressing a lack of power, achieving the effect of solidarity and an increase in power in her words, even if there is a lack of power to affect change. Her use of both the modal verb *have to* and a downtoner *kind of* in her response to the perceived lack of power to change the testing requirements suggests Samantha may feel some equivocation in her statement in that she would like to feel more certain about putting her pride aside and truly not care about the scores. But the reality is, teachers face incredible pressure and an inordinate amount of their professional life and identity is tied up in data, rendering it nearly impossible to shut that pressure out completely.

Samantha ends this excerpt with the expression of what she desires for her students, “I want to make sure **my** kids leave with the **tools** that can help them in third grade **survive**—and **confidence at the same time**.” The use of the possessive determiner *my* demonstrates the care that Samantha feels for her students—care that I have witnessed while visiting her classroom and that is evident in her classroom environment. She uses the phrase *make sure*, which indicates that she views this as her responsibility, though she does elide agency by masking any action that would indicate how the students would acquire the tools to help them survive in third grade. The choice of the word *tools* does, however, seem to place power and agency into the students’ hands, as Samantha does not say simply that she wants her kids to make it (though, of course, this is implied). Finally, the desires Samantha articulates here are

revealing. The latter of the two, *confidence* is connected to the passion she holds for teaching social equity and her work with a nationally-recognized center for gender and sexual diversity in education and her advocacy as an ally for LGBTQ+ students and communities. Thus, desiring confidence for her students as they leave her classroom is not surprising.

As Samantha continues to talk about the realities of testing at King, it becomes clear how working toward what she desires for her students is made more difficult by the absurdities of rigid accountability policies. She shares a story about a student whose family had just come to the United States from Afghanistan, “And they [the school administrators] **put the computer in front of her** and I said, ‘**She speaks no English.**’ They said, ‘I know. **She'll just have to, like, click through it.**’”

This narrative about testing reveals much about Samantha, King, and the neoliberal logics underlying the construction of literacy for students. Samantha invokes one of the primary arguments used in support of standardized testing as a tool for equality, the fact that they are the same for everyone, to argue the opposite. She uses an intensifier *so* when saying that it is *so not right* that all students get the same test no matter where the students come from. Again, in isolation the idea that students should be held to different standards or assessed with different measures may seem to be problematic—it evokes George W. Bush’s soft bigotry of low expectations—but Samantha provides a stark example to illustrate her reasoning. The image of a child who is positioned as the passive recipient of a *computer [put] in front of her* after arriving to the United States from Afghanistan and being forced to *click through* a test belies the absurdity beneath the discourse of equity in gathering data from all students

no matter what. What is the purpose of gathering data from this student? How is her test score going to be used to benefit her as a learner? Samantha as her teacher?

The cruelty of this image is solidified when Samantha continues, “Because it is constantly pushed down our throats, you know, like right now the testing, we're going to go over our scores. ‘Let's go over data. Data, data, data. How are you going to improve your data?’ They don't care about, well, how's she doing as a new person in America?

And her family has no home.

And she has no bed.

How's she doing?

They don't care.”

Samantha positions King administrators as part of the neoliberal machine that acts without reason and without concern for the humanity of her students. It is worth noting that elsewhere in our conversations, Samantha articulates her understanding that her principals are responding to pressure from the district, and as such are not always positioned as the ultimate source of authority in these decisions. This points to the instability of concepts such as authority and power, in addition to those related to elementary literacy, within this system. In addition to humans as voices of authority, Samantha's utterances, at times, pointed to *the science of reading* or the *curriculum* as exercising agency, to which I turn now.

Science of Reading and Curricular Authority

Samantha employs a fascinating nominalization by attributing agency to the science of reading in at least two different ways. First, she positions science of reading as responsible for setting second-grade expectations, or at least having a significant amount of power, as in this excerpt:

Samantha: I just have so many thoughts on it. Like my head just goes- I feel like they were not ready for the comprehension standards with the text given, and I felt like that was a lot of wasted time. I don't know if, like, the government needs to lower the standards or if **the science of reading needs to give us easier text**. Like, I just don't understand. Like, with the pandemic, like, nothing was changed.

Second, she conflates the science of reading with the Benchmark curriculum, as in the following excerpts:

1. **Samantha:** Because I'm creating so much work, cause you've seen that independent time when I would pull a group and then think of, like, my kids who speak no English, and, like, your independent work, **according to science of reading**, is read this article with a partner and write out your thoughts in a paragraph about point of view. (June 19, 2023)
2. **Emily:** Yeah, sure. That's- that's, yeah, that's really key and does- for the times of everything, is that in the curriculum, or is that from, like, either the district, or-

Samantha: That is **science of reading**. They want, like, the fifteen minutes. And then the district is like, “You have to follow the curriculum.” But **it's the curriculum, the science of reading**. Like, they want you to do, “We're going to focus- our standard this week is point of view.” (June 19, 2023)

In these examples, Samantha positions the science of reading as responsible for the content of student work, as in excerpt 1, and the amount of time given for each component of the curriculum, as in excerpt 2. In either case, the science of reading is not an actor with agency who could, in fact, make such a demand, but it is telling that Samantha attributes these harsh and unpleasant demands to *the science of reading* within this environment of policy mandates that are embroiled within the public discourse of the science of reading. There are additional instances within our conversations where Samantha blames restrictions on her teaching on the science of reading. In each of the cases, her attributions are negative. In one example, Samantha’s complains that “science of reading does not offer that time nor the appropriate text” for her students, which is a reason that students not only do not enjoy reading, but they have been “scared.”

What seems to be most prevalent in the science of reading discourse at the macropolicy and media levels, namely instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, is ultimately what Samantha places the most value on when describing her “perfect world” of literacy. As is seen in earlier analysis, Samantha describes phonics and foundational decoding skills as crucial, and in fact what she would prefer to occupy

the majority of her second-grade literacy instruction. She explains in this abbreviated excerpt:

I just feel like this whole, like, taking apart words is so important, and I feel like my kids who don't know how to read, don't know how to manipulate words and the sounds- And I feel like The Benchmark already expects them to know that. And obviously the whole point of reading is to understand what you've read. I always tell my, you know, my parents, there's learning to read and reading to learn, and I feel like Benchmark is reading to learn. And they're still learning to read. And I feel like the whole phonics, like, I- I could teach phonics all day. I feel like that's the most important part. (July 26, 2023)

Notably, however, the words *science of reading* are not found anywhere in this description of her ideal literacy instruction, despite the focus on phonics reified in SOR discourse. Of course, it is important to note that she is using the name of the curriculum, Benchmark, where she was using *science of reading* previously, but I find it significant that Samantha has left out *science of reading* when talking about positive aspects of reading instruction, and to be clear, these are elements that are included in the Benchmark curriculum. Samantha not only includes SOR when talking about negative aspects of the curriculum, but attributes agency to SOR as the source of the requirements and demands that she has found to be problematic and harmful to her students.

This aspect of normative discourse also includes the idea that the curriculum is to be accepted as a source of authority when it comes to reading instruction. As I have explored in chapters 4 and 5, the discourse coming from the state and the district, as

well as the local media, certainly promotes this idea, so it would not be surprising for Samantha's utterances to reflect this, as well. It is telling, then, that even when pointing out an aspect of the curriculum that she does not like, Samantha does not fully voice a criticism. In our initial conversation in May 2023, Samantha states:

So, they [the Benchmark curriculum] don't use very familiar text either. **And I- and I'm sure there's a purpose around it**, but it just makes it harder for them to, you know, like, I would love to just do like "The Three Little Bears," [Emily: Right.] "Goldilocks," you know? [Emily: Yes.] And let's just bring it back and then the new- the standards of that instead of on top of it having to analyze this hard story that sometimes I don't even understand.

Samantha's choice to say, "I'm sure there's a purpose around" the critique she levels toward the curriculum discursively signals her view that the curriculum holds authority. This move can be described as a feature of relational modality, namely the politeness strategy of face-saving (Goffman, 1955). This is also a metacognitive process using hedging to soften the impact of her critique. Once again, hybridity is visible in Samantha's discursive construction of the curriculum.

An element of literacy instruction that Samantha clearly articulates as valuable that she does not view as available within the Benchmark curriculum is meaningful discussions about text, which I discuss below.

Discussions About Text

From the first time I met her, Samantha has expressed her desire to engage her students in discussions around rich texts. She sees read alouds and the discussion prompted by texts showing characters as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors

(Sims Bishop, 1990) for her students' lives as critical to the confidence she wants for her students. Her involvement with a nationally-recognized center for gender and sexual diversity in education and her work with the larger RPP where I first met Samantha stem from her commitment to the ideologies undergirding sociocultural views of literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogical practices that recognize that children need to see their languages, literacies, and cultures, as well as their identities, present and valued in classrooms. (Love, 2019; Paris, 2012). Though Samantha expresses these views frequently in the data collected for the larger project where class discussions related to literacy instruction were centered, they do not emerge as often in the data set for this study. Importantly, Samantha still positions rich discussion as integral to her vision for her classroom.

When Samantha and I first talked about the broad outlines of my research project during our conversation on May 4, 2023, I shared, "A lot of it is very fluid because I really want to know, like, what goals you have for literacy instruction and what are some things that we could do, like ,that we could talk about together and think about together." In response, Samantha immediately spoke of read alouds and discussions:

My goals are **always** incorporating **rich** read alouds and discussion. That's, you know, why I got on board with CU. Because **I think that's so important** and just- That's what I want is to **be able to fit that in. Find time for that** and **meaningful** discussion around literacy.

She felt discussions were a casualty of, "too many requirements and not enough time."

In the following excerpt from this conversation, Samantha expresses her desire for

more space and *time* for her students to talk freely without the constraints of a scripted curriculum:

Samantha: Like yeah, like **I want to just give them-**, like, **I would love to just sit** and- like **my [student name], let him** talk. Like, I don't think **he gets heard** at home **at all**. [Emily: Mmm]. Like, **even** if I ask him a question and he wants to talk about some experience he had, that's **still** like **communicating** and . . . **sharing** his experiences [Emily: Mm hmm], you know, and **connecting** with other people. [Emily: Right.] **Even if** it's not talking about a **standard** like, that's **still** part of like **being a human being in society**, [Emily: Mmm] you know, that **they still need to learn** because **they don't know how to communicate and be human beings in society right now**.

Samantha's discursive constructions of *literacy*, *instruction*, *students*, and *teachers* are all present in this excerpt. She begins with, "Like yeah, like **I want to just give them-**, like, **I would love to just sit** and- like **my [student name], let him** talk." Beginning with *I want* and starting over with a more emphatic expression of desire with *I would love* suggests the intensity of Samantha's wish for this to be a reality in her classroom. Including the downtoner *just* in both versions of the repeated openings shows that Samantha believes that her desire is not too much to ask, and she likely thinks this is something that should be part of standard elementary literacy instruction, though she does feel disempowered from enacting this desired reality. The change between *give* and *sit* is interesting to consider, as the former places the agency with Samantha, as she is bestowing something on her students, in this case time and space, while the latter positions her passively as an observer, thus shifting power balances between student

and teacher. Further, the shift in pronoun from *them* to *him* brings the analysis of the “start, stop, repeat with changes” format of the opening sentence into focus. It seems that Samantha began this thought as a general desire to provide more space during the day for classroom discussions around literacy, but as she began, one of her students came to mind for whom she believes this time would be particularly beneficial, causing her to switch mid-sentence. So, rather than wanting to give her students time for discussion, she would love to sit back and allow a particular student to simply talk. As with the excerpt discussed above, the possessive determiner *my* is used, signaling care and protection.

Samantha remains focused on this student as she continues, “Like, I don’t think **he gets heard** at home **at all**. Like, **even** if I ask him a question and he wants to talk about some experience he had, that’s **still** like **communicating** and . . . **sharing** his experiences, you know, and **connecting** with other people.” I interpret the passive structure of *he gets heard*, followed by the intensifier *at all* as further evidence of Samantha’s care and concern for her student, as the student is centered over the other people in his home. Had Samantha phrased this using an active construction such as, “I don’t think his mother hears him at home at all,” the student’s mother would be positioned in the active role, relative to the student. Adding *at all* intensifies Samantha’s belief that the child deserves to be heard, signaling her positioning of students as knowledge producers with unique identities that require supportive spaces for fostering confident, communal self-images. In the remainder of this portion of the excerpt, I have drawn attention to Samantha’s verb selection in describing the student’s talking about “some experience.” She uses the verbs *communicating*, *sharing*, and

connecting, which all represent social behaviors done in community with others, bringing further attention to Samantha's character as a nurturing and compassionate teacher. In addition, Samantha uses the paired downtoners *even if* and *still* to express resistance to what she perceives as a power dynamic that is repeated in and becomes even clearer in the final sentence in this excerpt. Here, the *even if* refers to the student responding to Samantha's question with something off subject, "even if . . . he wants to talk about some experience he had," and the *still* points to the fact that there is something wonderful that comes from this, "that's *still* [] communicating and . . . sharing . . . and connecting."

Samantha begins to bring this excerpt to a close powerfully, "**Even if** it's not talking about a **standard** like, that's **still** part of like **being a human being in society.**" Without too much additional context, I think this last sentence could stand alone as a comment on contemporary public education, and it certainly speaks to who Samantha is as a teacher. In the context of this excerpt, it connects importantly to the previous portion by demonstrating Samantha's interest in what this student—or any student—gains by talking about their experiences and *communicating, sharing, connecting* whether what is shared is in response to the question Samantha has asked. Here is where the *even if* and *still* pair disrupts power even more explicitly. The final statement, "you know, that **they still need to learn** because **they don't know how to communicate and be human beings in society right now,**" speaks to the hybrid nature of these discourses and the tensions inherent in Samantha's constructions. One read of Samantha's language positions students with deficit framing as lacking, *they don't know how to . . . be human beings in society*, and out of context, I think this is a

valid interpretation. Situated within the context of the preceding utterance, however, Samantha's statement can be read as an urgent appeal toward a more humane and just education system that empowers her to be responsive to her students in supporting their holistic development as *human beings in society*. She uses the phrases *still need to learn* and *right now* to signal her belief that her students are capable of communicating in society but are not yet there. This look towards a hopeful horizon of possibility captures the promise of queer literacy practices as articulated by Coleman et al. (2022). The use of the verb *need to* does not allow for any uncertainty in interpreting what Samantha believes would be beneficial for her students. What makes this discourse creative is Samantha's refusal to separate the idea of her students as socioemotional human beings from their literate lives. She resists the idea that literacy is only attached to standards, recognizing that for her students to be confident, fulfilled, members of society, they will need authentic literacy skills, which leads directly into the next creative discourse Samantha expresses throughout our conversations.

Critique of Reading Comprehension Standards

Connecting explicitly to Samantha's creative discourse around rich classroom discussions is her critique of reading comprehension standards. This includes the content of the standards, as well as the way they are taught and assessed in the elementary literacy classroom. As an illustration of this critique, during our June 19, 2023, meeting, Samantha and I had the following exchange:

Samantha: I mean who comes up with these standards? Like, they're not- Yeah. How come in second grade they have to know point of view? At this stage.

Emily: I think in story- Like, I guess you know stories? And what is, quote unquote, supposed to be the second-grade level-

Samantha: Do we have to have so many standards? Can we just focus on main idea?

This excerpt illustrates Samantha's sense of humor, yet matter-of-fact approach to our work together. At this point in our conversation, we are talking about what would be useful to convey to the larger academic world of literacy researchers that would realistically capture Samantha's experience implementing a new curriculum under restricted circumstances without being able to respond to her students in meaningful ways. In the audio recording, Samantha and I both ultimately express our exasperation through laughter—something that happens frequently across our recorded conversations, and Samantha's questioning of the standards expresses an often-felt and hard to describe tension wherein Samantha utters something that seems on the surface absurd—*can't we just focus on main idea?*—but belies a genuinely hoped-for alternative reality. This early suggestion that comprehension standards be reduced to a focus on main idea foreshadowed deeper discussion of this topic that allowed Samantha to construct this possibility more concretely.

In our conversation on July 26, 2023, Samantha and I spent about 35 minutes discussing the article “The Dangers of Test Preparation: What Students Learn (and

Don't Learn) About Reading Comprehension From Test-Centric Literacy Instruction” (Davis & Vehabovic, 2018). I had compiled a few articles I thought would be interesting for Samantha and me to read together but had not planned when to bring them into our conversation. I pulled out the Davis and Vehabovic article as it fit perfectly into the conversation Samantha and I were having about comprehension standards. In the article, Davis and Vehabovic identify five test-centric practices that “privilege tidy views of comprehension over more complex, interactive understandings that better match what readers need for lifelong success” (p. 581). The authors’ arguments deeply resonated with Samantha, who responded excitedly after I read the opening paragraph, “Yes! This is exactly what I’m talking about!” In the following abbreviated lines, Samantha, drawing on the Davis and Vehabovic (2018) text, explains why a discussion would be preferable to the comprehension lesson format as presented in the Benchmark curriculum, which is focused around a second-grade reading comprehension standard, such as finding the central idea of a text or identifying a character’s perspective. These excerpts of Samantha’s utterances occurred in sequence, but I have taken out my responses between each:

1. And I feel like I could teach them how to understand what they're reading more naturally. This is not a natural flow. Like if I'm talking about text, I just want to come up and answer questions as they come. Not- this is just- is not a natural flow.
2. Look it says **right here** [pointing to article text], “When tests become the text for instruction, test items or questions often become the dominant

frames for organizing the kinds of thinking readers are **expected and allowed to do.**”

3. Like, that’s like, **why can't we just talk about it and *let it go*** into a discussion and **take each part as it comes?**
4. **Let’s just** have a discussion ***each time we’re reading.***

The way Samantha critiques reading comprehension standards-based instruction, positions reading as a sociocultural phenomenon that centers both her and her students as integral to the experience. Sharing a text together is not a context-neutral practice, as many so-called scientifically and evidence-based reading instructional programs imagine it to be. In excerpt 1, Samantha positions herself and her discussion-based approach as potentially more effective for her students than a typical commercial reading comprehension lesson (like those offered in Benchmark Advance) by first establishing the goal of the shared experience as *understanding what they’re reading*. This differs from the comprehension standards-based approach in that there is not a specific strategy or aspect of the text that functions as the desired outcome for the experience. Samantha describes the standards-based approach as *not a natural flow*, which she repeats twice for emphasis. Using the expression *I feel like* to categorize how she believes she could teach reading *more naturally* is a hedge that expresses uncertainty, which is not surprising given how teachers have been constructed in SOR and READ Act policy discourse as either maliciously or foolishly lacking knowledge of “best practices” for teaching reading. She uses the downtoner *just* to make clear how simple she believes her approach to be, particularly in contrast to the convoluted and unnatural way that reading comprehension strategy instruction complicates the

process—and enjoyment—of reading. Excerpt 2 is a continuation of this same conversation, where Samantha cites the authority of the Davis and Vehabovic (2018) text, demonstrating her interest in finding an authoritative voice for what she already believes to be true based on her extensive experience as a teacher. Because SOR and READ Act policy discourses fail to position teachers as knowledgeable experts—favoring the discursive construction of *well-trained technician*—Samantha’s use of the phrase *Look it says right here*, suggests she has internalized this discourse and seeks to recruit sources of power/authority to back up her position. The spatial deictic *here*, coupled with the intensifier *right* serves to minimize the distance between Samantha’s ideas and those of the expert authors of the text.

In excerpts 3 and 4, Samantha continues to use *just* to emphasize her perception that her ideas are commonsense and simple. This word also evokes a sense of helplessness and exasperation, as I mentioned was clear in the tone as recorded in the audio. This feeling is reinforced with the question *Why can’t we?* It is as if Samantha is saying, “It could all be so simple. But these standards insist on making it difficult.”

Samantha’s critique of reading comprehension standards-based literacy instruction extends to the way students are expected to show their understanding of these standards. As our conversation about how we might think about student engagement with text more expansively, we talked about building students’ confidence through listening to text read aloud. Samantha then asked, referring to the students, “Why do they have to write everything?” After I responded with, “Yes. That’s interesting,” our exchange continued:

Samantha: Like prove it? Like, why can't it be more oral?

Emily: Yes. And I wonder if there's ways that we can think about how to do that within the confines of what you're expected to do. Because with, like, that Google Docs text to speech [Samantha: Yes. Yeah.] Speech to text.

Samantha: That they love- When you taught them how to do that, they came back. They used it the rest of the year. They were so excited to tell stories.

When I asked Samantha if her students could use that feature to respond to texts she read aloud as a way to “prove” their understanding of curricular texts, she responded:

Samantha: Well, and the whole thing like my boss [indecipherable] they want to come in and look on paper that they can write the answers to these questions. That's them [the students] knowing it and like, that's not fair.

Emily: Right.

Samantha: You can still answer these questions without writing it down. [Emily: Yeah.] Or having them read it on their own.

This last exchange demonstrates yet another example of Samantha's creative discourse evident in her utterances, a *rejection of time-bound text level expectations*.

Conclusion: Possibilities for Reconstruction

In this chapter, I have analyzed Samantha's constructions of aspects of elementary literacy, demonstrating how each moment within discursive interaction represents an opportunity to reify or resist normative discourses related to the

neoliberal logics undergirding SOR and READ Act policy discourses. As I turn to the final chapter to discuss the findings from my critical discourse analysis across the macropolitical, local media, and situated elementary literacy classroom contexts, I take inspiration from Samantha's ability to remix the restrictions and limitations of her lived experience implementing a new curriculum in a highly regulated space to consider the promise of CDA and the destabilizing lens of queer theory to move past the deconstruction of discourse into a reconstruction of imaginative possibilities.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

In this final chapter I bring this story to a close. I begin by looking across the previous three chapters to weave together the intertextual threads I see in the discursive constructions across macropolicy, local media, and elementary classroom spaces that provide (always partial) answers to the research questions I laid out at the beginning of my study:

1. How are *literacy* and *literacy instruction* constructed in the discourse surrounding a state-level early literacy (reading) policy?
2. How are *students* and *teachers* constructed in the discourse surrounding a state-level early literacy (reading) policy?
 - a. For both questions, I ask what is made possible and impossible through these constructions and in the relations of power present?

From there, I consider the implications of this work by suggesting a reconstructed discursive formation for each of the four elementary literacy concepts raised by the research questions: *literacy*, *literacy instruction*, *students*, and *teachers*.

Research Question 1: *Literacy and Literacy Instruction*

1. How are *literacy* and *literacy instruction* constructed in the discourse surrounding a state-level early literacy (reading) policy?

Literacy is constructed across these three spaces as:

1. Based on functionalist views
2. Limited to a set of measurable, sequentially-developed skills related to reading print

3. Aligned with a concept referred to as *the* science of reading, which claims to be based on settled science
4. Highly consequential, commodified, and time-bound

Effective literacy instruction is constructed as:

1. Aligned with a concept referred to as *the* science of reading, which claims to be based on settled science
2. Delivered by *well-trained* teachers
3. Available exclusively through the implementation of scientifically based and evidence-based instructional programs (a category to which all instructional programs either belong or do not belong)
4. Non-contextual, or equally effective with any group of students in any context

The discursive constructions presented in the lists above have been acted upon by rules of formation comprised of neoliberal logics and language repeated through popular discussions of the science of reading that have limited the possibilities for Samantha and her students to engage alternative literate expressions in the classroom.

The rules of formation I consider to be the most consequential, troubling, and of interest to discuss here are the narrow construction of literacy as a set of decontextualized foundational print reading skills and an unquestioned faith in *the* (settled) science of reading. The circulation of these two ideas as Truth creates particular conditions for the way literacy is talked about within the elementary literacy space. In the sections below, I look at each of these in turn.

Limited View of Literacy

Within the discourse circulating about and around the READ Act policy, *literacy* is constructed as *reading print*. There are very few instances across my data set for chapters 4 and 5 where literacy is talked about in reference to any practice beyond reading print, and the few instances where this occurs trend to dates earlier in the data set (e.g., the District slide presentation showing a focus on writing instruction up until the 2017-2018 school year), or were limited to outside of school experiences, as in the writing practices described in the Bridge Project (Gassman, 2017). Frequently, the word *literacy* is conflated with *reading print* in ways that are troubling given the decades of research (cited in earlier chapters) emphasizing the importance of writing, orality, and other forms of literacy. Classification schemes are used in language to make sense of the world, and this includes assigning value to some constructs in a category over others. When labels are used in such limiting ways in discourse that holds weighty consequences for what occurs in literacy classrooms, what is *not* included in the label *literacy* inevitably loses value. Missing from a definition of *literacy* that only includes *reading print* are the myriad ways humans communicate through multiple modes, which was a clear finding that arose from my analysis of all three discursive contexts. I return to this idea in a later section of this chapter.

The Science of Reading

The deployment of the term *the science of reading* across my data set in all three chapters follows the neoliberal logic that asserts the authority of rationality and a technocratic trust in tools. The use of scientifically and evidence-based research as a

form of discursive power is not new in education (Berliner, 2002; St.Pierre, 2006), though it is interesting how the term *the science of reading* has come to take on a life of its own apart from any real connection to classroom-based research (Shanahan, 2020) and that has often imbued the term with vague and unspecified meaning. What is clear, though, is that *the science of reading* is coded as a tool of power used as a means of control to manage districts, schools, and teachers in an attempt to change behaviors, ostensibly to improve students' reading proficiency.

It is tricky to sort through the intentions of both policymakers and journalists who use *the science of reading* to mandate and promote, respectively, ways of teaching reading and specific commercial programs used to implement those forms of teaching. As Gabriel (2020) points out, "On the surface, few people would disagree with the idea that teaching should be informed by science, decisions should be based on research, and various tools and materials should have clear evidence supporting their use" (p, 11). The American public has been inundated with neoliberal education policies that rely on commonsense messages, like these, that prevent pushback against interventions in schools that actually cause harm. Further, what seems clear from my analysis is the limited understanding of what constitutes *science* and *evidence* when it comes to practices that should be used in the classroom with students. In the case of the State Board of Education, in chapter 4, I presented a comment from Board Member Joyce Rankin where she expressed her understanding of what is meant by a *scientific program* for teaching reading, one that is *evidence-based*. Her statement revealed false assumptions about the guaranteed success of evidence-based instructional programs, claiming there would be student *improvement in every*

instance. I find it difficult to imagine believing in anything with such conviction, but this is not an isolated phenomenon, as MacPhee and colleagues (2021) have shown in their analysis of the metaphors used in discourse involving the science of reading that “science was often personified as bearer of truth or reified as an unquestionable thing,” (p. S150). This unshakeable devotion is particularly worrisome, given Petscher and colleagues’ (2020) crucial statement regarding reading research: “it is currently impossible for schools to select basal reading programs that adhere to strict evidence-based standards” (p. S272). These scholars from the Florida Center for Reading Research distinguish between *evidence-based* and *evidence-informed*, noting that classroom practice is most accurately described as the latter, not the former.

Another major concern with how science and evidence are weaponized as a source of power within the discourses I analyzed relates to how quickly evidence is abandoned when it is deemed more beneficial to do so. Two examples related to the independent evaluation that was commissioned as a requirement of the 2019 READ Act amendments are illustrative. At the State Board of Education meeting on September 14, 2023, WestEd, the firm hired to conduct the evaluation, presented the results from their Year 3 Findings. Both examples of abandoning the need for evidence occur during questioning from the board members. The first example was included in chapter 4, as it also demonstrates how little significance is granted to the lived experiences of real students throughout the discourse related to the READ Act policy. In this additional example, Board Member Plomer questions WestEd’s Dr. Grogan about the data used to answer one of WestEd’s central questions for the evaluation,

How are LEPs [local education providers] and schools implementing READ Act provisions? (Grogan & Friedrich, 2023, Slide 2):

Board Member Plomer: Just a question about—was this all self-report? So, there was no—when you did the evaluation—you couldn't see if the implementation of the new practices was occurring but it's how they felt and perceived?

Dr. Grogan: Yes, these are all perceptions at this point. There were no other independent measures or obser—like formal observations that would have allowed us-

Board Member Plomer: Okay, will those be in another report—or is that ever planned—or is that too, too beyond the scope of the ability to--?

Dr. Grogan: It was beyond the scope of this, unless we were to do it in a small sample.

Despite this question being one of six targeted for the 2023 evaluation, and despite “Classroom Level Implementation” being listed as one of three items under the heading “Additional Focus Year 3” (Grogan & Friedrich, 2023, Slide 4), the evidence used to make claims about the classroom implementation *are all perceptions*. It seems highly inappropriate for an independent research firm to report results based solely on *perception* within a policy environment built on the certainty of scientifically and evidence-based practices. As I discussed in chapter 5, the board refused to allow teachers to delay testing young children coming back to school in person for the 2020 school year after COVID-19 kept them out of school because the state needed to know

which students were struggling readers. It would be interesting to know what the board would say to teachers who reported their insights about their students' reading abilities as *all perception*.

The second example where evidence is minimized relates to student data, as authoritative voices seem to be in denial about this form of evidence, which is supposed to be impacted by the evidence-based instructional practices in which they have so much trust. Near the end of the WestEd evaluation team's presentation, Board Member Steve Durham asks the presenters about the lack of growth in CMAS scores. He is demonstrating his trust in the data, while the response he gets from the presenter, Dr. Grogan, is dismissive of the evidence (the use of square brackets in the excerpts indicate places where the microphone cut out in the recording):

Durham: If you- if you look at the CMAS scores over the last- since the implementation of the READ Act first passed, progress in reading proficiency grade level appears to be very small. And- and our vice chair pointed out, apparently, some green shoots that were perhaps are- are there. Are the- is there enough progress being made since the implementation of READ Act that we should be seeing more dramatic results in- in CMAS scores and students reading at grade level?

Dr. Grogan: I think a lot of what is in this year's report are kind of more leading indicators [] now that there has been this shift towards using these [] evidence-based materials that there is this training that in some cases there's a lot of support um so I would think that student outcomes would follow that. So, I wouldn't say that at this point in time we would necessarily see a huge shift

especially when we're looking at CMAS, which is really a measure that's looking, you know, at one point in time. It's not looking at growth, and it is not completely aligned with the interim assessments and with the focus on growth and foundational skills that the READ Act really targets. (2:25:04)

Here, the evidence from the CMAS scores is downplayed, while the evidence-based instructional materials are held up as a tool of unquestionable legitimacy. As these examples illustrate, when evidence is portrayed as a source of truth, it cannot be the case that some pieces of evidence are marginalized while others are beyond reproach. Related to my findings in chapters 4-6, the discursive reliance on “evidence” is a mechanism of power that shifts as necessary to retain the positioning of science of reading as the unquestioned answer, silencing any practice that attempts to break the limits of what can be known and said within the ideological frame.

Research Question 2: *Students and Teachers*

1. How are *students* and *teachers* constructed in the discourse surrounding a state-level early literacy (reading) policy?

Students are constructed as:

1. Having a significant reading deficiency, or not
2. Achieving third-grade reading proficiency, or not
3. Reading at grade level, or not
4. Able to read, or not
5. Producers of test scores
6. Monolithic demographic groups
7. Passive recipients of pre-packaged curriculum

Teachers are constructed as:

1. Lacking knowledge about the science of reading
2. Requiring the support of a scientifically or evidence-based core reading instructional program
3. Not experts
4. Incapable of making instructional decisions
5. Critical to implementing high-quality reading instruction

Who are Students?

As I worked through my analysis for chapters 4 and 5 of this study, I was disturbed by the glaring lack of explicit attention to equity in relation to students' identities. Though I discussed a troubling absence of students from the data set, generally, which would explain this silence to some degree, it is still shocking the degree to which students' socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds are erased throughout the macropolitical and local media discourses. As I have stated, what is repeated and reproduced holds power and privilege and what is silenced is constructed as unimportant to the discursive formations within the larger discourse. In this case, functionalist views of literacy are positioned as acultural and context neutral (Lambirth, 2011), thus discourses that privilege reading print as a set of discrete skills, as does the discourse surrounding the READ Act policy, are uninterested in situated literacies as cultural practices. There are a few instances that acknowledge student identity within the data, however, and these reveal some complexities and inconsistencies that exist within reading scholarship, as well.

Disaggregated Test Scores. A predictable place for student demographics to be named are in discourses related to student test scores. Few of the macropolicy documents contain this specific information, with the exception of the 2023 Colorado READ Act Report (CDE, 2023). In this document, the following paragraph is printed above a graph displaying the same information:

The racial and ethnic groups with the highest SRD rates have remained the same over the last seven years with only slight variations year over year. In 2021-22 American Indian or Alaska Native had the highest SRD rate, at 38.4 percent. This was followed by Hispanic or Latino (32.2 percent), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (32.0 percent), Black or African American (30.4 percent), and two or more races (16.8 percent). The groups with the lowest rates were Asian (14.3 percent) and White (14.2 percent). (CDE, 2023, p. 18)

The matter-of-fact tone of this paragraph is troubling, as it positions this relative SRD (significant reading deficiency) rate comparison as a natural and fixed state. The fact that the groups with the highest rates of reading difficulty as measured by the state's reading assessments are matter-of-factly reported as having *remained the same over the last several years* emphasizes this as a taken-for-granted aspect of the READ Act data. There is no contextualizing the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) or the body of reading scholarship that suggests that “reading instruction tends to be less effective and less meaningful for Black children and youth than for their white student counterparts” (Jensen & Edwards, 2023, p. 413), which would situate this information

within a historical context that disrupts the repetition of the largely unquestioned achievement gap narrative that has become entrenched within education.

The intertextual thread of this uninterrogated achievement gap narrative appears within the media data set, where several articles report state-wide standardized test scores outside of READ Act data. These publications typically disaggregate scores by race and ethnicity, if students have a disability, and if students live in low-income households. Again, there is not any sociohistorical context provided for why scores may vary between groups, leaving readers to adopt deficit frames of students who have been marginalized by a racist, classist, ableist system. A *Chalkbeat Colorado* article reporting on 2022 CMAS scores, for example, includes the word *gap* 11 times. This paragraph is representative of the straightforward tone and language used to report about gaps between student demographic groups:

For example, less than a quarter of Colorado students who qualify for subsidized school meals met or exceeded expectations on CMAS literacy tests, compared with more than half of students who don't qualify. The gap was nearly 30 percentage points. The gaps between white students and Black and Hispanic students were nearly as large, at 27 and 29 percentage points respectively. (Meltzer & Asmar, 2022, Wide test score gaps remain section, para. 2)

Presenting data ahistorically, or without critical historic context, in this way follows the neoliberal logics of individualism and meritocracy that suggest that students who do well on tests do so as a result of their individual abilities and hard work, while those who fail, do so for the same reasons. When a CDE assessment officer is quoted

in this article as referring to the students whose scores are at the lower end of these gaps—the Black and Brown children and children who come from low-income households—as “historically lower-achieving” (para. 6), the deficit is located within the children, rather than the system. When students’ identities are only raised in this way in relation to their performance as a monolithic demographic group on standardized tests, their existence as individuals with unique literate identities tied to varied cultural backgrounds within such crude demographic categories is erased. Further, when these tests are presented as legitimate measures of student achievement without reference to the well-documented scientific racism that serves as their epistemological foundation (Au, 2016; Willis, 2008, 2018), alternative possibilities for what students need and deserve in the classroom are foreclosed.

Assumptions about Minoritized Students. A consequence of the discourse that fails to account for the “histories of economic, political, societal, and structural inequities experienced by People of Color” (Willis, 2018, p. 31) and all minoritized students is a single story of underachievement that positions children as a monolith who require one solution to achieve at the level of their white, English-dominant, middle-class peers. When minoritized children are positioned in this way—always compared unfavorably to the white, English-dominant other—their experiences in school from the beginning are fraught and subjected to discursive formations such as *having a significant reading deficiency*.

Evidence of this positioning appears in one of the *Chalkbeat Colorado* articles where a voice from a position of power in the state’s largest school district, Denver Public Schools speaks: “Phonics is important for all students — and it’s absolutely

critical for our most underserved students, particularly our students of color,' Anna Pendleton, the district's director of literacy, told the school board recently" (Schimke, 2020b, Turning the ship section, para. 2). There is no research base that supports her claim that phonics is any more critical for students of color than other groups of students. In fact, Willis (2018) points out the lack of students of color as participants in the studies reviewed for the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis published in 2000, suggesting the research upon which many of the recommendations for classroom practice are based do not take into account the experiences of nonwhite children. This is an irresponsible lack of racial grammar (Bonilla-Silva, 2012; cited in Willis, 2018, p. 37) where this Denver Public Schools employee in a position of power fails to see the racial consequences of her statement, subordinating a large group of students within her district.

The limited constructions of students in general, and culturally, economically, ethnically, linguistically, and racially diverse students in particular, across the macropolicy and media discourses in my data are harmful to both the children whose unique subjectivities are erased and to their teachers who are expected to treat their classrooms like factories where they operate as *well trained* technicians, implementing a scientifically and evidence-based curriculum as scripted, without regard to the particularities of their students. In this way, teachers lose access to the moral rewards of teaching (Santoro, 2011). With this in mind, I turn to Samantha's construction of her own identity as a teacher, connecting it explicitly to the discourses circulating through the macropolicy and media spaces analyzed in chapters 4 and 5.

Speaking for Herself: Understanding Samantha's Discourse through Neoliberal Logics and Theories of Identity and Talk

Across the three contexts—macropolicy, local media, and within the elementary classroom—teachers in my data set are discursively positioned in complex ways. The overwhelming construction, however, is that of an unskilled technician, who though capable of learning the new science of reading, has lacked such knowledge for some time. Further, there are elements within the discourse that suggest teachers lack urgency or concern for students who do not easily learn to decode print. This quote from Rep. Millie Hamner, one of the co-sponsors of the original READ Act legislation captures this sentiment, “Hamner and others argued for keeping some form of retention in the proposal. ‘It’s in the bill because it’s attention-getting’ and will focus parents and teachers on the need to help struggling readers, she said” (Engdahl, 2012a, The debate section, para. 6). The idea that teachers (as well as parents) have not been focused on the *need to help struggling readers* and require the threat of holding back students to start paying attention undermines the hard work and commitment of the majority of educators. With this deficit discourse circulating overtly through policy mandates and popular media conversations, it is useful to engage with Clarke’s (2009) model of teacher identity to see how these elements show up explicitly in Samantha’s construction of herself as a teacher. The elements of Clarke’s model that work in complex and ever-shifting ways to contribute to a teacher’s identity are a) substance, b) authority sources, c) self-practices, and 4) *telos*, or ultimate purpose. Focusing on the teacher-focus of my second research question, below I engage with Samantha’s discursive positionings of herself, in the context of data I shared in chapters 4, 5, and

6, to conceptualize shifts in her teacher identity in response to the current literacy (reading) policy environment.

Substance. The substance of teacher identity, according to Clarke (2009), has to do with which parts of self constitute one's teaching identity. For example, does it "involve intellectual and emotional parts of my being?" (p. 191). As I discussed in chapter 6, Samantha brings aspects of her intellectual, emotional, and analytical self to teaching. This, I believe, is resistant to the normative discourses circulating around the READ Act policy, which construct an ideal teacher as *well trained* (e.g., Schimke, 2021d).

Authority Sources. It was unsurprising, then, to find Samantha positioning herself in relation to this image of a teacher. Clarke (2009) explains authority sources of teacher identity as those messages that teachers find to be valid in defining what makes a good teacher. As is clear from my analysis, there are particular ways that the READ Act policy and science of reading discourses position good teachers, while teachers are bombarded by many other messages that may or may not align with such positionings. The idea of authority source in Clarke's model is not limited to the a view of authority in a traditional sense of power, as Clarke draws from Foucault's concept of discursive power in forming his model, and thus recognizes that power is not solely a top-down force. In this way, Samantha could just as easily view my affirmation of her value of rich discussion following high-quality, identity-affirming read alouds as an authority source she finds valid as she would the policy mandates she receives from the CDE even though I have no power over her employment.

As for discursively revealing her authority sources, at times, Samantha seemed to align herself with discourse produced by policymakers, while at others, she resisted these subject positionings. In the final recorded conversation we had in February 2024, Samantha made this statement while we were talking about the timing of her district's core reading resources adoption, "And that's the CDE. Always pushing things out and rushing always. It's like nothing is ever good enough for them." At the time of our interaction, I did not notice the last part of this utterance, and, in fact, it is slightly overlapped with my next turn, but when listening to the recording, I was struck by Samantha's phrasing. She nominalizes the CDE into an actor who pushes and rushes and for whom nothing is ever good enough. This speaks volumes about Samantha's identity as a teacher in that moment, and I believe generally in this larger moment of the aftermath of the 2019 READ Act policy amendments. The CDE is a central authority source for Samantha at this time, as two of the significant changes to the policy have impacted her over the last three years. First, she was required to fulfill the CDE's mandate to obtain training in the science of reading. She did so by taking the CDE's 45-hour self-paced online course. Though she has articulated valuable learning from the experience that has benefited her students, this was an additional professional responsibility she had to take on, without pay, in order to maintain employment. Though she does not feel that the expectations coming from the CDE are reasonable or aligned with what she believes to be important as a teacher, her expression in this moment that *nothing is ever good enough for them* deploys elements of relational modality, including the use of both *nothing* and *ever* as intensifiers, to convey a

conflicted emotional connection suggesting that she does see the CDE as a legitimate source of authority that impacts her identity.

In relation to the CDE training, Samantha also expresses multiple times her frustration that her school's coaches have not had to take the same READ Act-mandated training in the science of reading, as in this exchange between us in February 2024:

Samantha: And I don't understand why our coaches were not required for the training.

Emily: That is for the training of the 45, like the CDE training?

Samantha: Yeah, yeah.

Emily: But is that changing or is that? No, I don't know. Or yeah, cause coaches. I know there's different, like, levels of people. Like coach, or like, intervention. Because I guess coaches- they don't work necessarily with students, correct?

Samantha: Yeah.

Emily: So that's different, I guess.

Samantha's confusion about why King's instructional coaches have not been required to take the training is valid, as they are supposed to support her and her teammates to provide instruction based on the CDE's sanctioned practices as defined within the training. When Samantha has questions about such practices or about the newly-adopted Benchmark curriculum and asks her coaches, she is often met with uncertainty

from them. In our February 2024 conversation, she put it this way when I asked how she provides feedback on the curriculum, “We bring it to our leadership or our coaches and we tell them and then we never get answers back.” This suggests that her coaches are not seen as an authority source shaping her identity as a teacher.

As Samantha had expressed her frustration with her coaches’ lack of knowledge about the curriculum and science of reading in previous conversations, during our February 2024 conversation, I shared with her a transcript from the May 2022 DBE meeting that showed how the District Learning Service team’s vision conflicted with her experience. The discourse during the May 2022 meeting prioritizes teacher support and feedback, as one of the literacy instructional leadership team members states that her team’s goal is to:

Literacy Instructional Leader: ensure that we have a slow and responsive implementation there and that we're meeting the needs of our- of our buildings and our individual teachers. And then, as always that sub- subsequent professional learning is needed, we will rely heavily on feedback from our teachers and our principals in terms of what we might need to adjust and revise to ensure that we have a successful implementation. (2:11:16)

I was curious to hear Samantha’s reaction to this discourse painting a different experience. She did not have much to say about this portion of the transcript, but there were other elements that produced an interesting exchange that reveal what Samantha’s values as authority sources. The portion of the transcript from the May 2022 DBE meeting that is referenced during Samantha’s and my exchange excerpted below reads:

Literacy Instructional Leader: Using the Benchmark and, sort of, their pacing of each day and what their guiding the only- the only thing that is different is we actually have more time in our literacy block than Benchmark. So, we have 170 minutes in K-2 and their highest, like, pacing guide is 150, which gives us a little bit of, like, “Oh good, we can breathe a little bit!” Teachers can feel, um, like if their transitions aren't really tight- (2:32:55)

When Samantha read that portion of the transcript herself, she hadn't reacted, so I pointed it out to her, and we engaged in this back and forth:

Emily: But then there is just. This other one where I know it's- I can't believe it. But she says. “We actually have more time in our literacy block than Benchmark. So, we have 170 minutes

Samantha: Oh, that's not true.

Emily: in K-2 and their highest pacing guide is 150.

Samantha: The pacing guide is ridiculous.

Emily: But here's my-

Samantha: There's no way.

Emily: This is one of- this is one of my favorite lines where it- so, “Oh good. We can breathe a little bit. [S: No] Teachers can feel like their transitions aren't really tight. It's OK.

Samantha: No. No, that's not true. The the- lessons I would love for them to come in and do a lesson,

Emily: OK, yeah.

Samantha: I would love one- I would love [District Leader] to come in and teach a lesson and show me how it's done with understanding.

Emily: Yeah. Yeah. With understanding. Yeah. Yes. Because it's one thing to, like,

Samantha: Not, it's not possible.

Emily: read what's there, or whatever, versus, like, you're saying, understanding. So. OK. Interesting.

In short, as this exchange illustrates, Samantha does not derive the authority sources of her teacher identity from the school or district leadership when it comes to her literacy instruction. Rather, she points to the flaws in their assumptions, as she considers herself an authority source in the sense that she knows what is, and is not, possible. The self-practices, as discussed next, are where Samantha turns to find additional confirmation of what she knows to be true about teaching and learning.

Self-practices. The self-practices aspect of teacher identity are the kinds of activities that teachers engage in as part of an effort to develop as educators. Though not explicitly mentioned in Clarke's (2009) model, I consider this aspect of teacher identity to be those elements that are teacher-selected, rather than those required by one's school, district, or state. In a different sociopolitical context than the one shaping this study, there might be overlap between the practices a teacher chooses to engage in and those required by one of the levels of authority above the role of teacher. In Clarke's article, he mentions "engaging in particular forms of ongoing professional

learning” (p. 191) as falling under this category. Based on Samantha’s description of the professional learning experiences she currently engages in as a requirement at King, I do not consider any of those to be supportive of how Samantha wants to develop as a teacher. They undoubtedly shape her teacher identity, just not productively. Under this category, I would include Samantha’s participation in the professional learning opportunities with the nationally recognized center for gender and sexual diversity in education, the larger research project through which I met her, and this study. As I shared in chapter 6, during our conversations for my study, her involvement in the larger study did come up as connected to her personal beliefs and values as a teacher who wants to center text-based discussions about critical, socially relevant topics with children as a central aspect of school literacy.

Within the data sets for chapters 4 and 5, I do not see much evidence of discursive construction that aligns with this aspect of Samantha’s identity as a teacher. As such, this is an aspect that is in misalignment with the current normative discourse about teacher elementary literacy in Colorado. One glimpse could be the description of creative writing practices used in the after school Early Literacy and Writing program as part of the Bridge Project (Gassman, 2017), but, as I discussed in a previous section, that nod to writing in that out-of-school context was already marginalized in the prevailing discourse.

Telos. Samantha makes several statements to indicate what she views as the ultimate purpose for teaching, which is what Clarke calls *telos* in his model of teacher identity. Samantha’s language around purpose for teaching centers around positioning her students as confident and capable learners, which is intimately connected to the

view of herself as a skillful and responsive teacher. This view of the purpose for teaching is present in the normative discourse, though, I would argue, in distorted ways. The ideal teachers are constructed as effective at producing successful students, but success is narrowly defined as minimum competency on the READ Act assessment at a student's grade level and proficiency on third grade CMAS in English language arts. In the normative discourse, if students are not achieving these particular measures of success, teachers are positioned as failures. Samantha articulates this tension several times in our conversations, positioning both herself and her students momentarily as failures, while resisting such subjectivities in other moments.

In this section I have pulled threads from across my findings connected to my research questions, illustrating central themes from my analysis that point to the inconsistencies, and resulting consequences for children and teacher, in much of the discourse surrounding Science of Reading. At the same time, my analysis mapped onto the multiple dimensions of teacher identity show the crucial agency and forms of resistance that teachers can find, even as they are positioned in challenging ways through the enactment of these policies.

Reconstructing the Discourse of Elementary Literacy

An important component of CDA as a methodology is to move beyond the deconstruction of existing discourse to reconstruct alternative possibilities. In this section, I turn to theoretical and methodological impacts and implications of my study by considering a possible path toward transformation of the normative discursive formation of each of the four concepts within elementary literacy I analyzed in my study: *literacy*, *literacy instruction*, *students*, and *teachers*. For each, I name how I

would like to see the idea reconstructed to align with commitments of antioppressive pedagogies and liberatory literacy practices and pose a generalized path for reforming the discourse through the relevant actors. These paths for reconstruction are idealized and purely theoretical, and are meant to represent what I believe would be the course such discursive formations would need to travel to have the best chance of successfully making a change.

Expansive View of Literacy

Teacher educators & researchers / Teachers → School-based leaders → Media → Society
→ Policymakers

I am deeply troubled by the restrictive construction of literacy as limited to *reading print* as conveyed within the discourse in and around the READ Act policy and the science of reading. The conflation of the terms, as I have repeated throughout this study, erases the multiple other modes of communication that are needed in a diverse and digitally-connected society and, more importantly, serves to minimize the value of cultural practices that are not based on print literacies. One of the most interesting experiences I have had over the course of this study has been a personal examination of my stance toward the idea of literacy. As a white American with European ancestry, raised middle-class by parents who both have advanced degrees, my thinking about *literacy* was largely limited to reading and writing, with implicit understanding of listening and speaking as literate practices. As I have engaged with critical literacy studies, I have come to embrace an expansive view of literacy and literacy practices that recognizes the importance of valuing ways of knowing that exist beyond my narrow understanding and experience. In considering broad views of

literacy, I consulted the International Literacy Association's (ILA) Literacy Glossary and find the following definitions instructive for this discussion. First, the ILA defines *literacy* as:

The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context. Over time, literacy has been applied to a wide range of activities and appears as computer literacy, math literacy, or dietary literacy; in such contexts, it refers to basic knowledge of rather than to anything specific to reading and writing. (n.d.)

Literacies is defined in this way:

The distinct written and oral language practices evident across varying social circumstances, domains, and classes. As such, literacies are plural, with multiple manifestations, that cover various aspects of human life and social organization (e.g., school literacy, workplace literacy, science literacy). (n.d.)

And the term *literacy practices* is defined as, "Diverse forms of interacting with text that enable individuals to accomplish a range of purposes and attain personal benefits in ways that are shaped by cultural contexts and language structures" (n.d.).

Considering these three definitions together is useful, as they provide a framework for thinking about how to invite an expansive view of literacy into the classroom (as well as the consequences of failing to do so). The first, *literacy*, is the broadest. When searching for State Board of Education meetings where literacy was discussed outside of the READ Act, I found examples of literacy used in this sense, as

some SBE meetings related to content standards in areas such as media literacy or financial literacy. I think this version of literacy is crucial to include in the classroom, not just in the sense of the standards I just mentioned. As I have been working on this study, I have been keeping an informal record of the literacies I have engaged throughout my everyday life, and there have been surprisingly many. An example of one that I believe would be useful to explicitly name in the classroom is a literacy of the body/breath. As humans, we are all naturally literate in our bodies and breath, and spending time engaged in this literacy practice has many benefits that could be useful in the classroom. Imagine what it would mean to recognize children as always already literate beings because of the multitude of literacies they bring every day, such as a literacy of the breath?

The other two definitions—*literacies*, and *literacy practices*—are related, and importantly, are plural to recognize that literacy is multiple, in contrast to how it has been constructed across the texts in my data sets. In the *literacies* definition, school literacy is named as an example of a type of literacy. This would be where foundational reading skills leading to fluent reading of print would exist, though I wonder what purpose it serves to have a *school literacy* as a label in this way. If learning to read and write print provides the tools needed so that one can engage in the “range of purposes and attain personal benefits in ways that are shaped by cultural contexts and language structures,” as the definition of *literacy practices* states, then what is *school literacy*, really? In my idealized version of school, the purpose for doing anything is not school itself. Thus, I wonder if we stopped referring to this

discursive formation of *school literacy* if we would begin to imagine more interesting possibilities for what happens within the classroom space.

I also want to address the use of *literacy* in the context of *early literacy*, as I mentioned in chapter 4. When I consulted the ILA's Literacy Glossary, a definition for *early literacy* was not offered, instead, the term *emergent literacy* is used to describe the same concept. The definition reads:

Early reading and writing behaviors (e.g., scribble writing and pretend reading), knowledge (e.g., a book is a source of a story or information), and attitudes (e.g., question asking about neighborhood signs) are demonstrated by individuals as precursors of conventional literacy. The term is often used to characterize those aspects of literacy that develop without any formal instruction but rather through a stimulating environment. The concept reflects an appreciation for the notion that literacy development begins well before formal instruction. (n.d.)

I appreciate the emphasis that emergent literacy begins before formal instruction and that a stimulating environment is the mode of instruction, as it were. In general, I find that the use of literacy across all three of these definitions can be confusing, and my recommendation for reconstructing the idea of an expansive idea of elementary literacy within the classroom space is that all stakeholders make a concerted effort to be careful in the use of the term *literacy*, toward being as specific as possible in all contexts. For this reason, I believe the path towards reconstructing *literacy* expansively will necessarily be a collaborative endeavor taken up by teacher educators and researchers, teachers—both pre- and in-service—who are invited to imagine the

possibilities for embracing literacy in ways previously foreclosed by restrictive discourse. The media, society at large, and policymakers will support this change, too, as they pick up this discourse from those closest to the school space.

As education researchers, teacher educators, and elementary teachers engage in dialogue about students, it will be essential to make careful choices about language so as not to conflate *reading* with *literacy* or limit the possibilities when it comes to the bounds of literacy. Making linguistic choices in conversations with others, in research publications, and in classrooms of all levels to unsettle the simple view that literacy begins and ends with reading will drive the transformative change.

I saw an excellent example of how this can look in Hoffman et al.'s (2020) piece critiquing the way science of reading has been used to “silence the voices of literacy teacher educators and teachers” (p. S255). They explicitly named a challenge they faced in word choice regarding *reading* and *literacy*, noting the field has expanded to embrace *literacy* as its professional space to reflect the interactive nature of language processes (p. S256). I want to reiterate that I think being even more specific with *literacy* is possible by stating *print literacies* or *oral and print literacies* and so on, but the idea is there, and I applaud this effort and encourage more of this attention to word choice.

Literacy Instruction Informed by Evidence; Implemented by Agentic, Trusted

Teachers

School-based leaders / Teacher educators & researchers / Teachers → Families →

Media → Policymakers

In reconstructing the idea of *literacy instruction*, what is most important is to reframe instruction so that it is no longer positioned as context-neutral or able to be implemented mechanically by a *well-trained* teacher using a scripted curriculum. This requires two discursive moves. First, there must be attention to the meanings of and distinctions between key concepts. Second, teachers must be positioned as knowledgeable and capable of making informed decisions based on the unique needs of their particular students.

To the first point, as I mentioned above, Petscher and colleagues (2020) make an important distinction between instructional practices in reading that are *evidence-informed* and those that are *evidence-based*. The former are those that are “grounded in quality research—but have not been subjected to direct scientific evaluation” (p. S272). There are not many classroom instructional practices that are strictly evidence-based because it is extremely difficult to do experimental or quasi-experimental research in the classroom for a variety of reasons, including the ethical questions involved in withholding from a control group an intervention that may benefit a group of students and the incredibly complex intersecting factors that students bring to the table that are difficult, if not impossible, to isolate as variables when determining causal effects. Thus, (and this is a simplified description for purposes of my argument not meant to minimize the range of research within the field) there are experiments that have been done in laboratories by (primarily) cognitive scientists that are considered *evidence-based* that contribute to understandings about what happens to the brain during the processes involved with learning to read (this is part of the science of reading) and there are instructional practices that are *informed* by this evidence that

education researchers take into classrooms and test with formative studies or qualitative methods (this is part of the science of reading instruction; Shanahan, 2020; Tierney & Pearson, 2021).

The problem with the current discursive formation of *the science of reading* within the popular discourse is that those most responsible for its rapid dissemination do not appear to recognize the distinction between either *evidence-based* and *evidence-informed* nor *the science of reading* and *the science of reading instruction* (Petscher et al., 2020; Shanahan, 2020). This is incredibly consequential to the rules of formation that have led to the construction of literacy instruction within the discourse of the READ Act policy in the macropolicy and local media spaces.

In order to reconstruct a discourse of elementary literacy in which instruction is imagined as implemented by agentic teachers using their professional judgment to enact practices informed—but not dictated—by evidence, those in positions of power above teachers will need to learn the distinctions between *evidence-based* and *evidence-informed* and *the science of reading* and *the science of reading instruction*.

This is not going to be an easy task, as the excerpt below, taken from Emily Hanford's (2023) final episode of her audio documentary series *Sold a Story* shows. The episode, "The Impact" has Hanford reflecting on the impact of the six main episodes of the series. At the end she makes this statement about the term *the science of reading*, expressing concern about how the public may distill the idea down to just phonics:

We've been using the term, in this conversation today, the "science of reading."
And I think there's a lot of people who are starting to become like, sort of

suspicious of that phrase. Like it's getting used all the time. It's sort of the new phrase, “the science of reading.” What is it? And I think there's a good answer. *It's a big body of research that's been conducted over decades in labs and in classrooms all over the world, about reading and how it works and how kids learn to do it and why kids struggle. That's really what the science of reading is.* But it's become kind of a shorthand and I hear people referring to it like it's a curriculum or an approach. You know, I think there's a lot of misunderstanding about that term. And I was just thinking about it the other day, like why do I use that term? And I realized that one of the reasons I use the term the “science of reading” is because I don't want to use the word “phonics.” Because I think a lot of times, this does get reduced down to just phonics. And we know that learning how to read is about much more than phonics. So when I use the term “science of reading,” what I'm often trying to do, I think, is gesture towards something larger (2023, emphasis mine).

I searched the transcripts for the six main episodes of *Sold a Story*, along with the two bonus episodes, “Your Words” and “The Impact,” for the word root *phon*, along with the terms *literacy* and *oral* (for any reference to oral language development) and two other roots, *decod* and *compreh*. The results are only interesting for the roots *phon* and *compreh*. In the eight transcripts, there were 48 instances of the root *phon* and five of the root *compreh*. Additionally, I looked on The *Hechinger Report*'s website, an education news source that states its mission to “cover inequality and innovation in education with in-depth journalism that uses research, data and stories from classrooms and campuses to show the public how education can be improved and why

it matters” (“About,” 2024), and to which Hanford is a contributor. Of the 17 articles published between 2011 and 2024 listed on her contributor’s page, only one of them names a specific aspect of reading instruction in the title, “Kids Struggle to Read When Schools Leave Phonics Out” (Hanford, 2018). I offer these specifics to illustrate the lack of self-awareness that seems pervasive within the media discourse around the science of reading. While I do not believe that Hanford has malicious intent in her discursive positioning of phonics in relation to other components of reading instruction, her statement in “The Impact” episode of her series belies the work she has done to construct the very condition she is concerned about. As I will elaborate at the end of this section, I believe that school-based leaders, teacher educators and researchers and teachers themselves should take the lead for discursive reconstruction in this area, and though I do not think they will have significant direct impact on voices in the media like Hanford, I do think their understanding of and advocacy for these concepts will support the school community to filter out the noise created by uninformed media reports. In fact, scholarship is beginning to emerge from teacher educators committed to resisting simplistic views of the science of reading discourse, instead taking proactive stances toward understanding how policy narratives may influence teachers both in the field and in the university (Cox & Johns-O’Leary, 2024; Hoffman et al., 2020).

Where school-based leaders do have considerable power (though I do recognize the oversight structures within districts varies considerably and thus, like anything within school systems, leaders will face differing levels of autonomy) is in (re)establishing or (re)affirming teachers as agentic instructional decision-makers

within their classrooms. For too long teachers have been positioned within neoliberal discourses as “unknowing, unempowered, and lacking in both the knowledge and the resources to do their job well” (Gabriel, 2020, p. 12). Each of the other elements of discursive reconstruction, to some extent, depends on teacher agency and productive power. The current normative construction of reading instruction as implementation of a so-called evidence-based curriculum with fidelity regardless of what is happening with students is fundamentally inequitable and inhumane. No two classrooms are the same, and it is never permissible to implement a curriculum as though they are.

Reconstructing the idea of literacy instruction includes embracing the expansive view of literacy I discussed above, along with viewing literacy instruction as a space informed by evidence but directed by teachers as professionals capable of making decisions based on the needs of their unique students. To realize that reconstructed view, I believe the discursive formations, and related material changes, must come from school-based leaders, teacher educators and researchers, and teachers working collaboratively at the front end of this change. The discourse in the popular media—nationally and locally—has positioned teachers as lacking the knowledge necessary to teach children how to read, so the next step in reconstructing teachers as capable decision makers will need to be families and communities who schools will need to work with to gain back trust in teachers. As families and society adopt a discourse of teachers as knowledgeable, this can begin to influence the media and policymakers, who once again will be on the tail end of this reconstruction.

Students' Knowledge, Lived Experiences, and Identities Meaningfully Centered

Families / Students / Teacher candidates / Teachers / Teacher educators & researchers

→ School-based leaders → Society / Media → Policymakers

Teachers as agentic decision makers is a necessary condition for the reconstruction of students as central to their literacy learning experiences, rather than the current construction of students as passive recipients of pre-packaged instruction and producers of test scores.

The epistemological favoritism perpetuated by the federal government through the Reading Excellence Act (1998), NCLB, What Works Clearinghouse, Race to the Top, ESSA, and the READ Act and science of reading discourse that constructs empirical studies and cognitive sciences as *the* authoritative voices on reading science has cast a long shadow on the field. The myopic scope of research comprising what counts as the sanctioned science of reading has excluded a large body of research from other fields, such as sociology and education, often using qualitative methods, which demonstrates promising practices for effective instruction in reading and other literacy practices for minoritized students (Milner, 2020). Jensen and Edwards (2023) argue the moral imperative for teaching Black and other minoritized children to read successfully. Their argument for effective and meaningful reading instruction as requiring both “communal and just interactions in the classroom that are connected to what Black and other minoritized students know, do, and identify with in their everyday lives,” (p. 407). When reading instruction is constructed in the discourse as context-neutral, students' unique identities and interactions with the world around them are minimized, resulting in messages that they are insignificant to their own

learning experiences. Aside from the fact that teaching students as though they were interchangeable with any other students is dehumanizing, this is not a sound approach to learning from an evidence-based perspective, either. Students who are not personally connected to what they are learning are less motivated.

Sims Bishop (1990) wrote the oft-cited piece “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” to decry the limited number of children’s books featuring nonwhite and explain why it is important for children engage with texts that are both mirrors—reflective of their own lived experiences—and windows—providing insight into the experiences of those who are different than you. When curricula are pre-packaged and delivered to a group of students as though they are just like any other, the idea of having intentional interactions with text vanishes. Students come to internalize reading as a task to complete without agency and miss out on Sims Bishop’s (1990) point altogether.

Scholars have shown through a range of studies that readers of all ages benefit from the intentional aspects of selecting text. Milner (2020) describes his extensive observational studies of Black middle and high school students that have revealed Black students are motivated to read when they are “introduced, encouraged, and/or allowed to read texts that are meaningful to them, resonate with their experiences and worldview, and get them excited about finding meaning from and through the storylines” (p. S251). Similarly, in her survey of Black women readers of science fiction, Toliver (2020) found the respondents “consistently mentioned the need for Black, Brown, queer, and female representation in characters and authorship” (p. 327). Even if there are texts in a commercial curriculum that include representations of

characters that share experiences or traits with students in a classroom—as undoubtedly there will be—the use of scripted curricula limits the students’ access to aspects of literate identities that enrich the communal and connected, as Jensen and Edwards (2023) advocate for.

To reconstruct the way students are positioned within elementary literacy, families and students themselves might take the lead. For families that are part of school communities where they are valued as knowledge producers already, this will be more readily available. I recognize the power dynamics that many minoritized families are subject to within formal school spaces, however, so discursive reconstructions through alternative spaces outside of school, which are already occurring, particularly with older students, is an avenue to begin this process. Teacher candidates who are working in schools as student teachers, along with teachers and teacher educators and researchers are all included at the front end of this reconstruction, as well. I have found that many of the preservice teachers I have taught are eager to consider ways to center students’ existing literacies and working with preservice teachers to think about what it looks like to be intentional about the discourse used in and around schools that centers children’s literate identities would be an interesting and exciting way to work on this aspect of reconstruction. School-based leaders are important to recruit into the discursive project, as they would need to have a vision for the school that supports centering students in this way. If positioning teachers as agentic decision makers is already part of the circulating discourse, considering how to incorporate children’s identities into the discursive formations used in school-produced communications would not be too much of a stretch. Society,

media, and policymakers would, once again, follow as influenced by the work happening at the schools.

Recognize Complexity and Moment to Moment Shifting of Teacher Identity

Teacher educators & Researchers → Teachers → School-based leaders

The final call for reconstruction stems from what I have learned from working with Samantha. Elements of my study's design have contributed to what I believe to be a significant insight into how teacher identity formation should be reconstructed discursively in order to more productively engage teachers working in conditions constrained by neoliberal logics and misguided applications of tools (i.e., the Benchmark curriculum) as policy solutions.

Engaging the following analytical tools has supported the preliminary stages of developing a novel approach to teacher and researcher collaborative identity work:

1. A CDA protocol largely based on Fairclough (1991)
2. Clarke's (2009) model of teacher identity formation
3. Erickson's (2004) microethnography
4. A queer lens, including aspects of Kumashiro's antioppressive pedagogy

Above, I examined each of Samantha's four aspects of teacher identity, revealing what I believe to be Samantha's emotional and analytical connections to her work; the competing authority sources she subscribes to that leave her conflicted about student test scores; the investment she makes to bring social justice work to her teaching, particularly topics related to LGBTQ+ and antiracism; and her ultimate goal for teaching of seeing her students as learners. While I do believe these to be critical aspects of Samantha's teacher identity, Erickson's (2004) microethnography helps me

understand how it is possible to discursively move in and out of these facets of identity from moment to moment. Erickson describes how individuals bring many aspects of social identity to interactions:

These attributes [of identity] are located on various dimensions of identification. Which particular aspects of identity—or particular combinations of them—will become salient within a given encounter is something that interlocutors point to behaviorally during the course of their interaction together *and that others ratify in their reactions to the speaker of the moment*. At one moment some attributes may be made relevant and salient and at other moments some others may become salient, but the full multiplicity of aspects of social identity rarely become salient simultaneously in a single social encounter. (p. 149, emphasis mine)

As Samantha and I engaged in conversations, she and I both subconsciously ratified facets of each other's identities through our verbal and nonverbal cues. There are times in the recordings where I laugh in response to something Samantha says, and the way Samantha perceives that response influences whether she will continue to highlight the aspect of her identity featured in her previous utterance. In this way, each moment in our interaction is a constant adjustment in what Erickson refers to as our performed or situated social identity (p. 150). This is not to say that anything is inauthentic about what we are putting forth. Rather, it is a framework that suggests the impossibility of knowing fully the interlocuter in social interaction. Thus, when I say that an aspect of Samantha's authority source within her teacher identity is a belief that MAP test scores hold very little value as they do not show what her students truly know, I believe this

to be a true statement because we have talked about it. When I go into her classroom, and the students are taking the MAPs test and Samantha seems stressed out and disappointed by each student's score as they finish, I also believe that, because she is performing multiple aspects of her social identity. Clarke's (2009) model of teacher identity helps me see that she has competing authority sources telling her both that the test scores don't matter and that they are highly consequential, and Erickson's (2004) microethnography supports my understanding that Samantha, like all social actors, brings forth these competing aspects of her identity at various times based on her perceptions of the moment.

What I believe this analysis and framing offers to reconstructing the idea of *elementary literacy teacher* is a discursive formation of a much more complex and shifting teacher identity that cannot be treated as a linearly developing practitioner who can be expected to resist the constraints of neoliberal policies by tapping into a sense of moral imperative or by cultivating a particular disposition. While I have immense respect for the work of Jensen and Edwards (2023) who frame their argument for teaching reading equitably with an appropriate urgency and within a sense of morality I do not disagree with philosophically, in offering three principles for this work, they put forth teacher disposition as the first. Significantly, they name the idea that dispositions are not fixed traits and must be cultivated, practiced, developed. While this is true, what I find missing in much talk about teacher disposition and stance toward resistance is this idea of moment-to-moment fluctuation that Erickson (2004) theorizes. Based on my work with Samantha, my personal experience as a teacher, and my engagement with Erickson and Clarke, I do not believe it is the case

that teachers are able to adopt a stance toward teaching equitably and then enact it consistently from that point. To be fair to Jensen and Edwards (2023)—and many other scholars who put forth this idealistic perspective—they acknowledge that the challenges to enacting the moral rewards of teaching “are systemic and entrenched” (p. 413). However, this acknowledgement does little to engage with the realities teachers like Samantha face when the aspects of their teacher identity are misaligned, and they struggle to access even mildly satisfactory interventions against a system that discursively portrays both them and their students as failures.

So, what then? Discursively reconstructing teachers as having complex identities does not seem to do too much to move the antioppressive education project forward. This is where poststructuralism and the partiality that Kumashiro (2002) brings to his idea of antioppressive pedagogy comes into play. There is no certain way to reconstruct a teacher who can resist the neoliberal policy restrictions experienced under the READ Act policy or related science of reading legislation. Just like students, teachers are unique in their identities and their subjectivities. In fact, Kumashiro would argue that the very nature of a poststructurally-based, queer theory-informed antioppressive education “needs to refuse to be a panacea, and those who propose antioppressive approaches need to refuse to speak as the authoritative voice” (p. 202). Each teacher’s understanding of how they are or are not restricted will be different from the next. The important work for teacher educators and researchers is understanding this and recognizing the affordances of each teacher’s identity. Clarke (2009) sees his model as offering teachers a chance to engage in self-reflection as a way to think critically about reconstructing an identity with a “critical awareness of the

limits that condition us and the ways in which they constrain and enable what we can do” (p. 195). Erickson (2004), similarly recognizes the paradox between the completely unique locally-created talk and the influences outside of such talk that shape it as holding “a continual potential for innovation in the local conduct of discourse in everyday life—an innovation which, in some circumstances of linkage with broader-spanned processes, becomes part of a groundswell of influence toward social change” (p. 197). Taken together, these ideas demand attention to teachers as complex socially-situated beings with multifaceted identities that shift moment to moment in ways that, when analyzed have the potential to reveal powerful insights that may suggest paths for local acts of resistance that will be meaningful for teachers and their students and may lead toward a larger change. Though I would caution against seeking to move work like this towards generalizable applications, accumulating a collection of discourse analysis-based identity formations from teachers across contexts will provide insight into how teachers are making sense of the discourse surrounding policies like the READ Act and the accompanying discourse of the science of reading.

Recommendations

While the above reconstructions of elementary literacy discourse serve an important function in creating a vibrant reality of lived literate lives for children and teachers both in and out of school, other steps can, and must, be taken to disentangle from the “complex web of historically embedded inequities that continue to shape the construction, rollout, and consequences of education policy” (Conchas et al., 2022, title page, para. 2) that this study makes painstakingly visible. In this section, I put

forth three recommendations informed by the theoretical framings and findings of this study that various stakeholders, including education researchers and scholars, teachers, community members, and students, can take to impact change.

Take Political Action at All Levels

As I completed the analysis for this study, I was initially left with little hope that policymakers at the macro level could or would do much to make changes to the harmful policies they have enacted related to elementary literacy (reading). My analysis demonstrates fundamental misunderstanding of literacy, students, and teachers on the part of legislators and board of education members in ways that do not portend positive policy any time soon. Looking across the study data, however, there is reason for optimism with a call to action. The policymakers in this analysis did not appear to act out of malice but rather from a place of entrenched neoliberal beliefs as embodied in discourse that require the kind of unsettling advocated for by critical poststructural theories of discourse and queer moves that reject the sedimentation of categories. This, however, is not a natural process, and the destabilizing action must come from those of us concerned enough to push back against what has been taken for granted in these policies for so long.

Thus, the call to action involves a political effort to contact policymakers at every level, including school administrators, and begin to unsettle the “common sense knowledge” that has been positioned as fact within the early literacy (reading) policy discourse that is currently circulating. Some examples of what this could look like include scheduling a meeting with your local state board of education member to talk about concerns about policies requiring schools to purchase specific curricula and

what that really means, writing an op-ed to *The Colorado Sun* to challenge how the idea of “The Science of Reading” is being taken up in publications and popular discourse—being careful to point out the difference between a science of reading and a science of reading instruction, or preparing questions for the school administrator before sitting in your child’s classroom during a literacy block to understand how literacy is being taught. Teachers and students can get involved by organizing a field trip to the state capital to talk to legislators about their lived experiences with the new READ Act policies—or even better invite the legislators to the classroom! Taking political action can feel daunting and like it makes little difference, but my analysis of the way the local media has been marshalled behind SOR discourse shows that reconstructed discourse of elementary literacy as a broad and liberating social practice could have power if enough people get behind the movement.

Hold the Media Accountable

My analysis of the discourse circulating around the Colorado READ Act demonstrates that the language used at the macropolicy level and within the local media realm overlaps significantly. While there are times when it may be appropriate for the local media to echo the language of state education policy and policymakers, such as when reporting directly on policy debates and newly passed legislation, to find scarce diversion from the party line, as it were, within the local media reporting is concerning when the community of stakeholders including parents, teachers, and voters who elect the policymakers rely on reporters to provide information clearly and from a range of diverse perspectives. My second recommendation is for literacy and education researchers and teachers to work together to hold local media sources and

individual reporters accountable for their reporting choices. This recommendation could take the form of reaching out directly to news organizations or reporters with specific feedback after articles have been published to provide additional context, clarification, or corrections. An example of where this could have been useful related to the data set for this study would be contacting Ann Schmike regarding her “investigative” coverage of schools’ and districts’ curriculum choices, which I analyzed in chapter 5, to provide her with constructive feedback about the way her word choice and tone may have been perceived and the consequences of such a decision on how the general public views schools. Another tactic within this recommendation might be to invite local reporters to a critical discourse analysis course offered at a university where the class collaboratively analyzes an article related to the READ Act policy and then asks the reporter for their reaction and feedback after engaging in the process along with the students. Further, I recommend school of education faculty and classroom teachers reach out proactively to local media outlets to establish collaborative relationships whereby these education experts offer themselves as a source for future reporting and make suggestions for additional sources the reporters might consider consulting (i.e., academic journals, researchers, etc.) when working on future stories.

Perform Disruptive and Resistant Literacy Practices

One of the most powerful moves of resistance against the dominance of heteronormativity in queer theory’s lineage is Judith Butler’s idea of gender performativity (2006). Butler persuasively argues for a reading of heteronormative, binary gender categories as constructed, only legible in society through performances

of behaviors and characteristics defined as “male” or “female” through sedimented cultural norms. As such, these categories are subject to reexamination through destabilizing performances that first draw attention to the socially-constructed and fictional nature of the categories themselves before constructing new categories, or preferably reimagining possibilities beyond categorization. Significantly, Butler’s idea of performativity is not meant to connote playfulness or lack of sincerity but rather echoes Foucault’s understanding of how power and subjectivity work together to create conditions of control, which “may be more *contingent, recent* and *modifiable* than we think” (Gordon, 1991, p. 48, emphasis mine). That is, Foucault’s idea of governmentality (1988) reminds us that the discourses around us—categories of gender for Butler and concepts related to elementary literacy in the context of this study—operate with power when they seem *natural* or part of a *commonsense truth*. When, as Butler’s idea of performativity demands, we as elementary literacy educators begin to see neoliberal literacy practices such as those enacted through the READ Act as one version of—one way to perform—elementary literacy practices, we are able to see that there is no one *true* performance of elementary literacy and we can begin to unsettle the sedimented view of elementary literacy practices that has had a hold on classrooms and discourse for too long. I see performing productively disruptive and resistant literacy practices in the elementary literacy classroom as a way to shake the stubbornly entrenched *commonsense* understandings of elementary literacy. What I believe is useful about this recommendation is that it does not require teachers to fully reject the curricula they are mandated to teach, as Samantha is at King, but rather to perform resistant practices where possible. Viewing the enactment of literacy

instruction as a performance made up of “attributes and acts” (Butler, 2006, p. 192), rather than as a complete unit that one must adopt in an all or nothing manner allows teachers to find moments of resistance where they are able to perform literacy that aligns with their values and beliefs and meets the needs of their students. I believe teachers who try on such performances of literacy resistance will find it to be a self-perpetuating endeavor, as they are likely to find moments of joy and reconnection with the moral rewards of teaching that have been elusive in the neoliberal accountability era (Jensen & Edwards, 2023; Santoro, 2011), which will motivate them to engage in more resistant practices in an ever-growing cycle. These practices, over time and with intention, will begin to enter into the discourse as legitimized and valued elementary literacy practices, displacing those valorized by neoliberal discourse and policy.

Within the rapidly changing landscape of literacy policy and practice where an evolving understanding of the complexities of multiple ways of knowing and being within a culturally and linguistically diverse society seems to be diverging from an ever-more restrictive educational policy context seeking to limit what counts as literacy and what sanctioned instruction looks like, there is an urgent need for both richly layered and nuanced methodological and theoretical approaches to literacy research and concrete, immediate action by stakeholders who recognize that each moment in the literate lives of children in and out of the classroom is a “horizon imbued with potentiality” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). This study demonstrates the ways CDA and the productively disruptive lenses of antioppressive and queer theories can support liberatory reconstructions of concepts and actors in a refusal of the limits of

discursive formations that demand certainty, instead reaching out towards the unknowability of yet to be imagined literacies beyond the page.

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Appendix A

Questions for Each Stage of Fairclough's Process for Critical Discourse Analysis

The following are the questions for each stage of Fairclough's (2001) approach to CDA.

Stage One: Description

A. Vocabulary

1. What experiential values do words have?

What classification schemes are drawn upon?

Are there words which are ideologically contested?

Is there rewording or overwording? What ideologically significant meaning relations are there between words?

2. *What relational values do words have?*

Are there euphemistic expressions?

Are there markedly formal or informal words?

3. What expressive values do words have?

4. What metaphors are used?

B. Grammar

5. What experiential values do grammatical features have?

What types of process and participants predominate?

Is agency unclear?

Are processes what they seem?

Are nominalizations used?

Are sentences active or passive?

Are sentences positive or negative?

6. What relational values do grammatical features have?

What modes are used?

Are there important features of relational modality?

Are the pronouns we and you used and if so, how?

7. What expressive values do grammatical features have?

Are there important features of expressive modality?

8. *How are (simple) sentences linked together?*

What logical connectors are used?

Are complex sentences characterized by coordination or/ subordination?

What means are used for referring inside and outside the text?

C. Textual structures

9. *What interactional conventions are used?*

Are there ways in which one participant controls the turns of others?

10. What larger scale structures does the text have?

Stage Two: Interpretation

1. Context: what interpretation(s) are participants giving to the situational and intertextual contexts?

2. Discourse type(s): what discourse type(s) are being drawn upon (hence what rules, systems or principles of phonology, grammar, sentence cohesion, vocabulary, semantics and pragmatics; and what schemata, frames and scripts)?
3. Difference and change: are answers to questions 1 and 2 different for different participants? And do they change during the course of the interaction?

Stage Three: Evaluation

1. Social determinants: what power relations at situational, institutional and societal levels help shape this discourse?
2. Ideologies: what elements of MR which are drawn upon have an ideological character?
3. Effects: how is this discourse positioned in relation to struggles at the situational, institutional and societal levels? Are these struggles overt or covert? Is the discourse normative with respect to MR or creative? Does it contribute to sustaining existing power relations, or transforming them?

Appendix B

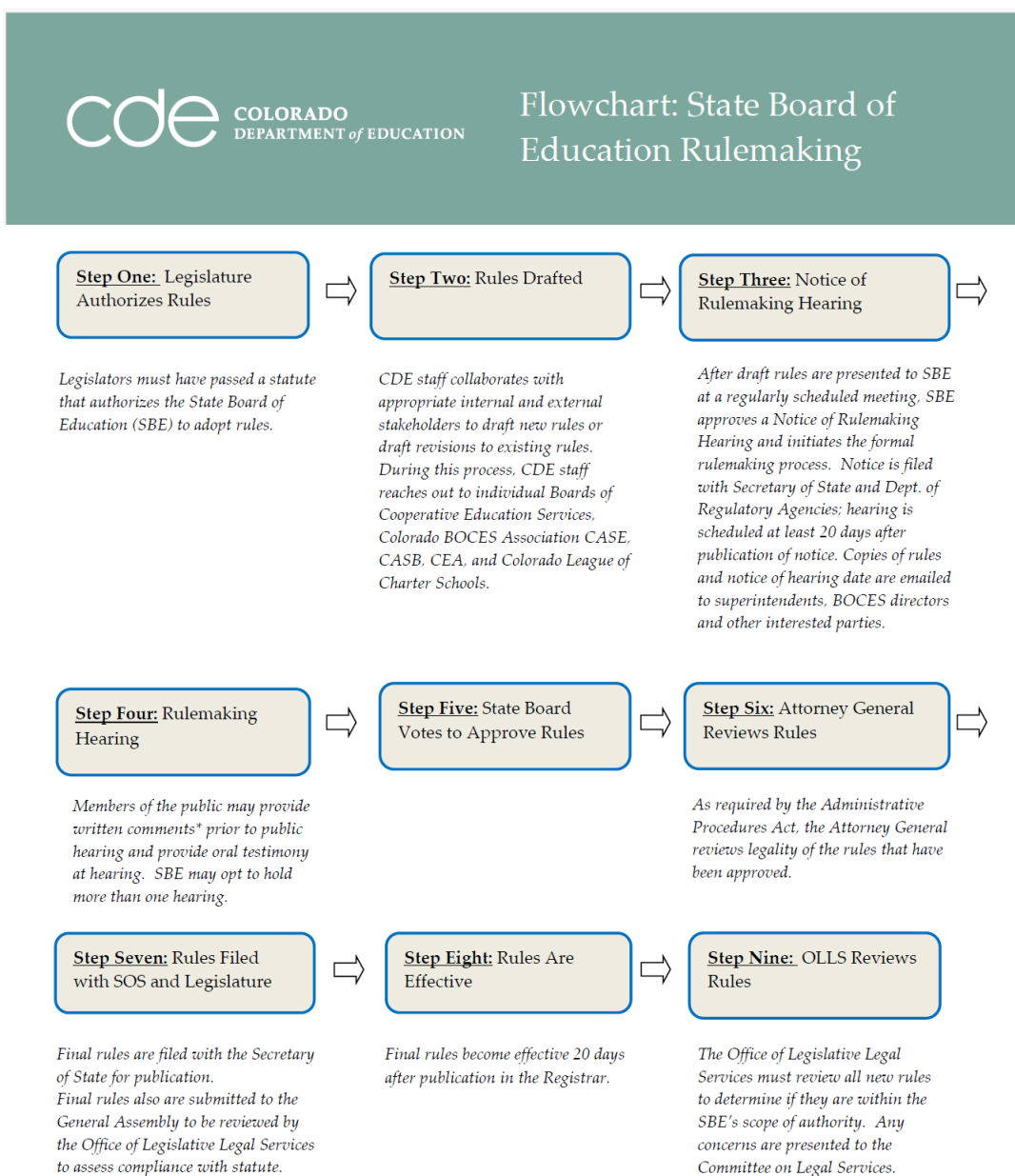
Rating	Color	Meaning
Performance	Green	Schools are meeting expectations on the majority of performance metrics
Improvement	Yellow	These schools are identified as lower performing. They may be meeting expectations on some performance metrics, but they are not meeting or are only approaching expectations on many.
Priority Improvement	Orange	These schools are identified as low performing. They are not meeting or are only approaching expectations on most performance metrics. The state will provide support and oversight to these schools until they improve.
Turnaround	Red	These schools are identified as among the lowest performing schools in the state. They are not meeting or are only approaching expectations on most performance metrics. The state will provide support and oversight to these schools until they improve.

Appendix B. Meaning of the Colorado School Performance Framework (SPF) ratings

Appendix C

Education Legislation Rulemaking Process

The flowchart below was published as a PDF in 2019 by the Colorado Department of Education to show the distinct roles played by the Colorado General Assembly, the State Board of Education, and the Colorado Department of Education in generating the rules for enacting education policy in Colorado.



Appendix D

Macropolitical Body	Source Name	Author or Producer (Date)	Source Type
Colorado General Assembly	Colorado House Bill 12-1238 The Colorado READ Act	Colorado General Assembly (2012, rev. 201, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022)	Legislative text
Colorado General Assembly	Issue Brief 19-13 The Colorado READ-Act	Abram, J. (Oct 2019)	Policy summary
Colorado General Assembly	2023 Annual Report on the Colorado READ Act	Colorado Department of Education (2023)	Policy report
Colorado Department of Education	Colorado READ Act Fact Sheet	Colorado Department of Education (2017)	PDF
Colorado Department of Education	READ Act Update: Senate Bill 19-199	Colorado Department of Education (2019)	PDF

Macropolitical Body	Source Name	Author or Producer (Date)	Source Type
Colorado Department of Education	Selecting an Instructional Program	Laura Lay; Colorado Department of Education's Literacy Team (2021)	PowerPoint
Colorado Department of Education	2021-22 READ Act Instructional Programming Review Process	Colorado Department of Education (Updated Mar 22, 2022)	Website (printed to PDF for analysis)
Colorado Department of Education	READ Act Advisory List Submissions Part II - Program Review Core Instructional Programming 2021-22 Rubric	Author unknown (2020)	Excel workbook
Colorado Department of Education	READ Act FAQs	Colorado Department of Education 2023	Website (printed to PDF for analysis)
Colorado Department of Education	Literacy Curriculum Transparency	Colorado Department of Education (updated Jan 19, 2024)	Website (printed to PDF for analysis)
Colorado State Board of Education	Update on the Colorado READ Act Instructional Programming and Professional Development Review Process	Colsmán, M., & Cobb, F. (Aug 13, 2020)	PowerPoint slides in support of State Board of Education meeting (in PDF format)

Macropolitical Body	Source Name	Author or Producer (Date)	Source Type
Colorado State Board of Education	Transcript: State Board of Education meeting	Colorado State Board of Education members and Colzman, M., Ph.D., Associate Commissioner for Student Learning, & Cobb, F., Ph.D., Executive Director, Teaching and Learning Unit, CDE (Aug 13, 2020)	Typed transcription of audiovisual recording
Colorado State Board of Education	Independent Evaluation of the Colorado READ Act: Year 3 Findings	Grogan, K., & Friedrich, L., WestEd (Sep 14, 2023)	PowerPoint slides in support of State Board of Education meeting (in PDF format)
Colorado State Board of Education	Transcript: State Board of Education meeting	Colorado State Board of Education members; Friedrich, L., & Grogan, K., WestEd; Cobb, F., Ph.D., Executive Director, Teaching and Learning Unit, CDE (Sep 14, 2023)	Typed transcription of audiovisual recording
District Board of Education	Board of Education Work Study Session	Don & District instructional team (Apr 2021)	PowerPoint slides (in PDF format)

Macropolitical Body	Source Name	Author or Producer (Date)	Source Type
District Board of Education	Elementary Core Reading Resource Update	Author unknown (Sep 2021)	PDF
District Board of Education	Transcript: District Board of Education meeting	District Board of Education members; Don, Chief Academic Officer (Sep 2021)	Typed transcription of audiovisual recording
District Board of Education	Board of Education K-5 Reading Update	Author unknown (likely Don) (Jan 2022)	PowerPoint slides in support of District Board of Education meeting (in PDF format)
District Board of Education	Transcript: District Board of Education meeting	District Board of Education members; Don, (Jan 2022)	Typed transcription of audiovisual recording
District Board of Education	6230 Instructional Materials Committee Recommendations	Author unknown (Apr 2022)	PowerPoint slides in support of District Board of Education meeting (in PDF format)
District Board of Education	Transcript: District Board of Education meeting	District Board of Education members; literacy team (Apr 2022)	Typed transcription of audiovisual recording

Macropolitical Body	Source Name	Author or Producer (Date)	Source Type
District Board of Education	Elementary Literacy Resource Adoption Resource Follow Up	Author unknown (May 2022)	PowerPoint slides in support of District Board of Education meeting (in PDF format)
District Board of Education	Transcript: District Board of Education meeting	District Board of Education members; Don, literacy team (May 2022)	Typed transcription of audiovisual recording

Appendix D. Summary of the data set for chapter 4 organized by macropolitical body (Colorado General Assembly, CDE, State Board of Education, District Board of Education and Instructional Leadership).

Appendix E

Complete Data Set for Chapter 5

Table E1

Chalkbeat Colorado Articles - 36 total

Date	Author(s)	Title
2011, Aug 3	Mitchell, N. & Hubbard, B.	Latest CSAP results mostly flat – again
2012, Mar 20	Engdahl, T.	Literacy bill gets final House OK
2012, May 9	Guest Columnist	Commentary: READ Act a victory for kids
2012, May 17	Engdahl, T.	Literacy bill signed into law
2012, Jul 2	EdNews Staff	Briefs: New literacy law, campaign
2014, May 6	Garcia, Nic	Colorado third-grade reading scores dip slightly
2016, Feb 25	Schimke, A.	Landmark Colorado reading law draws kudos, concerns from teachers three years in
2018, Feb 16	Asmar, M.	After criticism, Denver will change the way it rates elementary schools
2018, Aug 16	Asmar, M.	Colorado students show gains in literacy on 2018 state tests, but disparities remain
2018, Nov 13	Schimke, A.	Reading instruction is big news these days. Teachers, share your thoughts with us!
2019, Mar 8	Meltzer, E.	Frustrated with poor results, Colorado budget committee holds back \$33 million for struggling readers

Date	Author(s)	Title
2019, Mar 19	Meltzer, E.	Seeking better results, Colorado lawmakers want to tell schools how to teach reading
2019, Apr 11	Meltzer, E.	Colorado literacy bill mandating more teacher training advances
2019, Aug 15	Meltzer, E.	Most Colorado students not proficient in reading and math — but there’s some good news
2019, Nov 20	Schimke, A.	Colorado has spent hundreds of millions to help kids read. Now, it will spend up to \$5.2 million to find out why it’s not working
2020, Mar 27	Schimke, A.	Why do so many Colorado students struggle to read? Flawed curriculum is part of the problem
2020, Mar 27	Schimke, A.	Behind the story: Here’s what happened when we started asking about reading curriculum
2020, Apr 23	Schimke, A.	Colorado wants schools to use reading curriculum supported by science. Here are the ones that made the cut
2020, Jun 25	Schimke, A.	Colorado is cracking down on reading curriculum. Here’s how Denver’s made the cut
2020, Jul 8	Schimke, A.	Some Colorado educators seek to postpone fall reading assessments. State Board of Education members object
2020, Sep 25	Schimke, A.	What do Jeffco schools use to teach reading? District leaders don’t know, and neither does the public
2020, Oct 15	Schimke, A.	Many Jeffco schools use discredited curriculum to teach students how to read

Date	Author(s)	Title
2020, Oct 26	Schimke, A.	Colorado parents, here's what to ask your child's school about reading instruction
2020, Dec 14	Schimke, A.	Denver says this reading curriculum supports English learners. But the state says it's not based on science and has to go
2021, Mar 1	Schimke, A.	Colorado's rules on reading curriculum apply to Aurora, but that was news to district officials
2021, Mar 30	Schimke, A.	Nearly all Cherry Creek elementary schools use state-rejected reading curriculum. Change is coming
2021, Jul 30	Schimke, A.	6 takeaways from a \$1.5 million evaluation of Colorado's reading law
2021, Sep 10	Schimke, A.	New reading curriculum for some Jeffco schools, a step toward bigger changes
2021, Nov 15	Schimke, A.	Colorado cracks down on schools using weak reading curriculum. Advocates worry about backpedaling
2021, Dec 10	Schimke, A.	Aurora district pivots, reveals plan to drop discredited reading curriculum
2022, Jan 26	Schimke, A.	Colorado's reading curriculum crackdown advances, districts commit to change
2022, Aug 17	Meltzer, E. & Asmar, M.	CMAS results: Colorado students make gains but still below pre-pandemic levels
2022, Oct 18	Schimke, A.	How a Colorado district changed its reading curriculum to better reflect students

Date	Author(s)	Title
2022, Nov 2	Schimke, A.	A look inside Colorado's yearslong push to change how schools teach reading
2022. Dec 6	Metzler, E.	Republican Joyce Rankin resigning from Colorado State Board of Education
2023, Aug 17	Schimke, A.	Colorado 2023 CMAS results show slow academic recovery, red flags for some students

Table E2*The Denver Post Articles – 17 total*

Date	Author(s)	Title
2011, Nov 22	Robles, Y.	Listening tour looks at reading
2011, Nov 28	Grogan, B. Ingle, B., & Welsh, G.	Literacy is the key to unlocking children's potential
2012, Mar 9	Simpson, K.	Holding patterns - Legislature, schools debate usefulness of having students repeat a grade
2012, Apr 21	O'Brien, B.	Kids needs [sic] lawmakers to be bold on literacy bill
2012, May 18	Taylor, T. & Brough, K.	A big step for literacy
2012, Jun 12	Bush, J.	Colorado's READ Act challenges status quo
2013, Feb 24	Mazenko, M.	The "read" option
2013, Apr 29	Vogler, S.	Reading: The prescription for Colorado's future
2013, May 8	Torres, Z.	Reading scores remain stagnant
2013, Jun 30	YourHub	Jeffco summer school gives kinder kindergartners through third-graders a leg up on literacy
2013, Nov 17	Yettick, H.	Literacy project promising
2016, May 12	Hernandez, E.	State law gets credit for stats – K-3 students' reading deficiency is down 2.7 percent from 2013
2017, Jun 17	Schrader, M.	Let's go to the moon (and back) to close the achievement gap

Date	Author(s)	Title
2017, Nov 5	Gassman, I.	Bridge project guides youngest readers
2018, Apr 12	Wenzel, J.	“Pete the Cat” creator's latest book set to inspire Colorado kids (for free) as part of One Book 4 Colorado - Eric Litwin's "Groovy Joe: Dance Party Countdown" is available at libraries through April 23
2019, Oct 10	Anthes, K.	Reading to get new level of focus
2020, Sep 7	Denver Post	Give Joyce Rankin another term on the state Board

Table E3*The Colorado Sun Articles – 8 total*

Date	Author(s)	Title
2019, Jan 29	Osher, C.	Colorado spent \$231 million to help young children catch up on reading. But rates of kids with significant deficiencies only worsened
2019, Jan 30	Lubbers, E.	The Sunriser: How the READ Act failed, Montrose's big play for outdoor business, the Electoral College debate explained and much more
2019, Feb 8	Osher, C.	Colorado education officials failed state by botching \$231 million reading-improvement program, whistleblower lawsuit claimed
2019, Mar 17	Lines, C.	Opinion: Children need to READ and it is their right: The READ Act Challenge
2019, Mar 19	Osher, C.	Colorado lawmakers seek overhaul for troubled \$231 million program meant to help kids catch up on reading
2020, Aug 13	Breunlin, E.	Colorado students are improving in literacy — possibly to the detriment of their math skills. That's bad for the economy
2021, Jun 8	Batchelder, H.	Opinion: It's time for Colorado's teachers to "know better" about the science of reading
2023, Nov 27	Tatum, A.W.	Opinion: Number of Colorado students who aren't proficient readers is alarming, but a fix is out there

Table E4*Colorado Public Radio Articles – 4 total*

Date	Author(s)	Title
2011, Nov 17	Brundin, J.	Closing The Reading Gap
2013, Aug 14	Brundin, J.	State test scores flat, achievement gap won't close for decades
2014, Aug 14	Brundin, J.	Colo. school test scores dip slightly; achievement gap grows
2023, Sep 14	Brundin, J.	Six takeaways from the latest evaluation of Colorado's literacy law

Appendix F

Protocol for Pre-Research Interview

Protocol for Pre-Research Interview

Script: Thank you, Samantha, for embarking on this project with me. I am so excited to work and learn together. As a first step for this project, I'd like to ask you some questions about some ideas I have for our work, as well as ask you about your goals and hopes for the project. Though I will be recording our conversation and I do have some specific questions I would like to ask, I want you to be completely open with your responses and I also want you to feel comfortable declining to answer any question that I ask. Before we start, I want to make sure it's OK if I record the interview.

If participant indicates yes, then:

1. Start the Zoom or audio/video recording.
2. On the audio-player state "This is (Interviewer name) speaking with (participant first name) on (Date)."

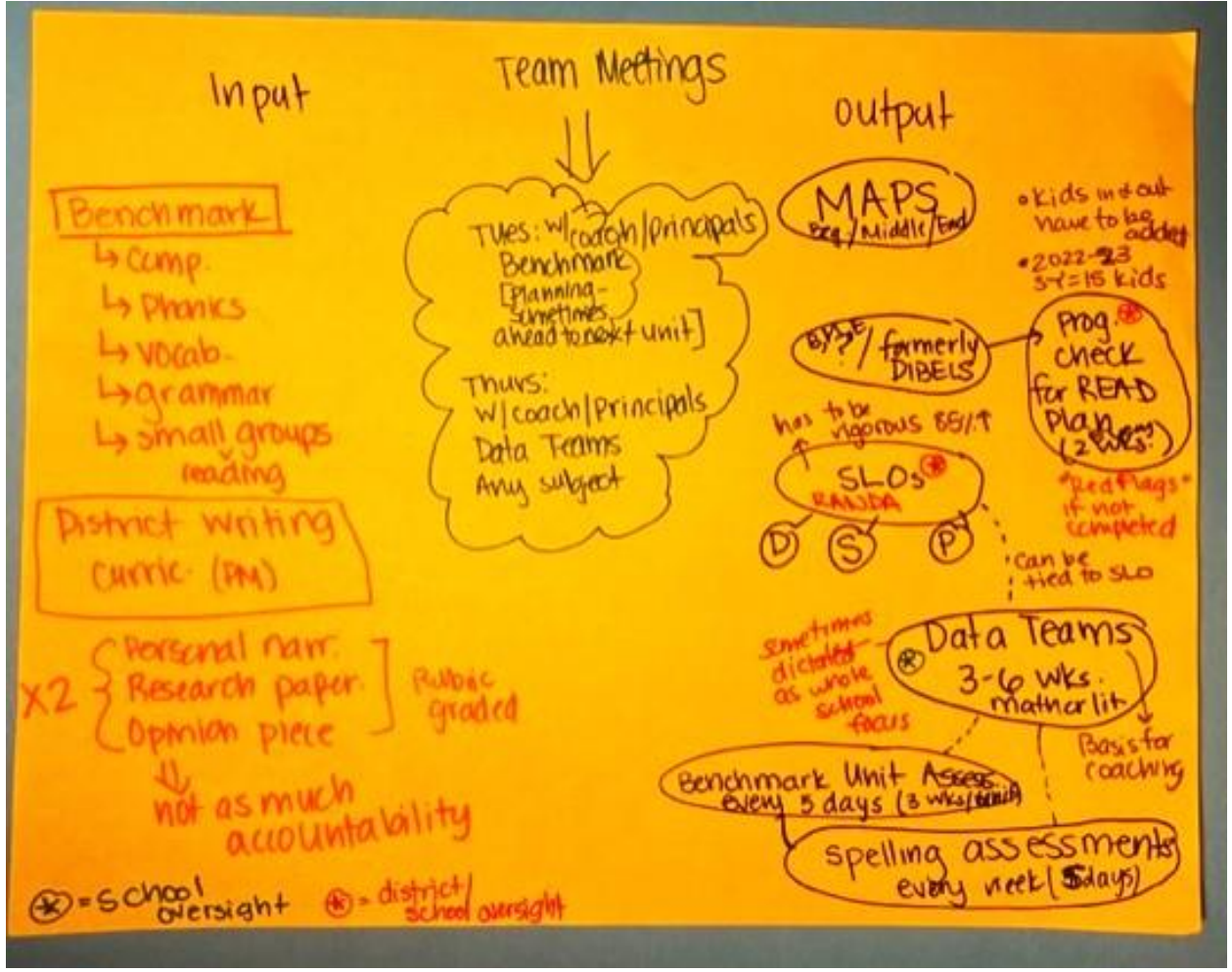
Context setting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For how many years have you been teaching? 2. How and why did you get into teaching? 3. What grade levels have you taught? 4. At which schools have you taught?
Literacy instruction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you define literacy? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Personally? b. In relation to school and instruction? c. Are these two different and why? 2. Tell me, in general, about your experience teaching literacy over the course of your career. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. How did you learn about literacy instruction? b. What curricula have you used? c. What changes have you experienced over time?

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. How do you feel about teaching literacy relative to other content areas? 4. What are some things you enjoy about teaching literacy? 5. What are some challenges you encounter when teaching literacy?
Accountability policy and practice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the current requirements at King for teaching literacy? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. To your knowledge, are these different from other schools in the district? b. How do you as a teacher learn about the requirements? 2. Are there current requirements for assessing students in literacy? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. To your knowledge, are these different from other schools in the district? b. How do you as a teacher learn about the requirements? 3. Are there consequences for you associated with teaching literacy? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. With assessing literacy? 4. Are there consequences for students associated with learning literacy? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. With assessing literacy? 5. Are there elements of literacy instruction and/or assessment that you feel unable to implement that you would like to? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Where do the restrictions come from? b. What would happen if you implemented these elements?
Goals for project	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We have an opportunity through our work together to think about how literacy instruction is talked about both in and out of the classroom. What are some questions you hope we answer during this process? 2. Based on these questions, what are some goals you have for our work together? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What do you hope you'll learn? b. How do you hope your practice is impacted?

Appendix G

Artifacts Generated with Samantha

Artifact 1: Graphic organizer showing data collection at King co-created with Samantha during July 12, 2023, meeting



Artifact 2: *Proposal accepted to AERA 2024. Samantha and I worked on this based on our engagement with the Davis and Vehabovic (2018) article.*

It has been over two decades since educational psychologist David Berliner (2002) published a commentary in *Educational Researcher* decrying the federal government's view of science as used in the then recently drafted No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (2002). In his compelling piece, Berliner argues that educational research is extraordinarily complex, requiring a range of sound methods to gather data of varied forms to inform well-reasoned debates about how to improve education. In contrast, the use of "evidence-based practices" and "scientific research" used in NCLB legislation refers to a single method, randomized experiments, which limits the types and quality of data available to understand the enormous range of contexts in which students and teachers engage in learning. Privileging randomized experiments in this way, Berliner believes, may yield research with clear findings but also significantly diminishes the possibility of fully understanding the contextual complexities of the field. Though Berliner's argument inspires as a rallying cry to educational researchers to eschew one definition of scientific research, we find it distressing that 20 years on, this same argument can be voiced in response to the proliferation of the phrase *science of reading* (SOR) in discussions about and policies influencing elementary literacy instruction. Currently, SOR dominates discussions of early literacy policy and practice at all levels of engagement (see *Reading Research Quarterly's* two special issues devoted entirely to this topic published in 2020 and 2021, respectively). The adoption of policies, programs, and practices believed to align with SOR perpetuates what Berliner (2002) wisely warned against two decades ago: context-neutral solutions to localized challenges. Such a limited view of literacy has serious consequences for

how elementary literacy classrooms reify or resist harmful practices, hindering the emancipatory possibilities of literacy. As a former elementary school literacy teacher and coach turned doctoral student (First Author) and current second-grade teacher (Second Author), we draw on lived experience to consider the implications of these policies for teachers and students and argue for a concerted effort by critical literacy scholars to adopt an expansive definition of literacy while simultaneously restoring trust in teachers, and by extension students, as knowledgeable enactors of the rich complexities of literate practices.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Sociocultural Theory

This analysis views literacy as a social practice steeped in power relationships both in and out of the classroom and is thus supported by a sociocultural stance. We recognize that speaking of a unified sociocultural theory on literacy elides important differences between socioculturally-informed perspectives of literacy such as literacy as social practice, multiliteracies, and critical theories (Perry, 2012), though all such perspectives emphasize the social and cultural elements of literacy which we value. In this light, we view literacy as a set of complex, contextual processes involving interaction between text(s) and reader(s) that is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the purposes for and social settings involved in the literate activity (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017). As we see power as being inextricably linked with ideas of literacy, particularly as it circulates within the SOR discourse, we see our work as specifically aligning with the tenets of critical literacy.

Critical Literacy

Though Rogers and O'Daniels (2015) persuasively argue that critical literacy, “resists being defined and categorized,” (p. 63), we trace critical literacy to Paulo Freire’s (2020/1970)

ideas of liberatory pedagogy. Emerging in the 1970s, these ideas provide a foundation upon which critiques of oppressive structures in schools have been built (Tierney & Pearson, 2021). Lankshear and McLaren (1993) put forth a definition of critical literacy centering practices that support engagement with multiple literacies in the real world, rather than a rote view of reading and writing as it appeared in schools (Tierney & Pearson, 2021). Crucial to our argument is critical literacy's insistence on questioning the power relations inherent in literacy practices that push educators to understand that readers' interactions with text make (im)possible the identities and voices available to them (Moje, et al., 2009). We further view critical literacy as an embodiment of culturally sustaining pedagogy, as defined by Paris (2012) as "seek[ing] to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 93).

Background Literature

In building our argument in the next section, we draw on previous research explicating two key ideas: test-centric literacy instruction and teacher resistance.

Test-Centric Literacy

In contrast to critical literacy practices rooted in students' identities, interests, and linguistic repertoires, literacy scholarship from the past 20 years points to the influence of policies and pressures associated with high-stakes standardized testing (HST) on literacy practices implemented in classrooms across grade levels (Avalos et al., 2020; Brindley & Schneider, 2002; Davis & Willson, 2015; McCarthy, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2008). Welner and Mathis (2015) have identified such curriculum-narrowing as a broad consequence of focusing obsessively on increasing test scores, as teachers feel pressure to

implement literacy practices that explicitly mirror what is expected with HST so as to “minimize the distance between what students experience in their classes and what they experience on test day” (Davis & Willson, 2015, p. 371). Such test-centric instructional practices include emphasizing tested standards, using passages formatted to look like those on the test, teaching how to annotate text correctly, teaching test-like items, and analyzing item-level test data (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017). Beyond influencing the content and structure of literacy lessons, teachers have also identified HST pressure as a factor in determining the language of instruction used with bilingual students (Palmer & Snodgrass Rangel, 2011). Based on sociocultural understandings of learning, it is easy to see that test-centric literacy practices and decisions convey troubling implicit messages to children about what constitutes literacy; the purposes for reading; the value of their identities, culture, and language repertoires; and their own sense of agency in relation to literacy practices (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017).

Teacher Resistance

Given the literature describing test-centric literacy practices and the detrimental messages students are likely to infer from such, it is unsurprising that a complimentary set of literature examines teacher response to the pressures of HST and accountability policies. Embedded within this set of research is a discussion of teachers’ ability to resist. This theme makes sense, as critical educators and researchers strive to find a path out of the test-centric paradigm that restricts the curriculum and increasingly forbids teaching about—or even mentioning—topics that recognize the humanity of all people. Though researchers continue to identify ways that critical-minded teachers denounce the realities of HST and other accountability policies (Hikida & Taylor, 2020; Leo, 2022; Mantei & Kervin, 2021; Taylor, 2019), the overwhelming message in this body of research provides an unsatisfying conclusion: it is not easy to “carve[] out spaces of

agency” (Leo, 2022). The consequences of test results carry significant weight, at times resulting in student retention, school closures, or school takeover, thus teachers weigh many factors when deciding how to prepare for HST (Hikida & Taylor, 2020). These decisions create undeniable tensions in teachers who experience a mismatch between their own identities as teachers and the structures of the schools and systems in which they teach. The emotional toll of such tensions is not inconsequential (Olitsky, 2020), as supported by research about teacher identity formation and negotiation (Santoro, 2011).

Finding a Way Out

Four years ago, when the First Author began her doctoral studies and met the Second Author, the rhetoric of the science of reading (SOR) had not yet inundated the State’s (and entire nation’s) policies and practices regarding elementary literacy. In the ensuing years, however, the State has adopted strict policies regarding “evidence-based literacy instruction” (State Senate, 2022), including requiring all districts to choose from a list of State-approved “scientifically based” reading programs (Schimke, 2022). As part of an ongoing research collaboration, the Authors have been considering the Second Author’s experiences implementing the newly-adopted literacy curriculum in her second-grade classroom. During a recent research meeting, the Authors reviewed an article defining “test-centric literacy instruction” (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017). The Second Author immediately resonated with the practices described, noting her familiarity with similar practices embedded in the new curriculum. We began to wonder what is lost when a widely-adopted reading curriculum is saturated with test-centric views of literacy that severely limit the opportunities for young readers to engage with rich texts in authentic ways? We are deeply concerned that the discourse of SOR is codifying test-centric literacy practices in a far more intractable way than what Davis and Vehabovic (2017) describe as “a tendency [for] test

preparation instruction to sneak into reading comprehension lessons that might otherwise be vibrant and engaging for young readers” (p. 579).

We have further noted that the use of this reading curriculum, including the way student data are collected and analyzed, promotes a deficit view of the diverse students in the Second Author’s classroom (this past school year a total of five home languages were represented in her class). When the students are expected to master a discrete reading standard during a lesson involving engagement with a text that is not of interest to nor yet decodable by many of the students in the classroom, what messages are students receiving about literacy and their place within what should be a joyous and edifying experience? Additionally, what messages is the Second Author receiving when she must teach this curriculum at a pace determined not by the students’ brilliant questions and their demonstration of increasingly sophisticated literacies but by the curriculum writers and district leaders’ beliefs?

In response to the conference call to *dismantle racial injustice and construct educational possibilities*, we advance a two-part agenda for critical literacy researchers calling for 1) the purposeful adoption of an expansive definition of literacy, and 2) restoring trust in teachers so that they may be responsive to the array of literate practices their students enact.

The first element of this agenda specifically asks for an expansion of what is considered *literacy*, not just *reading*. Although arguments for such an expansion are not new, the First Author is troubled by the way science of reading (SOR) discourse has coopted both the academic and popular conversations about elementary school, serving to quiet, if not silence, other aspects of literacy. The slim definition of literacy defined by SOR continues to limit the opportunities of all students, especially those who have been marginalized by the system of white supremacy shaping education in the United States (Au, 2016; Sloan, 2007). As education researchers,

teacher educators, and elementary teachers engage in dialogue about students, we must be careful about our language choices so as not to conflate *reading* with *literacy* or limit the possibilities when it comes to the bounds of literacy. While policy makers prefer “tidy views of comprehension” (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017) rather than the complex and contextual ways humans engage with language and one another, we must make linguistic choices in conversations with others, in research publications, and in classrooms of all levels to unsettle the simple view that literacy begins and ends with reading.

The second element of this call requires establishing teachers as authorities when it comes to the needs of their students. No two classrooms are the same, and it is never permissible to implement a curriculum as though they are. Much of the literature about teacher response to pressures from accountability policies calls on teachers to simply “Resist!” (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017, p. 586) and draw on “their commitments—to *be the kind of teacher they wanted to be*” (Buchanan, 2015, p.714, emphasis original). If only it were that simple. In our conversations, the Second Author has expressed just how difficult it is to balance the demands of learning a new literacy curriculum while teaching all other subjects, in addition to the myriad other demands placed on teachers. Add to this the district- and school-based mandates to teach the new curriculum without being responsive to her students, and you can begin to see why just resisting is not an option. Although not there yet, in our collaborative work the Authors strive to develop concrete ways to restore trust to elementary teachers, and we implore others to do the same, regardless of central research goals. As a community of educators sharing ideas and successes, we can and must construct an educational future where teachers are trusted and respected to respond to their unique and brilliant students. Educational possibilities that dismantle persistent

racial injustices require centering teachers' and students' full literacies stretching far beyond the science of reading.

[References removed for display purposes.]

Appendix H

CDA Protocol

This is the protocol for CDA I used to analyze the data sources for this project. Questions in **bold** are taken directly from Fairclough's (2001) approach to CDA. Questions with (ME) written after them have been created based on Erickson's (2004) microethnographic approach. Questions with asterisks (*) are meant to be used across the data set and would not be included in the analysis of a single transcript. Codes will be generated based on these questions, as well as others that emerge during the data analysis process.

1. First read: Read one time through without pausing and do not code/annotate
 - a. Questions to consider
 - i. *What are my first impressions after an initial reading of the text?*
 - ii. *What do I notice after an initial reading of the text?*
 - iii. *What am I most curious about at this point before I dig in deeper?*
2. Second read: Read with specific questions in mind and code/annotate
 - a. Questions to consider - vocabulary
 - i. ***What classification schemes are drawn upon?***
 1. What labels are used?
 2. How are binaries used in this text?
 - a. Are they present either explicitly or implicitly?
 - b. Are they reified?
 - c. Are they troubled?
 - ii. ***Are there words which are ideologically contested?***
 1. Is any language used that could have multiple meanings?
 2. Is any language used that would benefit from additional explanation?
 - iii. ***Is there rewording or overwording? What ideologically significant meaning relations are there between words?***
 1. Are there words or phrases that are explained that would otherwise be difficult to interpret?
 2. Are there words or phrases that are used to mitigate and/or change the tone of meaning? (e.g., to soften something that might be considered harsh or insensitive)
 - iv. ***Are there euphemistic expressions?***

- v. *Are there markedly formal or informal words?*
 - 1. Are there words or phrases that do not carry meaning outside of the context in which they are used?
 - vi. *What expressive values do words have?*
 - vii. *What metaphors are used?*
3. Third read: Read with specific questions in mind and code/annotate
- a. Questions to consider - grammar
 - i. *What types of process and participants predominate?*
 - ii. *Is agency unclear?*
 - 1. Are ideas talked about that have ambiguous actors? (e.g., “They say we have to do x.”)
 - iii. *Are processes what they seem?*
 - iv. *Are nominalizations used?*
 - v. *Are sentences active or passive?*
 - vi. *Are sentences positive or negative?*
 - vii. *What modes are used?*
 - viii. *Are there important features of relational modality?*
 - ix. *Are the pronouns we and you used and if so, how?*
 - x. *Are there important features of expressive modality?*
 - xi. *How are (simple) sentences linked together?*
 - xii. *What logical connectors are used?*
 - xiii. *Are complex sentences characterized by coordination or/ subordination?*
 - xiv. *What means are used for referring inside and outside the text?*
 - b. Questions to consider - text structure
 - i. *What interactional conventions are used?*
 - ii. *Are there ways in which one participant controls the turns of others?*
 - iii. *What larger scale structures does the text have?*
4. Fourth read: Read with specific questions in mind and code/annotate
- a. Questions to consider - interpretation & evaluation
 - i. *Discourse type(s): what discourse type(s) are being drawn upon (hence what rules, systems or principles of phonology, grammar, sentence cohesion, vocabulary, semantics and pragmatics; and what schemata, frames and scripts)?*
 - 1. Are there portions of text that would be difficult to understand outside of this context?
 - ii. *Social determinants: what power relations at situational, institutional and societal levels help shape this discourse?*
 - 1. What power relations at the situational level are visible?
 - 2. What power relations at the institutional level are visible?
 - 3. What power relations at the societal level are visible?

- iii. ***Ideologies: what elements of MR which are drawn upon have an ideological character?***
1. What is valued within this specific context and how are ideas/people positioned?
 2. Are there elements drawn upon that might constitute the discourse of accountability?
- iv. ***Effects: how is this discourse positioned in relation to struggles at the situational, institutional and societal levels?***
1. How does this discourse fit within struggles at the situational level?
 2. How does this discourse fit within struggles at the institutional level?
 3. How does this discourse fit within struggles at the societal level?
 - 4. Are these struggles overt or covert?**
 - 5. Is the discourse normative with respect to MR or creative? Does it contribute to sustaining existing power relations, or transforming them?**
 - a. Can the entire speech event be classified as normative or creative, or are there elements of both normative and creative discourse with respect to the discourse of accountability? (ME)
 - b. If yes to the second question, when, how and/or why do these movements in and out of normative and creative discourse occur? (ME)
- v. ***Intertextuality: What are the intertextual chains apparent in this discourse?***
1. Are the intertextual chains overt or covert?
 2. Are there connections to both the past and the future apparent in this discourse?
 3. *Are elements of creative (i.e. resistant) discourse traceable across transcripts over time? (ME)
 4. *Are elements of creative discourse limited to the speech event in which they occur? (ME)

Appendix I

Codebook

Round	Parent Code	Child Code(s)	Grandchild Code(s)
Second Read	Literacy Terms	Reading	Conflating
		Literacy	Sociocultural
			Functionalist
		Writing	
		Phonics	Positive/Negative
		Phonemic Awareness	
		Comprehension	
		Print Rich	
		Standards	
		Sociocultural lens	
	Literacy Instruction	Specific curriculum	
		Evidence based	
		3 cueing	
	Jargon/New language		
	Descriptor	Reading behaviors	
		Readers	
Third Read	Modals	Expressive	Word selection
			Intensifiers/downtoners
			Evaluative adjectives or adverbs
			Figurative language
			Modal verbs or adverbs
			Tone/style
			Subjective stance
		Relational	Pronouns/Pronomial
			Address terms or formal address
			Deictic expressions
			Power/authority markers
			Politeness strategies /face
			Quotatives/ reported speech
	Pronouns	Our/We	
		You	
		They/Them	

	Agency		
	Processes	Semantic	
		Syntactic	
		Pragmatic	
		Discursive	
		Rhetorical	
		Metacognitive	
	Logical Connectors?		
Fourth Read	Discourse Types	Frames/Scripts	
	Power Relations	Situational	
		Institutional	
		Societal	
	Ideologies/Values	Neoliberal/ Technocratic Solutions	Tools
		Research	
		Reading Print	
	Positioning	Teachers	
		Students	
		Instruction	
	Normative or Creative Discourse?		
	Intertextual Chains	Science of Reading	Hanford
			Lucy Calkins
		READ Act	
		Early Literacy Policy	
		Neoliberalism	
		Third grade reading	

Appendix J

Coded READ Act Bill Text: Opening Legislative Declaration

22-7-1202. Legislative declaration. (1) The general assembly finds that:

(a) All students can succeed in school if they have the foundational skills necessary for academic success. While foundational skills go beyond academic skills to include such skills as social competence and self-discipline, they must also include the ability to **read**, understand, interpret, and apply information.

(b) Colorado has prioritized early learning through its *investments* in the Colorado preschool program, established in 1988, and full-day kindergarten, and the general assembly recognizes that these *investments can best be leveraged* by adopting policies that support a continuum of learning from preschool through third grade and beyond;

(c) *It is more cost-effective to invest in effective **early literacy education** rather than to absorb costs for remediation in middle school, high school, and beyond;*

(d) *A **comprehensive approach to early literacy education** can improve student achievement, reduce the need for costly special education services, and produce a better educated, more skilled, and more competitive workforce;*

(e) An important partnership between a parent and child begins before the child enters kindergarten, when the parent helps the child develop **rich linguistic experiences, including listening comprehension and speaking, that help form the foundation for reading and writing**, which are the main vehicles for content acquisition;

(f) The greatest *impact for ensuring student success lies in a productive collaboration* among parents, teachers, and schools in providing a child's education, so it is paramount

Coded READ Act Bill Text: Opening Legislative Declaration

that parents are informed about the status of their children's educational progress and that teachers and schools *receive the financial resources and other resources and support they need, including valid assessments, instructional programming that is proven to be effective, and training and professional development programs, to effectively teach the science of reading, assess students' achievement, and enable each student to achieve the grade level expectations for reading;* and

(g) The state recognizes that the *provisions of this part 12 are not a comprehensive solution to ensuring that all students graduate from high school ready to enter the workforce or postsecondary education,* but they assist local education providers in setting a solid foundation for students' academic success and will require the *ongoing commitment of financial and other resources from both the state and local levels.*

(1.5) (a) The general assembly further finds that:

(I) **Reading** is a critical skill that every child must develop early in the child's *educational career to be successful;*

(II) *Research shows that reading instruction that is focused around the foundational reading skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency including oral skills, and reading comprehension is highly effective in teaching young children to read;*

(III) Section 15 of article IX of the state constitution *grants to the elected board of education in each school district the authority to have control of instruction in the public schools of the school district,* and section 16 of article IX of the state constitution

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prohibits the general assembly and the state board of education from prescribing the textbooks to be used in public schools;

(IV) However, section 2 of article IX of the state constitution requires the general assembly to provide for the establishment and maintenance of a thorough and uniform system of free public schools throughout the state, and section 1 of article IX of the state constitution vests the general supervision of the public schools of the state in the state board of education;

(V) In interpreting these constitutional provisions, the Colorado supreme court has found that, because they are competing interests, none are absolute; these interests must be balanced to identify the contours of the responsibility assigned to each entity; and

(VI) It is the general assembly that initially strikes this balance.

(b) The general assembly finds, therefore, that ensuring that each child has access through the public schools to evidence-based reading instruction that is focused on developing the **foundational reading skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency including oral skills, and reading comprehension** is a significant component of ensuring that the system of free public schools throughout the state is thorough and uniform. In exercising its authority of general supervision of the public schools of the state, it is appropriate that the state board of education, supported by the department of education, *hold local education providers accountable for demonstrating that the reading instruction they provide is focused on these five foundational reading skills*. And, in maintaining control of the instruction in the classrooms of the public schools of their respective school districts, it is appropriate that

Coded READ Act Bill Text: Opening Legislative Declaration

each school district board of education select the **core reading instructional programs and reading interventions** to be used in those public schools, so long as they are focused on **phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency including oral skills, and reading comprehension** to ensure that the students educated in the public schools throughout the state consistently receive evidence-based instruction that is proven to effectively teach children to **read**.

(2) It is therefore the intent of the general assembly that each local education provider that enrolls students in kindergarten or first, second, or third grade will work closely with the parents and teachers of these students to provide the students the instructional programming, intervention instruction, and support, at home and in school, necessary to ensure that students, by the completion of third grade, can demonstrate a level of competency in **reading** skills that is necessary to support them in achieving the academic standards and expectations applicable to the fourth-grade curriculum. It is further the intent of the general assembly that each local education provider adopt a policy whereby, if a student has a significant **reading** deficiency at the end of any school year prior to fourth grade, the student's parent and teacher and other personnel of the local education provider decide whether the student should or should not advance to the next grade level based on whether the student, despite having a significant **reading** deficiency, is able to maintain adequate academic progress at the next grade level.

(3) The general assembly further finds that:

Coded READ Act Bill Text: Opening Legislative Declaration

- (a) The purpose of this part 12 is to provide students with the necessary supports they need to be able to **read** with proficiency by third grade so that their academic growth and achievement is not hindered by low **literacy** skills in fourth grade and beyond;
- (b) It is a priority in the public schools of Colorado to provide high-quality instruction that enables each student to attain proficiency in English, regardless of the student's native language;
- (c) **Research demonstrates that a person who has strong **reading** skills in one language will more easily learn and become literate in a second language; and**
- (d) While the "Colorado READ Act", this part 12, is not designed to measure or support a student's acquisition of English as a second language, ensuring that a student has strong **reading** skills in his or her native language by third grade will help to ensure that the student will attain proficiency in English more quickly.

Appendix J. Annotated Opening Legislative Declaration text from the Colorado READ Act legislation.

Note. **Bold** denotes reference to literacy practice; underline denotes benefits of reading success; **highlight** denotes reference to proof, research, or evidence; *italic* denotes neoliberal logics

Appendix K

Source	Excerpt
2021-2022 READ Act Programming Review Process website	The Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act (READ Act), passed by the Colorado legislature in 2012, focuses on early literacy development for all students kindergarten through third grade and especially for students at risk of not reaching grade level proficiency in reading by the end of third grade. Included in the READ Act is the requirement that the department create an advisory list of evidence-based or scientifically based instructional programming in reading , pursuant to C.R.S. 22-7-1209.
Selecting an Instructional Program PowerPoint (Lay, 2021, Slides 8, 32)	A strong curriculum is an important step in delivering effective literacy instruction but does not substitute for deep educator knowledge about scientifically evidence-based reading instruction . The next area we will focus on is writing instruction . Reading and writing draw upon the same body of skills and knowledge . Teaching writing can help students become better readers as well as writers .
Colorado READ Act Fact Sheet	The Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act (READ Act), passed by the Colorado legislature in 2012, focuses on early literacy development for all students and especially for students at risk to not read at grade level by the end of the third grade. The READ Act focuses on literacy development for kindergarteners through third-graders . Students are tested for reading skills, and those who are not reading at grade level are given individual READ plans. ASSESSMENTS The READ Act requires teachers to assess the literacy development of K-3 students in the areas of phonemic awareness; phonics; vocabulary development; and reading fluency, which includes mastery of oral skills and reading comprehension . In March 2013, the State Board of Education approved interim assessments for use in measuring reading competency skill levels for children in K-3.

Source	Excerpt
The Colorado READ Act Issue Brief 19-13 (Abram, 2019, Overview section, paras.1-2)	Enacted in 2012, the READ Act addresses literacy education for early elementary grade students to master the reading and literacy skills necessary to meet fourth-grade curriculum and beyond. Assessment of reading skills . Public schools are required to administer a reading assessment to incoming kindergarten students, and administer additional reading assessments in grades one, two, and three, allowing teachers to identify students with significant reading deficiencies.

Appendix K. CDE sources conflating literacy with reading

Appendix L

District Slides

The slides below, excerpted from a District literacy presentation from 2021, demonstrate a decreased focus on writing and increased focus on reading over time.

Elementary Timeline		
Year	Curriculum Development	Professional Learning Supports
2014-15	Standards-aligned curriculum development for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> reading and writing science and social studies 	System-wide study (and understanding) of the Colorado Academic and Common Core State Standards
2015-16	Standards-aligned curriculum development for math. Rewrote science curriculum based on teacher feedback.	Use of standards-aligned curriculum as an instructional planning tool.

Elementary Timeline (cont.)		
Year	Curriculum Development	Professional Learning Supports
2015-16 (cont.)	Implementation of standards-aligned writing units of study. Really Great Reading resources added to special education resource bank	System-wide study of the writing standards in collaboration with consultants Decoding and the Struggling Readers 8 hour training for special education teachers
2016-17	Begin pilot/implementation of Mondo reading resources at: Implement BOE-approved reading resources aligned to the curriculum (across multiple schools) Continued focus on standards-aligned writing units of study	Extensive work with Mondo pilot schools focused on the reading standards and implementation of the reading resource Building-based, standards aligned reading and writing focus System-wide study and analysis of student work (writing). Beginning of Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT) comprised of principals, teachers, and coaches.

Elementary Timeline (cont.)

Year	Curriculum Development	High Level Overview of Professional Learning Supports
2017-18	<p>Revisions to the reading curriculum Reading resource alignment</p> <p>Implementation Mondo reading resources at:</p> <p>Implement reading resources aligned to the curriculum (across multiple schools)</p> <p>Creation of embedded curriculum supports for ELLs</p>	<p>Study and implementation of formative assessment practices across content with Instructional Leadership Teams</p> <p>Begin/continue the study of the reading standards and the reading resource across all schools using Mondo or a different BOE approved resource.</p> <p>Student Support Services: Study of foundational reading skills, including consultation with _____ and implementation of Really Great Reading: Decoding and the Struggling Reader</p>
2018-19	<p>Continued revisions to the reading and writing curriculum based on feedback from teachers and CDE's Office of Standards and Instruction</p>	<p>Continued study and application of formative assessment practices with Instructional Leadership Teams</p>

Elementary Timeline (cont.)

Year	Curriculum Development	Professional Learning Supports
2018-19 (cont.)	<p>Implement reading resources aligned to the curriculum (across multiple schools)</p> <p>Diagnostic Assessments purchased - training plan developed</p> <p>ELD-specific curriculum developed</p>	<p>Continue the study of the reading standards and the reading resource across all schools.</p> <p>Initial training for K-3 teachers on the Foundational Reading Standards</p> <p><i>ELL Essentials</i> training (45 hours) for all classroom educators</p>

Elementary Timeline

Year	Curriculum Development	Professional Learning Supports
2019-20	<p>Implementation of Standards-Aligned Foundational Reading Units</p> <p>Research curricular resources to support phonological awareness for special educators</p> <p>Continued work on ELD curriculum and revisions to curriculum supports for ELLs</p>	<p>System-wide study of foundational reading standards and elements of structured literacy ELL Essentials</p> <p>Special education teacher OGI Training implementation initiated 2 day Science of Reading Training</p> <p>ERD PD on new diagnostic assessments Training on RGR progress monitoring decoding surveys</p>
2020-21	<p>Remote Learning Curriculum with digital supports</p> <p>Stakeholder engagement and BOE approval process for Special Education curricular resources</p>	<p>Teaching in a Remote Environment</p> <p>Beginning of CDE's training on reading instruction (45 hours) OGI Training continued for Special Education Continued <i>ELL Essentials</i></p>

Appendix M

Source Name	Date	Excerpt
READ Act Legislation ^a	2022	"Scientifically based" means that the instruction or item described is based on research that applies rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge that is relevant to reading development, reading instruction , and reading difficulties. (p. 5)
Issue Brief 19-13 The Colorado READ-Act	2019	Updates to the READ Act in 2019 require that the programs and services provided by public schools be evidence-based , and focus on reading competency in the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words, correlating sounds with letters, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. ("2019 Updates" section, para. 1)
2023 Annual Report on the Colorado READ Act	2023	Evidence-based literacy curriculum is a vital component of the READ Act. Colorado understands the importance of high-quality, scientifically based instructional programs in supporting student learning. (p. 28)
CDE Literacy Transparency Act website	2024	The evidence-based or scientifically based core and supplemental reading curriculum , or a detailed description of the reading curriculum, by grade, used at each of the schools operated by the local education provider. ("Senate Bill" section)
Selecting an Instructional Program PowerPoint	2021	In this training, we will go through some high-level information on scientifically and evidence-based reading instruction . (Lay, Slide 1)
Colorado READ Act Fact Sheet	2017	Per-pupil funds may be used to provide full-day kindergarten, scientifically or evidence based interventions , summer school and/or tutoring services. ("State Supports" section)

Source Name	Date	Excerpt																		
Colorado READ Act FAQs	2023	<p><u>Is retention simply repeating the third grade?</u></p> <p>No. Students who repeat third grade should be supported with a comprehensive program of intensive intervention. Students should receive an evidence-or research-based K-3 reading program designed to give students every opportunity to be successful. (“Is retention” section)</p>																		
READ Act Update Senate Bill 19-199	2019	<p><u>Strengthening the READ Act: SB 19-199</u></p> <p>The updates to the READ Act emphasize the importance of using evidence-based instructional practices through changes to improvement planning, external program evaluation, accountability for fund usage, and teacher training. (“Strengthening” section)</p>																		
2021-2022 READ Act Instructional Programming Process website	2022	<p>Included in the READ Act is the requirement that the department create an advisory list of evidence-based or scientifically based instructional programming in reading, pursuant to C.R.S. 22-7-1209. (Background section)</p>																		
2022 Core Instructional Programming Rubric	2022	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="3">Core Program Review Rubric</th> </tr> <tr> <th colspan="3">Phase 1: Required Features of Scientifically-Based or Evidence Based Core Reading Programs</th> </tr> <tr> <th></th> <th>Section 1: Research Alignment - The program reflects current and confirmed research in reading and cognitive science.</th> <th>Rating</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td><i>Must receive one point for each criterion in Section 1 in order to move forward to Phase 2 review.</i></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>1</td> <td>For the grades for which the program is submitted, the program must include evidence of alignment to ESSA Evidence Level 1, 2, 3 or 4. If Level 4, then a logic model must be submitted.</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>2</td> <td>The program provides evidence of grounding in conceptual research and theoretical models with reference to research articles and websites. If the program is constructed for learning to read in a language other than English, a conceptual model and research foundation, as well as evidence that it is not merely a translation of an English program is provided.</td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>(Sheet “Phase 1”, cells B:5-7)</p>	Core Program Review Rubric			Phase 1: Required Features of Scientifically-Based or Evidence Based Core Reading Programs				Section 1: Research Alignment - The program reflects current and confirmed research in reading and cognitive science.	Rating		<i>Must receive one point for each criterion in Section 1 in order to move forward to Phase 2 review.</i>		1	For the grades for which the program is submitted, the program must include evidence of alignment to ESSA Evidence Level 1, 2, 3 or 4. If Level 4, then a logic model must be submitted.		2	The program provides evidence of grounding in conceptual research and theoretical models with reference to research articles and websites. If the program is constructed for learning to read in a language other than English, a conceptual model and research foundation, as well as evidence that it is not merely a translation of an English program is provided.	
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State Board of Education	2020	<p>SB 19-199 READ Act Implementation Measures amended the Colorado READ Act to:</p>																		

Source Name	Date	Excerpt
Meeting August 13, 2020, slides		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require increased budget monitoring by CDE • Require training of all K-3 teachers in evidence-based reading instruction by the 2021 – 22 school year (Slide 4)
State Board of Education Meeting August 13, 2020, transcript	2020	Dr. Cobb: These ideas not only aligned to the Colorado Academic Standards, but also are scientifically or evidence-based , which is critically important. (01:48:09)
State Board of Education Meeting September 14, 2023, slides	2023	Just over 5% of the programs reviewed by the evaluation team fully met the criterion of being “ evidence-based ” or “ scientifically based. ” (Slide 13)
State Board of Education Meeting September 14, 2023, transcript	2023	Dr. Grogan: I think a lot of what is in this year's report are kind of more leading indicators now that there has been this shift towards using these approved evidence-based materials that there is this training that in some cases there's a lot of support um so I would think that student outcomes would follow. (02:25:52)
District Board of Education Work Study Session April 2021, slides	2021	Training already underway and/or forthcoming: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 45 hour, CDE created evidence based reading training (K-2) (Slide 27)
District Board of Education Meeting September 2021, supporting document	2021	... implementation of evidence-based literacy practices. (Background section)
District Board of Education Meeting September 2021, transcript	2021	Don: Any other educators at the elementary level that were responsible for providing reading instruction to students in grades K through 3 would complete or provide evidence of training related to evidence-based reading instruction one thing that's changed and been amended since we met last spring was an extension in the timeline. (00:32:58)

Source Name	Date	Excerpt
District Board of Education Meeting January 2022, slides	2022	As of December 2021, approximately 40% of educators in Adams 12 had already met the required CDE evidence-based training requirement (Slide 8)
District Board of Education Meeting January 2022, transcript	2022	Board Member: It's nice to see how the intention of the intervention dovetails so nicely with the intention of the potential curriculum um you know just sticking to that whole science of reading um you know complementing and you know not having to do something entirely different as an intervention but just the best instruction for literacy in general. (01:53:13)
District Board of Education Meeting April 2022, slides	2022	This team created a shared set of values, knowing that the materials were on CDE's approved list and aligned to the Science of Reading and also pre-vetted by our internal team to be standards aligned. (Slide 13)
District Board of Education Meeting April 2022 transcript	2022	District Literacy Professional: We've scheduled a half day of professional learning for our instructional coaches and principals to come together part of that time will be supporting the work of professional learning around teaching reading based on the 45-hour course the science of reading and some other learning that we're having in that space. (03:08:56)
District Board of Education Meeting May 2022, slides	2022	All professional learning sessions will support teachers in applying their learning of evidence and scientifically based reading instruction . (Slide 6)
District Board of Education Meeting May 2022, transcript	2022	District Literacy Professional: That got us to a point tonight um to move forward with a request for resource adoption that we think is representative of what we need in our classrooms aligned to our commitment to the science of reading . (01:57:35)

Appendix M. Excerpts from each source analyzed for Chapter 4 labeling reading instruction as “scientifically” or “evidence based”

“Though I consider the original text of the READ Act from 2012 and the full text of the READ Act containing all of the amendments through 2022 as separate sources for purposes of analysis, I have only included the latter in this table, as the purpose of this table is to illustrate that every source I analyzed across bodies makes reference to some version of scientifically and evidence-based reading instruction. I do not find it necessary to show the term is in both the original and the updated text.”

Appendix N

Excerpts with “experts” highlighted
<p>Though experts remain divided on whether retention helps or hinders students over time, several states are considering policies that would employ the practice to ensure that students don't move ahead without a firm academic foundation.</p> <p><i>Simpson, 2012</i></p>
<p>Members of the network will have access to an online help desk, peer-learning opportunities, meetings with national experts and policymakers, and a foundation registry designed to expand and replicate successful programs, according to a press release.</p> <p><i>EdNews Staff, 2012</i></p>
<p>(DP16) Send low-income mothers home from the maternity ward with books and instructions on how to have what the campaign calls "nurturing and affirming back and forth interactions with their children." The experts with the campaign say that means reading a book and asking open-ended questions, building vocabulary by defining new words and making connections between the book and real life.</p> <p><i>Schrader, 2017</i></p>
<p>That law also convened experts to study the methods teachers are using to help struggling readers and make recommendations for policy changes.</p> <p><i>Meltzer, 2019a</i></p>
<p>(a) Experts agree that reading proficiently by the end of third grade is critical, giving students a foundation for learning in other subjects, increasing their chances of graduating from high school, and impacting their future earning potential.</p> <p>(b) Experts agree that five pillars support solid reading instruction: phonemic awareness — the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in language — phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.</p> <p>(c) Generally speaking, experts say three dozen primary reading curriculums in Colorado school districts is too many.</p> <p>(d) Steiner and other experts say choosing a high-quality curriculum aligned to state standards is a critical first step when it comes to ensuring that all students, including children of color and those from low-income families, learn to read well.</p> <p><i>Schimke, 2020b</i></p>

Excerpts with “experts” highlighted
<p>Some of the programs use discredited or inconsistent approaches to teach reading, which experts say takes a particular toll on students from low-income families and those with disabilities.</p> <p><i>Schimke, 2020c</i></p>
<p>Experts say low-quality curriculum is part of the problem.</p> <p><i>Schimke, 2020f</i></p>
<p>It’s been popular for years in Colorado and around the nation, but experts say it doesn’t do a good job teaching phonics and encourages debunked strategies, such as having students guess at words instead of sounding them out.</p> <p><i>Schimke, 2020g</i></p>
<p>a) The answers compiled below come from the dialogue tool as well as other experts.</p> <p>b) Experts also recommend parents ask schools how the share of English learners on READ Plans compares with the share of native English speakers on such plans. If there’s a big difference, parents should ask what teachers are doing to address that disparity.</p> <p>c) Experts say good quality reading curriculum and intervention programs are important, but they must be paired with teacher training.</p> <p>d) Experts and advocates say this is tricky territory.</p> <p><i>Schimke, 2020h</i></p>
<p>a) Like EL Education, experts praise Core Knowledge for its emphasis on building content knowledge, an important element for all children, but especially English learners and children who come from low-income families.</p> <p>b) Experts also agree that phonics instruction on its own isn’t enough.</p> <p><i>Schimke, 2020i</i></p>
<p>Aside from promoting guessing and missing key phonics instruction, experts have criticized the Lucy Calkins curriculum for providing almost no support for English learners.</p> <p><i>Schimke, 2021a</i></p>
<p>Most Cherry Creek elementary schools rely on reading curriculum that has been rejected by the state and criticized by experts because it relies on debunked methods.</p>

Excerpts with “experts” highlighted
<i>Schimke, 2021b</i>
WestEd suggested convening a panel of experts to recommend changes.
<i>Schimke, 2021c</i>
The intent of that 45-hour training is to increase teacher knowledge of the science underpinning reading development and instruction, a piece of the reading puzzle that experts say is even more critical than a high-quality curriculum.
<i>Schimke, 2021d</i>
<p>a) Some schools in the three districts have been using a state-rejected reading program commonly called Lucy Calkins, which experts have criticized for encouraging students to guess at words instead of sounding them out.</p> <p>b) Experts say well-trained teachers are critical to teaching reading well, but that high-quality curriculum can make that job easier.</p>
<i>Schimke, 2021e</i>
Experts say well-trained teachers are the most critical ingredient for good reading instruction, but that high-quality curriculum makes that job easier, especially for new teachers.
<i>Schimke, 2021f</i>
<p>a) Experts say boosting students’ background knowledge improves reading comprehension.</p> <p>b) Experts say culturally responsive education is good for all kinds of students, creating a more complete picture of the world and helping schools engage students.</p>
<i>Schimke, 2022d</i>

Appendix N. Excerpts showing the use of an ambiguous group of “experts.”

Appendix O

No. Excerpted text including article author and year

- 1 ‘Our students who are successful in third grade reading CSAP, are going to be successful,’ through graduation. (Robles, 2011, para. 6).
- 2 He [Colorado State Representative Tom Massey] and other bill supporters repeatedly stressed the importance of children learning to read by grade three so that they have the tools to succeed and stay in school after that. (Engdahl, 2012, The debate section, para. 2).
- The measure would require all districts and schools to provide the teaching and special services for K-3 students to ensure that children have adequate reading skills by third grade. (The bill section, para. 1)
- 3 Reading proficiency in third grade is a strong predictor of high school graduation. It is one of the most important benchmarks in a student's successful progression through elementary, middle and high school. (O’Brien, 2012, para. 2).
- Without the ability to read well by third grade, all other learning becomes an uphill battle. Students who do not read at grade level by the end of third grade are six times more likely to drop out of high school. (para. 6)
- The research is clear: Increasing the number of students who are proficient readers by the end of third grade is a critical step toward increasing the number of high school graduates. (para 7)
- It is time for strong leadership on behalf of the children who will face a lifetime of struggle if they never learn to read well—and whose futures will be full of possibility if they do. (para. 11)
- 4 Fundamentally change the culture of early reading in our state to ensure that all children read by the end of third grade, without excuse or exception. (Guest Commentary, 2012, para. 3)
- 5 Research shows that the transition between learning to read and reading to learn typically happens in third grade. If kids are unable to read on grade level by the end of that benchmark year, they are four times more likely to dropout than those who are reading on grade level.
- This is why Colorado's leaders acted to ensure every child can read at the appropriate level before leaving third grade. (Bush, 2012, paras. 3-4)

No. Excerpted text including article author and year

- 6 The inability to read proficiently by third grade can set off a domino effect, leading to academic delays, disengagement, and even the decision to drop out. Colorado, through the 2012 READ Act and the 1996 Colorado Literacy Act, has made early reading a priority, compelling schools to identify and remediate struggling readers before moving them past third grade. (Yettick, 2013, para. 1)
- 7 Part of the reason Colorado and so many other states have passed reading laws in recent years is because third-grade reading proficiency plays a big role in future success. Children who can't read well by the end of third grade are more likely to drop out of school, which can lead to other problems like unemployment and criminal activity.
- 'The data is there that shows that third grade reading proficiency is huge,' said Bruce Atchison, director of early learning at the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, which tracks research and advises state education policymakers. (Schimke, 2016, paras. 10-11)
- 8 Some communities are calling it their moonshot — having 90 percent of students proficient in reading by third grade. In 2012, Colorado set a stake in the ground with its own READ Act. (Schrader, 2017, para. 1)
- 9 Research shows third graders who don't read proficiently are four times as likely to fail out of high school. (Asmar, 2018, para. 8).
- 10 The rate of students in danger of never becoming proficient has only worsened. (Osher, 2019a, para. 1)
- The idea was those resources would make sure struggling students could read at grade level by third grade, a crucial milestone. Extensive research shows students with reading woes after that grade may never catch up and are most in danger of dropping out of school. (para. 7)
- 11 At stake is the academic fate of students with 'significant reading deficiencies,' a technical term the state uses for students so far behind on their reading skills that they are in danger of never reading proficiently. If those students aren't reading at their grade level by third grade, they are in danger of never learning to read and considered those most likely to drop out of school, research shows. (Osher, 2019b, para. 14)
- 12 Market the READ Act. Reach out to businesses, community centers, libraries, foundations, lawmakers, and shout the message: Read by Third Grade, Every Colorado Child. Get everyone involved; everyone has a stake in this. The results are clear. Companies will have more literate employees; prison numbers will drop; graduation

No. Excerpted text including article author and year

rates will increase; post-secondary education will see more prepared students and diversity; poverty/public assistance will decrease. (Lines, 2019, para. 20)

The 2012 READ Act aimed to get students reading proficiently by the end of third grade. Schools must test reading from kindergarten through third grade, identify students with "significant reading deficiencies," and develop individualized plans to help those students. (Meltzer, 2019a, para. 2)

- 13 “We have to do something. . . . Sixty percent of our kids cannot read, at third grade, at grade level, and it makes a difference in the rest of their schooling and then their whole life.” (Meltzer, 2019b, para. 3)

- 14 It [Senate Bill 19-199] also sets aside \$500,000 for a public information campaign to emphasize the importance of learning to read by third grade and highlighting school districts that have succeeded in getting a high percentage of their third-graders reading at grade level. (Osher, 2019, para. 4)

“‘What we really want to do is help our kids,’ said state Sen. Bob Rankin, a Carbondale Republican and co-sponsor of the bill. ‘This can literally keep kids out of jail. The average prisoner only reads at a fourth grade [*sic*] level’” (Meltzer, 2019c, para. 2)

- 15 These adorable characters come alive in books that every student should be able to enjoy by the end of third grade. Study after study shows those children who can't read at grade level by then will encounter challenges greater than Captain Underpants and Ramona ever faced. (Anthes, 2019, para. 2)

Students who cannot read by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school, and high school dropouts make up 75% of citizens receiving food stamps and 90% of the Americans on welfare, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. (para. 4)

- 17 Experts agree that reading proficiently by the end of third grade is critical, giving students a foundation for learning in other subjects, increasing their chances of graduating from high school, and impacting their future earning potential. (Schimke, 2020b, para. 8)

- 18 Nearly 41% of Colorado third graders met or exceeded grade-level expectations in literacy, almost as high as the 41.3% who did so in 2019. Colorado is in the midst of a multiyear effort to improve reading instruction. Reading well by the end of third grade positions students for future academic success. (Meltzer & Asmar, 2022, para. 7)
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Appendix O. Intertextual thread across local media texts that shows the positioning of third grade reading as THE predictor of success.