



# Right to Read Implies Opportunity to Read

## A Contribution to the Ongoing Dialogue Concerning the Ontario Human Rights Commission Right to Read Report

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Article abstract

This paper extends discussion of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) (2022a, 2022b) report entitled Right to Read, which recommended significant changes to both reading instruction and special education programs aimed at providing equitable opportunities for all children to develop strong reading skills. In a critique of the OHRC report (Cummins, 2022), I endorsed the report's call for the establishment of an identification and intervention infrastructure to support students who are struggling to develop reading skills. However, I also critiqued the report's misrepresentation of the strong reading achievements of Ontario students and the scapegoating of "balanced literacy." Klein (2022) disputed this characterization of the OHRC report, highlighting the important contributions of the report to special education policies. In continuing this dialogue, I argue that the OHRC report has omitted consideration of significant dimensions of literacy acquisition and development that are directly relevant to preventing reading difficulties among Ontario children. Specifically, I argue that beyond the systematic teaching of phonics and other foundational literacy skills, which the OHRC report emphasizes almost exclusively, literacy policies should ensure that all children experience extensive opportunities for literacy socialization, which must involve active engagement with print, in both the preschool and early elementary years.

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## **Right to Read Implies Opportunity to Read: A Contribution to the Ongoing Dialogue Concerning the Ontario Human Rights Commission *Right to Read* Report**

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### **Abstract**

This paper extends discussion of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) (2022a, 2022b) report entitled *Right to Read*, which recommended significant changes to both reading instruction and special education programs aimed at providing equitable opportunities for all children to develop strong reading skills. In a critique of the OHRC report (Cummins, 2022), I endorsed the report's call for the establishment of an identification and intervention infrastructure to support students who are struggling to develop reading skills. However, I also critiqued the report's misrepresentation of the strong reading achievements of Ontario students and the scapegoating of "balanced literacy." Klein (2022) disputed this characterization of the OHRC report, highlighting the important contributions of the report to special education policies. In continuing this dialogue, I argue that the OHRC report has omitted consideration of significant dimensions of literacy acquisition and development that are directly relevant to preventing reading difficulties among Ontario children. Specifically, I argue that beyond the systematic teaching of phonics and other foundational literacy skills, which the OHRC report emphasizes almost exclusively, literacy policies should ensure that all children experience extensive opportunities for literacy socialization, which must involve active engagement with print, in both the preschool and early elementary years.

## Introduction

I very much welcome Perry Klein's (2022) response to my critique (Cummins, 2022) of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) (2022a, 2022b) report entitled *Right to Read*, published in February 2022. Dialogue about the issues raised in the OHRC report has the potential to identify common ground, which is frequently overlooked when the teaching of phonics and other foundational reading skills is promoted in opposition to "balanced literacy." In this paper, I respond to the issues raised by Klein regarding the interpretation and policy implications of the OHRC report. I also attempt to specify the relevance and scientific credibility of empirical research omitted from consideration in this report. Specifically, I highlight the relevance for policy and intervention of the ecology of literacy socialization that is experienced by children in the preschool years and of the creation of a culture of literacy engagement in the primary grades of schooling and beyond.

My critique highlighted the importance and urgency of the OHRC report's recommendation that Ontario educators and policymakers set up an assessment and intervention infrastructure to ensure that children who are having difficulty acquiring decoding skills receive timely and effective support to assist their journey to literacy. On this central point, I am fully in agreement with Klein (2022) that the *Right to Read* report makes a highly valuable contribution, or as he put it, that it "will move Ontario special education policy into the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (p. 102).

However, I also argued that the report's timely and persuasive argument for change in special education provision is ill-served by what I view as its misrepresentation of the remarkably positive overall literacy accomplishments of Ontario students. Specifically, I questioned the accuracy of two central themes that are emphasized throughout the OHRC report:

1. It claims that Ontario schools are failing to implement effective approaches to reading instruction for all students, not just those with specific reading disabilities, resulting in far more students underachieving in reading than would be the case if scientifically based instructional approaches had been implemented; and
2. It scapegoats "balanced literacy" instruction as the primary culprit for this underachievement, in that the report argues that balanced literacy approaches are unscientific because they pay insufficient attention to teaching sound/letter correspondences in a systematic, explicit, and sufficiently intensive way.

I suggested that neither of these claims is supported by the empirical research. Over the past 20 years, Ontario students have consistently been among the top performers in reading achievement in comparison to other jurisdictions in cross-Canada and international comparisons. For example, Ontario ranks far ahead of any other Canadian province in reading achievement at the Grade 8 level, according to the 2019 Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (O'Grady et al., 2021). Logically, this pattern of positive findings is much more consistent with the claim that Ontario is implementing effective rather than ineffective approaches to reading instruction.

With respect to the OHRC's dismissal of "balanced literacy," I argued that "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" (Cummins, 2022, p. 85). I pointed out that the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000), while arguing for systematic phonics instruction as an essential component of early reading instruction, also 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). The panel also expressed concern about “the commonly heard call for ‘intensive, systematic’ phonics instruction” (p. 2–135), and they emphasized that “systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program” (p. 2–136). Klein also endorses this conception of a balanced reading program, supporting “reading instruction that balances phonics education with extensive self-selected reading and reading across the curriculum” (2022, p. 103). So where do the differences in interpretation and recommendations lie?

## Literacy Performance of Ontario Students

Klein acknowledges that most Ontario students *are* learning to read, and he points out that the OHRC authors explicitly acknowledge “Ontario and Canada’s generally strong performance in PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment]” (OHRC, 2022a, p. 75). He notes that “the *R2R Report* does not claim that Ontario has a general reading crisis or that Ontario ranks poorly in international tests” (2022, p. 97). However, neither Klein nor the OHRC authors address the contradiction between the acknowledgement of Ontario’s strong performance in cross-Canada and international assessments and the *unequivocal* condemnation of reading instruction in Ontario as ineffective and unscientific. As Klein points out (p. 100), the report comments negatively on “balanced literacy” 20 times in the Executive Summary alone. The central message of the report was clearly communicated in the media response following its release. For example, the *Toronto Sun* (Miller, 2022) led with the headline, “Ontario schools need sweeping changes to help children learn to read,” and continued “Ontario schools are failing to teach many students how to read, says a report from the Ontario Human Rights Commission that recommends sweeping changes to language curriculum and teacher training. ... Currently, Ontario teachers are required to deliver a curriculum that is inconsistent with a science-based core curriculum that meets the right to read.”

In short, the OHRC report presents an overwhelmingly negative account of literacy instruction and outcomes in Ontario schools. The Executive Summary makes no mention of the fact that Ontario (and Canadian) students are among the most proficient readers in the world. The full report does acknowledge this fact with reference to PISA and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) data, but it does so without elaboration and in the context of emphasizing that “there remains a significant proportion of youth who do not possess the necessary knowledge and literacy skills to adequately benefit from educational opportunities” (OHRC, 2022b, p. 75). Thus, the report fails to address the logical “elephant in the room”—how is it possible for Ontario students to be among the most proficient readers in Canada and in the world when, according to the OHRC, the approaches to reading instruction implemented in Ontario schools are ineffective and devoid of scientific support?

Klein (2022) does attempt to address this issue: “In attributing a manufactured crisis to the *R2R Report*, Cummins misreads it and fails to take into account that reading achievement comprises a distribution; it is consistent and accurate to claim that many Ontario students are learning to read well while many others are struggling” (p. 97). This claim may be consistent and accurate, but it says very little—virtually every educational jurisdiction across Canada and internationally could make such a claim. The nature of any quantitative distribution means that a significant proportion of students will perform below the mean, just as a significant proportion will perform above the mean. The specification of any benchmark or standard is, to a considerable extent, arbitrary and aspirational, and the fact that a certain percentage of students in an educational jurisdiction fails to meet this benchmark in reading or other curricular areas says very little about the adequacy of instruction in that jurisdiction.

For example, in making the case that “too many Ontario students are not learning to read well” (2022b, p. 65), the OHRC report devotes considerable attention to the results of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) annual literacy assessments of students across the province. The report points out that “a large proportion of Ontario students (one in four in Grade 3 and one in five in Grade 6) are failing to meet provincial reading standards” (OHRC, 2022b, p. 65). Even more concerning for the OHRC is the fact that “approximately half of students with special education needs (53% in Grade 3 and 47% in Grade 6) are not reading well enough to meet provincial standards” (2022b, p. 65). Clearly, reading performance in Ontario, and in virtually all educational jurisdictions across Canada and internationally, could be improved. But the narrative of instructional ineffectiveness that infuses the OHRC report’s discussion of EQAO data fails to consider the subjective nature of attainment standards, benchmarks, and expectations, in Ontario and elsewhere. Ravitch (2013) expresses this point clearly:

All definitions of educational standards are subjective. People who set standards use their own judgment to decide what students ought to know and how well they should know it. People use their own judgment to decide the passing mark on a test. None of this is science. It is human judgment, subject to error and bias; the passing mark may go up or down, and the decision about what students should know in which grades may change, depending on who is making the decisions and whether they want the test to be hard or easy or just right. All of these are judgment decisions, not science. (p. 47)

Thus, the EQAO literacy data tell us nothing about how well or how poorly Ontario students are performing in comparison to other jurisdictions. They simply tell us that between 20% and 25% of students are performing less well than the 80% to 75% of students whose reading performance is superior and considered satisfactory by provincial standards.

Similar interpretive difficulties apply to the concern expressed in the OHRC report about the fact that approximately 50% of Grade 3 and Grade 6 students with special education needs are performing below the criterion required to meet provincial standards. The OHRC (n.d.) notes that approximately 80% of people with learning disabilities have dyslexia. Thus, significant underachievement in reading is likely to represent one of the major criteria for designating students as having special education needs. In light of this fact, it could be construed as *positive* that only about 53% of these students in Grade 3 and 47% in Grade 6 are still underachieving in reading. Although the expression of concern in the OHRC report regarding the literacy challenges of students with special education needs is obviously heartfelt, from a scientific perspective, it tells us little except that approximately 50% students identified in the primary grades (K–3) as having special education needs (many on the basis of reading difficulties) manifest these difficulties on provincial tests in Grades 3 and 6. The corollary is that 50% of students who were identified as having special education needs are performing *at or above* the provincial standard in reading. It may be that the Ontario educational system is doing a good job in enabling many of these students to overcome their academic challenges and reach provincial standards; alternatively, perhaps a myriad of other factors is at play in determining students’ literacy trajectories. Either way, the EQAO data presented in the OHRC report provide minimal information about the effectiveness or scientific rigor of approaches to reading instruction in Ontario schools. However, within the context of the OHRC report, the EQAO data contribute rhetorically to an inaccurate narrative of educational malpractice that is at variance with the strong literacy performance of Ontario students, as revealed in cross-Canada and international assessments.

In summary, as Klein (2022) points out, the authors of the OHRC Right to Read report do not use the term “crisis” to characterize the reading performance of Ontario students. However, they do present a scathing indictment of the Ontario approach to reading instruction, which they reinforce with a narrative that highlights literacy attainment gaps (e.g., among special education students) while acknowledging only minimally, and in passing, the fact that multiple cross-Canada and international studies have identified Ontario students as among the most proficient in the world in reading attainment. If Ontario students are among the most proficient readers across Canada and internationally, there is a clear credibility gap in designating as unscientific and ineffective the approaches to reading instruction implemented by Ontario educators.

### Scapegoating “Balanced Literacy”

Klein (2022) offers the useful clarification that the OHRC’s condemnation of balanced literacy approaches to reading instruction is directed at particular programs that it views as advocating minimal teaching of phonics: “That is, it appears not to be balance in literacy education that the *R2R Report* objects to, but a de-emphasis on phonics instruction” (p. 100). Specifically, the OHRC report provides the following description of the “three-cueing system” and balanced literacy approaches:

The three-cueing system encourages students to guess or predict words using cues or clues from the context and their prior knowledge. In balanced literacy (or comprehensive balanced literacy), teachers “gradually release responsibility” by first modelling text reading, sharing text reading, then guiding students’ text reading, with the eventual goal of the student reading texts independently. These approaches for word reading are rooted in a whole language philosophy which suggests that by immersing children in spoken and written language, they will discover how to read. (2022a, p. 21)

In my critique, I suggested that the OHRC report’s description of balanced literacy and its presumed opposition to the teaching of phonics was highly inaccurate: “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” (2022, p. 88). I did *not* suggest that either the OHRC or researchers associated with the broader Science of Reading movement advocated such an approach to phonics teaching. But I did point out that the overwhelming emphasis on phonics teaching, together with the blanket dismissal of balanced approaches to reading instruction, could very well give rise to patterns of implementation that are at variance with the recommendations of the NRP (2000) report—specifically, the NRP’s warning that phonics instruction “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).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aukerman (2022b) points out that Hanford’s (2019) influential media report entitled *At a Loss for Words* contained 86 mentions of phonics instruction and only a single reference to any other aspect of literacy. In many other journalistic accounts of the Science of Reading in the United States, an either/or dichotomy is presented between phonics instruction and balanced literacy, which is described in very similar terms to its characterization in the OHRC report (i.e., non-scientific, whole language inspired, minimal attention to phonics, etc.).

This is exactly what happened in the context of the six-billion-dollar *Reading First* program implemented in the United States after the publication of the NRP report. The intensive phonics approaches to early reading instruction championed in this nation-wide project showed minimal positive impact on decoding skills and no impact on either reading engagement or reading comprehension (Cummins, 2007). The OHRC report echoes *Reading First* in its unqualified and vigorous rejection of balanced literacy approaches. Like many recent journalistic articles, both *Reading First* and the OHRC report construct an either/or dichotomy that elevates systematic phonics instruction to the realm of “scientifically proven” while balanced literacy approaches are viewed as devoid of scientific credibility.

Aukerman (2022a) has highlighted this either/or dichotomy in her analysis of the recent media discourse related to the teaching of reading. Her description of this media discourse, summarized in the following quotation, also accurately encapsulates the major arguments and the rhetorical structure of the OHRC report, despite its occasional acknowledgement of the need for “a rich language arts curriculum” (2022a, p. 68) and the fact that “becoming fully literate also requires more than just the ability to read words” (2022a, p. 5):

The story is frequently some version of a conflict narrative relying on the following problematic suppositions:

- a) science has proved that there is just one way of teaching reading effectively to all kids—using a systematic, highly structured approach to teaching phonics;
- b) most teachers rely instead on an approach called *balanced literacy*, spurred on by shoddy teacher education programs;
- c) therefore, teachers incorporate very little phonics and encourage kids to guess at words;
- d) balanced literacy and teacher education are thus at fault for large numbers of children not learning to read well. (Aukerman, 2022a, p. 1)

Aukerman (2022a) points out that these suppositions are highly misleading and do not accurately reflect the empirical evidence, which is much more consistent with a both/and orientation than an oppositional either/or orientation. She points to the strong empirical evidence reviewed by Scanlon and Anderson (2020) in support of their Interactive Strategies Approach, which advocates enabling students to use contextual cues as a supplement to phonics skills in their pursuit of meaning. Scanlon and Anderson describe their approach as follows:

In contrast to a code-only approach, the approach to word learning that we have developed, refined, and studied across a 25-year research program involves both explicitly and directly teaching alphabetically and orthographically based decoding skills and teaching students to strategically use contextual information to direct and check their decoding attempts. This aligns well with the findings of Swanson’s (2001) meta-analysis, indicating that such a combination is generally more effective for students identified as learning disabled across a range of learning targets than either explicit instruction or strategy instruction alone. ...

The thrust of our argument is that the use of context can be a valuable assist for word solving both when a student’s knowledge of the code is still developing and when inconsistencies in English orthography result in only an approximate pronunciation of a word. (p. S32)

The role of contextual cues in the Interactive Strategies Approach described by Scanlon and Anderson (2020) is similar to the *Reading Rescue* tutoring intervention implemented by Ehri and colleagues: “Students were encouraged to decode unknown words by relying on their letter–sound knowledge and then cross-checking with meaning and pictures to confirm the identities of the words” (Ehri et al., 2007, p. 424). Scanlon and Anderson explicitly related the Interactive Strategies Approach to Share’s (1995) “self-teaching hypothesis” and to Ehri’s (2014) concept of “orthographic mapping”:

The role of context in learning to read, especially when decoding is only partial, is consistent with Share’s (1995) self-teaching hypothesis. Most sight words, according to Share, are not explicitly taught. Rather, they are learned across multiple encounters with individual words in context, as the reader successfully applies an analytic approach to identifying words. By providing support for successful word reading, especially when decoding is only partial, contextual information supports orthographic mapping and facilitates self-teaching by building up stronger associations between the sound and meaning of the word, along with its spelling. (p. S21)

Scanlon and Anderson (2021) point out that this approach increases the proportion of words that students can identify accurately, thereby increasing their familiarity with phonics elements that have not been explicitly taught and enabling the orthographic mapping that is the foundation for fluent reading.

In short, the dismissal of students’ use of contextual cues as simply “guessing” in the OHRC report and the problematic identification of “three-cueing” with “balanced literacy” ignore the important *secondary* role that attention to contextual cues plays in both decoding and comprehension of text. Whole-class and small group instruction that directly and explicitly teaches high-frequency and regular patterns of sound–symbol relationships is an essential first step for many students on their path to literacy. However, as students progress in their reading and writing development, they increasingly encounter words that do not conform to the phonics rules or patterns that they have learned. Input and feedback from teachers or other adults drawing students’ attention to semantic, syntactic, orthographic, or pictorial contextual cues play an important role in enabling students to decode and understand these words.

This point is reinforced by Amanda Goodwin, co-editor of *Reading Research Quarterly*, which, in 2020 and 2021, published 50 peer-reviewed articles written by researchers on the science of reading. In an interview in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Goodwin noted, “It’s self-defeating to insist on an either-or choice between phonics and context cueing, as though these practices were at war with each other. It’s much more helpful to treat them as complementary” (Heller, 2022). In describing the 50 articles that were published in the two special issues, Goodwin noted that “we *did not* hear calls for the sort of narrow, directive approach to reading instruction that journalists and policy advocates often promote. ... I just don’t see anybody talking about a battle between science and non-science” (Heller, 2022).

In contrast to the nuanced perspective of researchers who contributed to the special issues of *Reading Research Quarterly*, the authors of the OHRC *Right to Read* report repeatedly characterize the opposition between systematic phonics and balanced literacy as an opposition between a scientifically proven instructional approach and an approach that is refuted by the scientific evidence. They are definitive, for example, in their claim that “balanced literacy or comprehensive balanced literacy approaches, cueing systems and other whole language beliefs and practices are not supported by the science of reading” (2022a, p. 26).



In summary, the OHRC's dichotomous and oppositional characterization of systematic phonics instruction and balanced literacy is at variance with the perspectives of a large majority of researchers who contributed to the two special issues of *Reading Research Quarterly*. As noted by Goodwin (Heller, 2022), these researchers identified considerable common ground between phonics-oriented approaches and balanced literacy orientations, viewing them as complementary rather than oppositional.

In the following section, I suggest that there is considerable empirical evidence that supports a broader set of educational interventions and social policies for the prevention of reading difficulties in young children than those highlighted in the OHRC report.

## **Literacy Socialization: Closing Opportunity Gaps in the Preschool Years**

The OHRC report says virtually nothing about the importance of preschool-years literacy socialization for creating a cognitive and social foundation for later literacy acquisition in the early grades of schooling. The word *preschool* appears just once in the Executive Summary. Clearly, the authors interpreted their mandate primarily in terms of instructional issues arising in the elementary and especially primary (K–3) grades. However, in focusing on these age and grade levels, the authors may have missed an opportunity to identify and recommend societal investments that could yield significant dividends in preventing reading difficulties. Specifically, there is compelling empirical evidence that interventions to create an ecology of literacy socialization in the preschool years can enhance children's concepts of print, phonological awareness, and overall language knowledge, all of which contribute to successful reading and writing development in the early years of schooling.

The preschool years represent a period when the neural architecture that underlies all future learning grows rapidly. About 90% of brain development occurs in the first five years of life (Engster & Moore, 2018). The quality and quantity of this growth is fueled by children's interactions with caregivers, which are mediated primarily through language. Thus, it is not surprising that children's shared book reading experiences exert lasting influences on their subsequent literacy development (e.g., Bus et al., 1995; Payne et al., 1994; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). Reading to children, even in their first year of life, pays dividends (Jimenez et al., 2020; Leech et al., 2022). Leech et al. (2022), for example, demonstrated the unique effects of shared book reading to infants at nine months of age on subsequent vocabulary development at 36 months. Neuroimaging studies have confirmed these effects and identified brain regions that are directly affected by patterns of literacy socialization in the early years (e.g., Hutton et al., 2021; Noble et al., 2006). Hall and Moats (2015) summarized the empirically demonstrated benefits of reading aloud to children as follows:

Reading aloud to a child is a critical activity in helping a child gain the knowledge and language skill that will enable good comprehension later on. Reading aloud increases background knowledge, builds vocabulary, and familiarizes children with the language in books. (p. 29)

They point to research (e.g., Whitehurst et al., 1988) that highlights the additional benefit of interactive story reading that encourages active listening and engages children in dialogue about the story by means of open-ended questions.

Numerous studies have reported differences associated with socioeconomic status (SES) both in reading attainment and in the extent to which children have opportunities to interact with

print in their early years (e.g., Phillips & Lonigan, 2009; Sirin, 2005; Teale, 1984). Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021), for example, note that by age 17, “students from low-income families exhibit a four-year lag in their reading achievement when compared with the reading achievement of students from more economically advantaged families” (p. S234). Numerous researchers have attributed this achievement gap, at least in part, to the fact that students from lower-income communities typically have significantly less access to print in their schools, homes, and neighborhoods than is the case for students from higher-income communities (Duke, 2000; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Neuman & Moland, 2019). Noble et al. (2006) summarized this research by noting that across ethnic groups, “children from higher SES backgrounds are far more likely to own books and to have greater access to resources such as museums or libraries” (p. 642). Neuman and Moland (2019) use the term *book deserts* to refer to the experiential consequences of income segregation.<sup>2</sup>

Intervention research carried out by Neuman (1999) highlighted the potential impact of transforming the ecology of literacy socialization that many low-SES children experience in the preschool years. The project provided 330 child-care centers across the United States with high-quality children’s books at a ratio of five books per child. The research sampled 400 3- and 4-year-old children, randomly selected from 50 centers, and 100 control children from comparable centers not involved in the project. Findings indicated that “children’s concepts of print, writing, letter name knowledge, and concepts of narrative improved substantially over the year’s intervention compared to those of the control group” (p. 308). These gains persisted into kindergarten six months later.

Also consistent with these findings are the outcomes of the Reach Out and Read program in the United States, in which pediatricians provide age-appropriate books and guidance to parents during childcare visits from infancy to age 5. Hutton et al. (2021) summarized the research findings related to this initiative as follows: “Participation in the Reach Out and Read program has been associated with increases in the frequency of shared reading and the number of children’s books in the home and improvements in language development and kindergarten readiness” (p. E7).

Evidence for the long-term impact of literacy socialization has also been reported in New Zealand (Wylie & Thompson, 2003; Wylie et al., 2006). These researchers examined the relationship between the literacy environment of preschools attended by children and their reading attainment at ages 10, 14, and 16. The researchers identified the degree of “print saturation” in the early childhood centers attended by children as a highly significant influence on their later literacy development. For children from low-income homes, at age 10, there was a difference of 18% in reading comprehension between those who attended the least and most print-saturated early childhood centers. At age 14, students who had attended non-print-focused early childhood centers scored 12–15% lower than the three other quartile groups who had experienced greater print saturation in their early childhood centers.

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to point out that many low-SES and minoritized group children do experience rich linguistic interaction and culturally embedded narratives in their homes. Book reading is only one form of literacy engagement, albeit an important one because of its alignment with early literacy instruction in schools. In many homes where there are few or no books, adults and older children may foster literacy and cultural knowledge in a variety of other ways (e.g., oral stories). However, schools frequently fail to recognize and build on the funds of knowledge that students bring from their communities (Moll et al., 1992). In the past, schools in many countries have failed to connect to the lives and cultural and linguistic experiences of low-SES students. This mismatch has created the academic gaps or presumed “deficits” that have then frequently been attributed to the inherent cognitive or linguistic characteristics of the children themselves (Cummins, 1984).

None of this information is new. Twenty-five years ago, Snow et al. (1998) highlighted the importance of the preschool years in their influential report entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*:

Excellent preschools can also make a difference for at-risk children; excellent in this case implies providing rich opportunities to learn and to practice language and literacy related skills in a playful and motivating setting. Substantial research confirms the value of such preschools in preventing or reducing reading difficulties for at-risk children. (p. 171)

Empirical evidence regarding the effects of literacy socialization in the preschool years is consistent with the extensive research documenting the causal impact of literacy engagement on reading achievement during the elementary and secondary school years (for reviews and meta-analyses, see Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021; Elley, 1991; Evans et al., 2010; Hiebert & Martin, 2010; Krashen, 2004; Lewis & Samuels, 2005; Lindsay, 2010, 2018; Mol & Bus, 2011; Nakanishi, 2015). Surprisingly, this research documenting the consistently significant impact of literacy socialization and literacy engagement is rarely mentioned by Science of Reading advocates and is largely absent from consideration in the OHRC report. This is unfortunate for two reasons:

1. Acknowledgement of the relevance of literacy socialization as a foundation, and literacy engagement as an essential complement, to effective teaching of decoding and reading comprehension skills would have highlighted powerful opportunities for intervention for and prevention of reading difficulties prior to the start of formal schooling; and
2. Failure to acknowledge the roles of literacy socialization and literacy engagement as causal factors in children's reading development, together with the implementation of early screening measures that assess what many low-SES children have had minimal opportunity to learn, risks identifying the problem as a cognitive deficit within the child rather than an opportunity gap deriving from the social conditions (e.g., poverty) experienced by children and families. These alternative ways of framing the problem give rise to potentially very different ways of supporting children in their journey into literacy.

Again, this latter point is not new. Neuman & Celano (2001) cite the environmental opportunity hypothesis advanced by Stanovich and colleagues (e.g., Stanovich, 1986; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992) to highlight both the effects of limited print access in early years and the ways in which a remedial orientation to this opportunity gap within schools can potentially further remove students from active engagement with print:

However, those children who lack exposure and experiences with print are less likely to be skilled at the initial acquisition process, less likely to become involved in reading-related activities, and less motivated to read, beginning the spiraling effect of the rich-get-richer, poor-get-poorer phenomenon. Once children are in public schools, the problem often becomes exacerbated through remedial instruction that exposes less skilled children to fewer interactions with text than their more skilled peers (Allington, 1983), providing them ultimately with the very poorest language and literacy instruction. (p. 26)

In short, research findings regarding literacy socialization in the early years entail clear implications for educational policies and practice. Sustained outreach, professional development, and provision of literacy resources (e.g., children's books) to parents, early childhood educators,

librarians, and daycare providers in the preschool years have the potential to dramatically improve children's literacy trajectories and long-term outcomes. The impact of the *Right to Read* report in preventing reading difficulties would likely have been enhanced if it had drawn attention to the scientific evidence highlighting the powerful effects of literacy socialization. Children who are immersed in an ecology of literacy socialization in their early years are much less likely to experience reading difficulties than their peers who do not experience a print-rich early childhood environment. This print-rich environment is a typical experience for a large proportion of children from higher-income backgrounds. It is much less typical for children growing up in poverty whose families do not have money to purchase books and who may not have access to public libraries or other sources of engaging children's literature.

## Conclusion

As Klein (2022) points out, the OHRC report (and the Science of Reading movement more generally) *does* acknowledge that effective instruction should focus on more than just word reading skills. Specifically, the OHRC authors state that "robust evidence-based phonics programs should be one part of broader, evidence-based, rich classroom language arts instruction, including but not limited to story telling, book reading, drama, and text analysis" (p. 5). The authors justify omitting these other dimensions of effective literacy instruction from subsequent consideration on the grounds that "word-level reading difficulties are the most common challenge for students who struggle to learn to read well" (p. 5).

There are two major problems with the narrow analytic approach adopted in the OHRC report. First, it ignores the social and economic conditions that result in many low-income children experiencing difficulty in acquiring word-reading skills. Educational policies and initiatives have only limited power in the short term to ameliorate social conditions such as poverty, food insecurity, and overcrowded housing. However, much more rapid change can be pursued in transforming the literacy ecology of children's lives. Children who have had only limited opportunities in their early years to be socialized in a rich literacy environment seldom acquire decoding or comprehension skills at the same pace or to the same level as their peers who have experienced literacy saturation in their early years. The research related to literacy socialization discussed previously shows clearly that policy and educational interventions in the preschool years and in the primary grades can significantly elevate children's literacy trajectories. Unfortunately, the OHRC report does not discuss ways in which policymakers and educators might address these opportunity gaps related to literacy socialization.

A second, and related problem, concerns the scapegoating of balanced literacy throughout the OHRC report. The instructional components of a rich classroom language arts instruction which the *Right to Read* report endorses in passing, including storytelling, book reading, drama, and text analysis, are very much characteristic of a balanced literacy approach and whole language approaches more generally. Similarly, the initiatives associated with literacy socialization or saturation in early years (e.g., ensuring ample print access, interactive read alouds with caregivers and early childhood educators, discussion and dramatization of stories) are all intrinsic to what balanced literacy is all about. The same is true for the documented significant positive impact of reading volume and literacy engagement during the primary grades and beyond. The whole notion of "balance" within balanced literacy approaches reflects the commitment to integrate or contextualize the explicit teaching of decoding skills within a classroom culture of literacy engagement. The strong reading performance of Ontario students in cross-Canada and international comparisons, together with recent research syntheses (e.g., Bowers, 2020; Wyse &

Bradbury, 2022), reduces the credibility of the OHRC report's unequivocal claim that balanced literacy approaches are ineffective and unscientific.

In short, our society will ensure children's right to read only when it addresses gaps in children's *opportunity to read* much more vigorously than it has to this point. It is crucial to implement effective foundational skills instruction in early grades as the OHRC report has emphasized, but preparing the ground for this task should ideally start many years before formal instruction begins. As discussed in this paper, there is a strong scientific basis supporting the creation of an ecology of literacy socialization in the preschool years and a culture of active literacy engagement in the primary grades and beyond.

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