



Ontario Human Rights Commission Right to Read Report: Sincere, Passionate, Flawed

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Article abstract

The Right to Read report highlights the fact that children who experience dyslexia are not being adequately supported in Ontario schools. The report's call for the establishment of a more effective identification and intervention infrastructure within the school system is timely and persuasive. Unfortunately, the Right to Read report advances two unsubstantiated claims to explain the reading difficulties some children experience in the early grades. Specifically, it argues that Ontario schools are failing to teach reading skills effectively for all students, not just those with specific reading disabilities. Second, it attributes this general failure to the fact that most Ontario schools implement a balanced approach to reading instruction, which the report claims, pays insufficient attention to teaching sound/letter correspondences in a systematic, explicit, and intensive way. Neither of these claims is supported by the scientific data. Ontario students are consistently among the top performers in cross-Canada and international comparisons of reading performance. Furthermore, the empirical research is fully consistent with the implementation of a balanced or contextualized approach to literacy instruction that integrates the teaching of sound/symbol relationships with a more general commitment to immerse children into a literacy-rich instructional environment.

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Dialogue & Commentary

Ontario Human Rights Commission *Right to Read* Report: Sincere, Passionate, Flawed

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Abstract

The *Right to Read* report highlights the fact that children who experience dyslexia are not being adequately supported in Ontario schools. The report's call for the establishment of a more effective identification and intervention infrastructure within the school system is timely and persuasive. Unfortunately, the *Right to Read* report advances two unsubstantiated claims to explain the reading difficulties some children experience in the early grades. Specifically, it argues that Ontario schools are failing to teach reading skills effectively for all students, not just those with specific reading disabilities. Second, it attributes this general failure to the fact that most Ontario schools implement a balanced approach to reading instruction, which the report claims, pays insufficient attention to teaching sound/letter correspondences in a systematic, explicit, and intensive way. Neither of these claims is supported by the scientific data. Ontario students are consistently among the top performers in cross-Canada and international comparisons of reading performance. Furthermore, the empirical research is fully consistent with the implementation of a balanced or contextualized approach to literacy instruction that integrates the teaching of sound/symbol relationships with a more general commitment to immerse children into a literacy-rich instructional environment.

Introduction

Empathy and outrage, in equal measure, flow through the pages of the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (OHRC) (2022) landmark *Right to Read* report that highlights the personal and societal consequences of reading difficulties in Ontario schools. There is empathy for the children who experience dyslexia and for the families who struggle financially to provide private assessment and specialized tuition (when they have the means) to support their children's challenging journey into literacy. There is outrage about the fact that Ontario is not fulfilling its Supreme Court of Canada obligation to recognize that learning to read is a basic and essential human right that legally requires Ontario schools to ensure that *all* students acquire functional reading skills.

The OHRC report makes valuable recommendations about how Ontario schools can improve the ways in which they identify children with dyslexia and the instructional supports that are required to help them decode words and acquire the reading comprehension and writing skills necessary to participate effectively in society. The report makes a persuasive case that this is an issue of social justice that requires far more attention (and financial resources) than it has received up to this point.

Unfortunately, the authors of the report risk undermining their own urgent and powerful message when they stray from the specific challenges faced by children with dyslexia, and other forms of reading difficulties, into a more general condemnation of the Ontario educational system. The report makes two dubious claims to 'explain' the reading difficulties of children in Ontario schools. First, it attempts to make a case that Ontario schools are failing to teach reading skills effectively for all students, not just those with specific reading disabilities. Second, it attributes this 'failure' to the fact that most Ontario schools implement a 'balanced' approach to reading instruction, which they claim pays insufficient attention to teaching sound/letter correspondences (phonemic awareness and phonics) in a systematic, explicit and intensive way.

To what extent are these claims supported by the research evidence? Is Ontario a Canada-wide and international laggard when it comes to teaching reading and other literacy skills? Has the research evidence discredited balanced approaches to reading instruction that integrate the teaching of sound/symbol relationships with a more general commitment to immerse children into a literacy-rich instructional environment?

Contrary to the unsubstantiated claims of the OHRC, Ontario is among the top performers internationally and across Canada in reading performance. Thus, there is no 'crisis' either in overall reading performance or in reading instruction that requires corrective action. The OHRC claim that Ontario schools are failing to teach reading effectively because they are not adhering sufficiently to the teaching of 'stand-alone' phonics is also at variance with the research evidence.

How Do Ontario Students Compare Internationally?

The most recent international comparison of Ontario students' educational performance with those in other countries is the 2018 Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) which has been administered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in countries around the world for over 20 years. The PISA currently involves more than 80 countries and focuses primarily on reading, mathematics, and science performance of 15-year-old students. In the Canadian context, it is possible to compare reading performance across most provinces and between English and French language schools within provinces. It is also possible

to examine trends in reading performance for different countries since the initial assessment published in 2000.

In these comparisons, the 2018 reading performance of Canadian 15-year-olds was far superior to that of most other OECD countries (OECD, 2019). The average reading score for Canadian students was 520, 33 points higher than the OECD average (487). Only students from four provinces in China, together with Singapore and Macao, scored higher than Canada. Students from Hong Kong, Estonia, Finland, Ireland and Korea performed at the same level as Canada. Among Canadian provinces, Alberta (532) and Ontario (524) scored highest (O'Grady et al., 2019).

Perhaps the two most relevant comparisons in the present context are between Ontario English-medium schools and the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK). The national curriculum in England has mandated a strong focus on intensive and explicit phonics instruction since the early 2000s (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). In the US, the six-billion-dollar 'Reading First' program, implemented between 2002 and 2007, prioritized the teaching of systematic explicit phonics for low-income students (Cummins, 2007). By contrast, over the past 20 years, Ontario students, by and large, have experienced a relatively balanced reading curriculum that integrated phonics instruction with a strong focus on promoting active engagement with reading and writing.

The PISA 2018 reading scores for the UK and the US were 504 and 505 points respectively, far below the Ontario average of 524 points. When Ontario English and French language schools are disaggregated, the Ontario average for English language schools increases to 527. This places Ontario English language schools' reading performance second in Canada (behind only Alberta), and behind only China and Singapore internationally. The reading performance of Ontario students in English also compares favourably to that of other English-speaking countries such as Australia (503 points) and New Zealand (506 points).

Further evidence of the strong reading performance of Ontario students comes from the 2019 Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (O'Grady et al., 2021). Ontario Grade 8 students scored significantly higher than the Canadian mean with a score of 517, 11 points higher than Alberta (506) and 12 points higher than the Canadian average (505).

These international and pan-Canadian results are hardly the profile of a province that is failing to teach its students to read, as alleged by the OHRC *Right to Read* report.

There is concern in many countries that reading skills have been in decline over the past 20 years. This apparent decline, particularly among boys, has frequently been attributed to competition from video games and other digital activities. These concerns have also been expressed by the OHRC with respect to Ontario students, but the OHRC authors attribute this purported decline to what they view as the ineffective ways in which reading is taught in Ontario schools. Once again, the OHRC claim is not supported by the 2018 PISA data which documented the fact that Canadian (and, by implication, Ontario) reading scores have remained stable between 2000 and 2018. According to the OECD, this stable performance in reading over the past 20 years contrasts with the 'steadily negative' trend experienced by countries such as Australia, Finland, Iceland, and New Zealand (Schleicher, 2019).

In short, Ontario education is *not* experiencing a crisis with respect to literacy outcomes. The OECD PISA data demonstrates that Ontario 15-year-old students, on average, are reading significantly better than their peers in most other English-speaking countries, as well as outperforming students in countries around the world. This strong overall performance does not in any way invalidate the OHRC's timely call for more focused and effective support for students who are experiencing reading disabilities in the early grades. These students need focused and intensive intervention to help them acquire the decoding skills that most other students acquire

through mainstream classroom instruction. Unfortunately, the OHRC risks undermining its own message by manufacturing an artificial and evidence-free crisis that is easily refuted.

The Myth of Phonics as Panacea

The so-called 'Reading Wars' have been around since at least the 1950s when Rudolf Flesch (1955) wrote his best-selling book *Why Johnny Can't Read*, which argued that children were failing to develop strong reading skills because they hadn't been explicitly taught the fundamentals of how to connect the sounds of the language to the written symbols. The call for a greater focus on systematic phonics instruction was also taken up by the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) in the United States which concluded that there is "strong evidence substantiating the impact of systematic phonics instruction on learning to read" (p. 2-132). The hallmark of systematic phonics programs, according to the NRP, "is that they delineate a planned, sequential set of phonic elements, and they teach these elements, explicitly and systematically" (p. 2-99).

This narrative has recently been revived by the 'Science of Reading' movement in the United States (The Reading League, 2022), which is extensively referenced and endorsed in the OHRC *Right to Read* report. The claim in all these accounts is that there is consensus among the scientific community, supported by a vast amount of research evidence, that explicit stand-alone systematic phonics instruction is a crucial element in helping children learn to read. Within this narrative, systematic phonics instruction is typically contrasted with balanced reading instruction, which is caricatured either as not teaching phonics or teaching it in an ineffective non-systematic way.

Unfortunately, this claim is inaccurate. There is *no consensus* among the research community either in North America or internationally about the appropriate way to include phonics in a comprehensive approach to reading instruction (Duke et al., 2021; Escamilla et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2021; Seidenberg & Borkenhagen, 2020; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). There *is* consensus that the teaching of phonics—sound/symbol relationships—does have an important role in the development of decoding skills. Advocates of balanced reading instruction are very clear on this point—they do not reject the teaching of phonics or phonemic awareness. What they do reject is an approach to initial reading instruction that teaches phonics in an isolated, stand-alone, and rigid one-size-fits-all manner, divorced from actual engagement with high-interest meaningful texts (e.g., Escamilla et al., 2022).

In this regard, researchers who endorse a balanced approach to early reading instruction are more closely aligned with the *actual* findings of the NRP than is the case for 'Science of Reading' advocates. The NRP reported a positive impact of systematic phonics instruction on both decoding and reading comprehension for Kindergarten and Grade 1 students. However, *the NRP found no relationship between systematic phonics instruction and reading comprehension after Grade 1 for normally achieving and low-achieving readers*. For students classified as reading disabled, some impact of phonics instruction on comprehension was observed in Grades 2–6, probably because, by definition, these students experience longer-term difficulty in decoding than is the case for normally developing readers.

These findings have been almost totally ignored by policymakers in the United States (and by the OHRC) despite the fact that they are explicitly acknowledged in the peer-reviewed publications of NPR panelists. For example, Ehri et al. (2001) noted that "Among the older students in 2nd through 6th grades . . . phonics instruction was not effective for teaching spelling ($d=0.09$) . . . or teaching reading comprehension ($d=0.12$)" (p. 418). These authors go on to note that

“readers in 2nd through 6th grades classified as low achieving (LA) revealed no overall effects of phonics instruction...” (p. 418).

In short, an inconvenient truth for both ‘Science of Reading’ advocates and the authors of the OHRC report is that, according to the NRP’s analysis, systematic phonics instruction rapidly reaches a point of diminishing returns after Grade 1. The development of reading comprehension does not benefit from systematic phonics instruction among the vast majority of learners in Grades 2 through 6. The vehement rejection of balanced approaches to reading instruction in the OHRC report stands in stark contrast to the NRP’s *endorsement* of balanced reading (Cummins, 2007). The panel cautioned against one-size-fits all approaches and emphasized that “systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program” (p. 2–136). The panel also advocated the use of high-quality literature and cautioned that phonics “should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached” (p. 2–136). They expressed concern about “the commonly heard call for ‘intensive, systematic’ phonics instruction” (p. 2–135) and drew attention to the possible effects of scripted programs on teachers’ orientation to instruction: “Although scripts may standardize instruction, they may reduce teachers’ interest in the teaching process or their motivation to teach phonics” (p. 2–135).

The relevance of these cautions was demonstrated in the dismal results of the *Reading First* initiative instituted by the Bush administration to support low-income students’ early acquisition of reading skills. *Reading First* demanded that schools implement exactly the kind of intensive systematic phonics instruction that the NRP panel had warned against. Balanced reading instruction was demonized, and stand-alone one-size-fits-all phonics instruction, isolated from any engagement with meaningful texts, was required as a condition for funding. The outcomes of this six-billion-dollar investment were bleak, as reflected in the following excerpts from the evaluation report (Gamse et al., 2009): “Reading First did not produce a statistically significant impact on student reading comprehension test scores in grades one, two or three” (p. xv); Reading First had no statistically significant impacts on student engagement with print” (p. xxii).

The scientific fragility of approaches that position intensive stand-alone phonics instruction as a panacea for underachievement in reading derives from the fact that they ignore a massive amount of research evidence that high-volume print access is a major predictor, and a *causal* agent in reading comprehension development (e.g., Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen, 2004; Lindsay, 2010, 2018; Mol & Bus, 2011; Neuman, 1999; OECD, 2010; Sullivan & Brown, 2013; Wylie & Thompson, 2003).

This conclusion is reinforced by the comprehensive review of the research on reading comprehension outcomes published by University College of London researchers Dominic Wyse and Alice Bradbury (2022). They concluded that the intensive phonics approach implemented over the past 20 years in England “is not sufficiently underpinned by research evidence” (p. 1). Their overall conclusion is that: “The teaching of phonics and reading in curriculum policy and practice should more closely reflect the evidence that *contextualised teaching of reading, or balanced instruction*, is the most effective way to teach reading” (p. 2) (*italics original*).

A recent randomized control experimental study (Gray et al., 2021) provides further evidence for the efficacy of a contextualized/balanced literacy program in Kindergarten. The program embedded science instruction within the instructional components of the literacy block (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, teacher science-themed read-alouds, student writing activities), and students brought books home on a daily basis to read with parents/carers. Compared to the “business-as-usual” control classrooms, which implemented stand-alone whole-class phonics instruction as a major component of reading instruction, significant treatment effects were

observed for comprehension, letter-naming fluency, and motivation to read. The authors also reported that students whose teachers implemented the treatment with fidelity also performed significantly better in writing and decoding.

Moving Forward

Children who experience dyslexia are currently not being well served in Ontario schools. Inability to read *does* represent a crisis for these children and their families. As recommended by the OHRC, educators and policymakers need to set up an assessment and intervention infrastructure within the Ontario educational system to ensure that children who are having difficulty acquiring decoding skills receive timely and effective support to assist their journey into literacy.

Unfortunately, the OHRC *Right to Read* report distracts from this goal by misrepresenting the remarkably positive overall literacy accomplishments of Ontario students. Over the past 20 years, Ontario students have consistently outperformed most other countries in reading achievement. A major reason for this success is that Ontario schools have focused on both decoding and reading comprehension by implementing an evidence-based balanced approach to reading instruction. Further improvement in the literacy accomplishments of Ontario students can be pursued by ensuring that instruction focuses *simultaneously* on ensuring that all students are supported in developing decoding and other foundational skills, while at the same time immersing them into a print-rich, engaging, and communal literacy environment that extends beyond the classroom into children's homes.

Author Bio

Jim Cummins is a Professor Emeritus at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. His research focuses on literacy development in educational contexts characterized by linguistic and socioeconomic diversity. In numerous articles and books, he has explored the nature of language proficiency and its relationship to literacy development, with particular emphasis on the intersections of societal power relations, teacher-student identity negotiation, and literacy attainment. His most recent book *Rethinking the Education of Multilingual Learners: A Critical Analysis of Theoretical Concepts* (Multilingual Matters) was published in fall 2021. He is the recipient of the International Reading Association's 1979 Albert J. Harris award and has received honorary doctorates from five universities in North America and Europe in recognition of his contributions to issues of educational equity and multilingual education.

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