

# Thoughtfully Navigating the Terrain of Teaching English Language Arts: An Examination of Two Teacher Educators' Literacies Pedagogies

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Volume 26, Number 3, 2024

Special Issue: Literacy Teachers Navigating Turbulent Times in Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1114597ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29699>

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Publisher(s)

Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada

ISSN

1496-0974 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

McKee, L. & Scheffel, T.-L. (2024). Thoughtfully Navigating the Terrain of Teaching English Language Arts: An Examination of Two Teacher Educators' Literacies Pedagogies. *Language and Literacy / Langue et littérature*, 26(3), 75–95. <https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29699>

Article abstract

This paper shares findings from a Self-Study of Teacher Education practice (S-STEP) where we leveraged our long-standing relationship as critical friends to examine our teacher education pedagogies in our elementary English Language Arts courses in 2022-2023. Guided by posthuman perspectives, we consider the relational movements that produced our pedagogies during a currently contentious field mapped by polarizing views in reports, social media, and teacher professional texts. We name movements our literacies pedagogies with/in these challenging times highlighting instances where the context shaped our pedagogies and where our pedagogies moved against the context. This paper offers an invitation to other educators to consider ways that we can create a culture that honours expansive understandings of literacies and creates spaces for curriculum-making and pedagogical inventiveness.

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## ***Thoughtfully Navigating the Terrain of Teaching English Language Arts: An Examination of Two Teacher Educators' Literacies Pedagogies***

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In 1997-1998, we taught in the same independently funded elementary school in Ontario. As teachers of Grade 1 and Grade 2, school leadership asked us to research and recommend a program to support early reading instruction and replace the outdated basal readers. Opinions were diverse as we met with parents and school board members to identify beliefs/priorities in early reading instruction, but the conversations were always respectful. We did not realize it then, but these discussions occurred at a time in history sometimes called the *reading wars* (Pearson, 2004).

More than 25 years later, in our work as teacher educators in Saskatchewan (Lori) and Ontario (Tara-Lynn), we are embroiled in similar conversations about reading instruction as the *reading wars* continue (e.g., Goldberg & Goldenberg, 2022; Stouffer & Van Dyke, 2023; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Our current teaching of literacies takes place within a contentious space mapped by views expressed in *The Right to Read Report* in Ontario (OHRC, 2022), *The Equitable Education for Students with Reading Disabilities* report in Saskatchewan (SHRC, 2023), discussions of the Science of Reading (SOR) movement in the news, social media, and teacher professional texts alongside those with alternate points of view that appreciate the benefits and limits of isolated phonics instruction (e.g., Cummins, 2023; Gabriel, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). These often-political debates about the *right* way to teach reading have resurfaced, grown more intense (Soler, 2016), and are impacting instructional practices (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

We recognize this context, often fueled by polarizing views and heated debates that support an either/or approach (e.g., Goodwin & Jiménez, 2020; MacPhee et al., 2021; Yaden et al., 2021) as very challenging for preservice teachers (PSTs) to begin their practice. Individually, we have been working to respond to this shifting context in our English Language Arts (ELA) methods courses in teacher education, and we have informally shared resources with one another. In doing so, we realized the need to examine our teaching practices more formally. We embarked on a collaborative self-study of teacher education practice (S-STEP) and examined our teaching artifacts to better understand our pedagogies and the ways we sought to support our preservice teachers in contemporary times. In this article, we asked, *How are our pedagogies moving with/in the current context of reading instruction?*

### *Literature Review*

Many years ago, Pearson (2004) identified the challenging context for literacy teachers and researchers within the context of the reading wars. This challenging context continues in contemporary times as the science of reading (SOR) movement is prevalent and gaining ground (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2020). The International Literacy Association (ILA) explains that the SOR movement is not a program, or an instructional approach, but is “a corpus of peer-reviewed research on how we learn to read and develop as readers [and]...defines SOR as a convergence of accumulated and evolving findings from research regarding reading processes and reading instruction (pedagogy)” (n.d.). As research continues to evolve, there is no consensus about how children learn to read or the most supportive instructional methods (e.g., Cummins, 2022; Goodwin & Jiménez, 2020), however the OHRC (2022) report promotes instructional methods aligned with the SOR movement. We next examine some key issues in reading instruction in relation to common instructional approaches embedded in this debate. Then, we explore literature related to how this debate is visible in teacher education classrooms.

#### *What is the Debate About?*

Current debates often pit instructional approaches against one another (e.g., Aukerman, 2022; Cummins, 2022; OHRC, 2022; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022; Yaden et al., 2022). In our regions, the instructional approaches named in debate (OHRC, 2022; SHRC, 2023) are whole language, balanced literacy, and code-based<sup>1</sup> (See Wyse & Bradbury, 2022 for definitions of these approaches). These approaches are sometimes misrepresented or partially explained which can have the effect of forwarding or diminishing particular approaches<sup>2</sup>. Though the names of the instructional approaches are the most visible in debate, understandings of how the methods work underpin the arguments. Hammond (1999), describing the debate about reading instruction amidst the reading wars, identifies: one’s stand on these four issues — (a) the foundations of the learning-to-read process, (b) the effects or noneffects of context, (c) the extent to which educators can make learning to read natural, and (d) the concept of automaticity — determines how one structures the literacy curriculum for young learners. (p. 5)

In an author’s note written “more than twenty-five years later” (p. 1) and embedded in a reprint of the original article, Hammond writes “This article seems to be as relevant today as when originally published” (p. 1). Given that current debates are entangled with those from the past (Seidenberg et al., 2020), we see these same issues visible in contemporary debates. Table 1 outlines the four issues outlined by Hammond (1999) and identifies how whole language, balanced literacy, and code-based approaches are positioned in relation to these issues.

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<sup>1</sup>Code-based approaches highlight decoding processes and often emphasize phonics. Phonics approaches are associated with SOR and touted as scientifically based (Escamilla et al., 2022).

<sup>2</sup> See OHRC (2022) for the conflation of whole language and balanced literacy approaches.

Table 1

*Key Issues in Reading Instruction in Relation to Current Instructional Approaches  
(Adapted from Hammond, 1999)*

<b>Key Issues (Hammond, 1999)</b>	<b>Whole Language</b>	<b>Code-Based</b>	<b>Balanced Literacy</b>
<i>Issue A: Learning to read as a linear process of learning, of focusing on one aspect of reading before moving on to another, or whether several behaviors can occur simultaneously.</i>	Processing flows from top down where “predicting what will happen in a story will influence...word solving” (Stooke, 2020, p. 12)	Flowing from bottom up, “reading is conceptualized as a series of skills ordered hierarchically from naming letters and sounds up to being able to comprehend passages of text” (Heydon et al., 2022, np)	Allows for the flexible movement between letters, words, meaning; this movement is shaped by the social context (Heydon et al., 2022) The reader can process multiple sources of information simultaneously (Stooke, 2020)
<i>Issue B: The role of context in early reading, specifically the role of context on word recognition and word processing.</i>	Context shapes word recognition and word processing (Stooke, 2020)	The focus is on matching letters/sounds; context is not central as readers follow a developmental sequence (Stooke, 2020)	Context cues can support decoding alongside syntactic and visual cues (Stouffer & Van Dyke, 2023)
<i>Issue C: The extent to which reading is a natural or unnatural act.</i>	Reading is a natural process similar to learning to talk (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022)	Learning to read requires systematic instruction (Roberts, 2021)	Learning to read builds “on the natural...meaning-making ability of the learner” (Hammond, 1999) and is supported through direct instruction (Stouffer & Van Dyke, 2023)
<i>Issue D: Word recognition must be accurate, rapid and require little conscious attention so that attention can be directed to the</i>	“Reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game.... Efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements, but from	Fluency is a pillar of reading instruction and is gained through rapid processing of letters, words, and texts (Seidenberg et al., 2020)	Word solving processes can support comprehension (Stooke, 2020)

<i>comprehension process.</i>	skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues... ” (Goodman, 1967, p. 127).		
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*Teacher Education Literacies Pedagogies in a Turbulent Context*

Tensions within the field of elementary literacies instruction directly impact teacher educators. This impact may be unsurprising as teacher educators are often linked to supporting curricular change (Hadar & Brody, 2017), and that children’s access to knowledgeable educators who have been trained through “high-quality, rigorous, and standards-based programs” (ILA, 2019, p. 1) is affirmed as a right. The literature shows a narrowing (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021) of what is promoted as *high quality* in instructional approaches in literacies with calls for code-based or phonics-focused approaches to reading (e.g., OHRC, 2022). This movement is supported by an inaccurate assertion that instructional methods in phonics is a settled science (Cummins, 2022; Seidenberg et al., 2020). As a result, the literature highlights a more negative stance that critiques teacher educators and teacher education programs for failing to promote “evidence-based instruction” (OHRC, 2022, p. 25) where evidence-based instruction is synonymous with code-based instructional approaches within the SOR movement. Hoffman et al. (2020) assert that the “SOR construct is being used to shape the future of literacy teacher preparation and silence the voices and work of literacy teacher education researchers” (p. S255).

Critiques of literacy teacher education associated with the SOR movement are visible in the academic literature, media, and reports (Hoffman et al., 2020). The academic literature identifies that historically, teacher education programs have “deflected” the influence of cognitively based theories in teacher education (Seidenberg et al, 2020, p. S12) and the media joins in these criticisms (Goldstein, 2022; Hanford, 2019). Aukerman (2022) outlines a narrative frequently portrayed in news media outlining issues in instructional methods where the SOR movement is promoted, asserting:

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. (np).

The tenets within this narrative are also felt in reports (Holston et al., 2024; OHRC, 2022; SHRC, 2023). For example, the OHRC (2022) *Right to Read*<sup>3</sup> report faulted teacher education programs (alongside the programmatic literacy curriculum documents) for

<sup>3</sup> The Right to Read Report was created by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) (2022) in response to a “public inquiry into human rights issues facing students with reading disabilities in Ontario’s public education system” (p. 3). The report was written specifically in relation to reading disabilities.

failing to promote “highly effective approaches to early word-reading instruction” (p. 21) and instead relying on balanced literacy, which they view as faulty (Cummins, 2022 has pointed out flaws in this reasoning). The OHRC (2022) report provides explicit recommendations for teacher education programs in Ontario, specifically that they “should embrace the science of early reading, and make sure future teachers understand critical concepts” (p. 227) which they identify as including word-reading accuracy, spelling skills, and comprehension (Recommendation 48<sup>4</sup>). Running records is one of the recommendations suggested for re-evaluation in Recommendation 52. The OHRC (2022) report is cited in the newly revised Ontario curriculum (OME, 2023) and impacts both the local curricular context and beyond (Stouffer & Van Dyke, 2023).

The effects of the OHRC (2022) report are already felt in other areas of Canada. For example, the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission (SHRC, 2023) report on *Equitable Education for Students with Reading Disabilities*<sup>5</sup> identifies “congruence between the issues identified in the OHRC report, the concerns raised by parents here in Saskatchewan, and the Commission’s findings” (p. 6). In relation to teacher education, the SHRC (2023) report identifies that “teacher training is recognized as a primary factor in the reading skills acquisition of students with reading difficulties and disabilities” (p.7) and includes quotes from select parents and educators who call for additional work in teacher education in relation to reading skills. The SHRC (2023) report does not identify specific recommendations and instead raises “issues to be addressed” (p. 57). Related to teacher education, these issues focus on increasing knowledge of reading disabilities in teacher education (SHRC, 2023). The OHRC (2022) and SHRC (2023) reports both recognize the role of teacher education in supporting beginning teachers in learning to teach reading. We recognize these reports as influential in guiding policy, curricula, and instructional practices in teacher education in our jurisdictions in Canada, while also recognizing that other jurisdictions may be influenced in different ways by local reports in their areas and by national and international policies as they unfold.

Hoffman et al., (2020) explain that “critiques on literacy teacher preparation are not new” (p. S256). However, previous critiques in the 50s and 60s contrast with more recent critiques as “there was nothing vitriolic, personal, or sensational... Appeals for change were based on data and made directly to the profession, not to the public through the media” (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. S256). Current debates highlight teacher educators specifically for failing to teach methods associated with the SOR (Gewertz, 2020), with some authors suggesting that teacher educators are uninformed about research in reading (Seidenberg, 2017).

### *Monitoring of Teacher Education Literacy Instruction*

Internationally, teacher education is immersed within the ongoing reading debate and programs have become more closely monitored. In the US, Hoffman et al. (2020) report

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<sup>4</sup> Other recommendations for teacher education related to teaching students with reading disabilities can be found in Recommendations 49-55.

<sup>5</sup> The SHRC (2023) report on *Equitable Education for Students with Reading Disabilities* was a result of its own independent inquiry focusing on families in Saskatchewan. Though the SHRC (2023) report was distinct from the OHRC inquiry (2022), the SHRC (2023) report cites the Ontario report and makes explicit connections to the Ontario inquiry. As in the Ontario context, this report focuses specifically on students with reading disabilities.

that the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) is “at the center of the storm of criticism against literacy teacher preparation” (p. S258). Hoffman et al. (2020) further explain that the quality of teacher education programs has been assessed through the “examination of a single course syllabus for each program” and this syllabus is scanned for whether the *five pillars of reading instruction* are included and for “the use of acceptable textbooks by the NCTQ” (p. S258). In Ontario, the OHRC (2022) enacted a similar process. The report explains, “To assess whether teachers educated in Ontario receive adequate training and academic preparation to teach all students to read, the OHRC requested production of documents, data and information from Ontario’s... public faculties of education” (p. 21); the documents requested included course syllabi. Like Hoffman et al., (2020), we are concerned that these methods of evaluation do not provide a fulsome understanding of the content taught in a course or within a teacher education program.

These evaluation methods are continuing, strengthened in the US by new NCTQ policy actions designed to “strengthen the implementation of the Science of Reading” (Holston et al., 2024, n.p.). These policy actions include specific actions/performance indicators directed at the content of teacher education programs and ensuring their compliance (Holston et al., 2024). For example, performance indicators include: “Set specific, detailed reading standards for teacher prep programs that are aligned to the science of reading” and “Conduct program reviews to hold programs accountable for implementing the science of reading” (Holston et al., 2024, n.p.). Such policies contravene the role of teacher educators outlined in the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (LLRC) (2020-2021) position statement that states, “teacher educators should be trusted to use their professional discernment to make decisions about what to teach and how to teach” (p.1) and not teach to a singular method. Though the NCTQ does not govern the districts where we teach and learn, we are concerned about the narrowing of instructional practices in the US and the implications for Canadian teacher educators.

### *What is the Purpose of Teacher Education Within Turbulent times?*

The current debates in reading instruction and the implications on teacher education literacies pedagogies are underpinned by a key question: *what is the purpose of teacher education?* Though some teacher education models focus on training teachers and transmitting particular practices (Hindman et al., 2020), other researchers envision teacher education as more than this (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2020). Grimmitt (2022), for example, points to “ a “culture of curriculum making and pedagogical inventiveness” (Grimmett, 2022, p. 38) recognizing teacher education as more than “prescribing practices” (p. 197), explaining “...I see teacher educators working with pre-service teachers to facilitate the development of their pedagogical capacity and professional freedom and responsibility” (p. 187). Darling-Hammond (2023) has similar perspectives

A commitment to open inquiry, the enlargement of perspectives, and the crossing of boundaries are critical features of the ideal of university education... If universities are to continue to make the important contribution to the education of teachers...they need to pursue these ideals of knowledge building and truth finding by creating a genuine praxis between ideas and experiences, by honoring practice in conjunction with reflection and research, and by helping teachers reach beyond their personal boundaries to appreciate the perspectives of those whom they would teach. (p. 155)

Applied to teaching English Language Arts in teacher education, we assert that PSTs benefit from learning about multiple theoretical approaches (Darling-Hammond, 2023) that include expansive, contextual understandings of reading and multiple instructional practices (e.g., direct instruction and meaning-focused) (e.g., LLRC, 2020-2021). At the same time, we acknowledge that changes in the field of reading and Language Arts, specifically toward the SOR movement may also call for shifts in teacher education (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021, p. S95). This expansion of practice can support professional discernment and pedagogical innovation within curriculum-making (Grimmett, 2022), but to realize this within a contested space requires policymakers, researchers, and educators to “navigate the terrain thoughtfully” (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021, p. S96).

### *Perspectives*

This research is oriented through posthumanism. Kuby et al. (2019) explain “posthumanism as a material turn which builds upon (not leaves behind) the linguistic turn that literacy education is so heavily rooted in” (p. 7). In contrast to humanist theories that focus on the human who is in control over the world, posthumanist theories view humans and non-humans as equally important and both having agency” (Barad, 2007; Kuby et al., 2019, p. 8). In contrast to orientations that focus on “find[ing] meaning in literacy practices...posthumanism...focus[es] on processes, becomings, movements, and fluidity” (p. 12). This orientation is connected with our research focus that attends to the shifts and movements of our teacher education literacies pedagogies in turbulent times.

Our understandings of teacher education literacies pedagogies are built on two premises. First, we view literacies and pedagogies as *ideological* (Street, 1984); that is, they are multiple, variable, purposeful, shaped by institutions and power relationships, and connected to time and place (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). This contrasts with *autonomous* models that view literacies and pedagogies as technical, neutral, and universal sets of skills (Street, 1984). Thus, our teacher education literacies pedagogies aimed to promote expansive, responsive, and dynamic learning opportunities for our preservice teachers in/on literacies concepts (LLRC, 2020-2021).

Second, teacher education literacies pedagogies are produced within relationships (Barad, 2007). These relationships include those produced within intra-actions between people and materials, where both entities have agency (Barad, 2007). For example, in this study, we recognize that as teacher educators, we have an active role in our pedagogies, planning activities that include entities like texts and materials that reflect curricular tensions and institutional requirements, but we also see these entities as working on us and affecting our thinking and planning (e.g., Heydon, et al., 2022; Kuby et al., 2019). Like Kuby and Christ (2020), we draw on the work of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) to envision pedagogy as including humans (the educator and students) and nonhuman entities (including space, time, materials, and the sociopolitical context). The decentering of humans provides an opening to highlight the constituents and movements of the time/space/matter within the teacher education pedagogies (Kuby & Rucker, 2016). We look to these intra-actions of humans and nonhumans as producing our pedagogies (Kuby, 2017).



### *Collaborative Self-Study of Teacher Education Practice*

In this article, we draw on collaborative Self-Study of Teacher Education Practice (S-STEP) (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009) oriented through posthumanism (Strom et al, 2018). S-STEP is a form of self-study that focuses on the self-in-practice and offers a mechanism to purposefully examine our teacher education pedagogies as we seek to “to answer questions about how best to prepare new teachers” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 818). Building on LaBoskey’s (2004) suggestions for self-study research, this collaborative S-STEP was: self-initiated and self-focused, focused on our pedagogies, transformative in purpose, interactive, and reliant on multiple, qualitative data sources. This project was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Boards (REB) at both of our institutions.

At first glance, it may appear that self-study, with its focus on self, is contradictory to a posthuman perspective that decenters the human (Strom et al., 2018). However, S-STEP’s focus on self-in-practice means that the “unit of analysis is not really the self, but practice, in relation with/to the teacher-self” (Strom et al., 2018, p. 145). This collaborative S-STEP provided opportunities to examine our teacher education literacies pedagogies in a relational way as we considered our relationship with each other, and the social, material, and political relationships that were a part of our pedagogies (Strom & Porfilio, 2019). In this way, this S-STEP decentered the human and appreciated that human and non-human entities have agency in producing pedagogies (Barad, 2007).

In this collaborative S-STEP, we relied on each other as critical friends (Strom et al, 2018). As mentioned above, we have a long-standing relationship as critical friends (Hordvik et al., 2021) in both our elementary and teacher education practice (McKee & Scheffel, 2019; Scheffel & McKee, 2019). This shared history enabled us to be vulnerable within the examination of our pedagogies and to expose our questions and uncertainties (e.g., Casey & MacPhail, 2018). Though we have an informal ongoing history of sharing pedagogical resources, we had not engaged in collaborative self-study research prior to this project.

This article focuses on our teaching of introductory, required elementary English Language Arts methods courses in teacher education in Western and Central Canada in 2022-2023. In both sites, the courses were 36 hours of instruction and the first of two required ELA courses (within the context of our programs, it was not guaranteed that the same instructor would teach both required ELA courses). Lori’s teaching was located in a four-year undergraduate education program in Saskatchewan, where the course was taught to students in their third year. Tara-Lynn’s teaching was located in a two-year post degree professional program in Ontario where the course was taught to students in their first year. Though our courses were located in teacher education programs that were configured differently (e.g., undergraduate and professional programs) and responded to different provincial and institutional curricula, there are a number of points of connections between our courses. For example, we both used the same textbook (*Constructing Meanings - Pedagogies for Literacies K-8* by Heydon et al., 2022). In addition, both courses were introductory courses and complementary in content; both courses took an expansive view of literacy with consideration of all dimensions of language arts (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, representing) while situating the importance asset-oriented approaches grounded in critical literacies. Since we shared teaching materials informally for a number of years prior to the research study, there is a strong resonance between our pedagogies.

## *Methods*

We employed both individual and collaborative digital methods. We began by individually reviewing our ELA teaching resources for 2022-2023 keeping our research question at the forefront as we asked *How are our pedagogies moving with/in the current context of reading instruction?* We gathered examples of teaching artifacts (e.g., syllabi, activities, slides, assignments, etc.) of the ways we recognized our pedagogies as moving with/in the competing discourses in elementary literacies teaching/learning. Individually, we reflected on the movements within each example selected as well as the entities producing these movements.

Over six weeks, we met twice weekly for collegial conversations. These conversations took place in two-hour blocks on Zoom and were video recorded with transcripts while also taking live notes within the Zoom interface. We discussed and digitally annotated pedagogical artifacts using the screen sharing feature on Zoom as we discussed our artifacts. Our conversations on pedagogies were entangled with discussions of literacies theories and of our provincial curricular contexts and within the digital environment within which we researched (Strom et al., 2018).

Data sources included teaching artifacts that comprised of course syllabi for elementary ELA methods courses and teaching materials (e.g., PowerPoints and activities), as well as video-recordings and transcriptions of our conversations together on Zoom, and downloads of live notetaking during the critical friend conversations.

## *Analysis*

We employed a *thinking with theory* approach (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013), engaging with concepts of intra-action and entanglement (Barad, 2007) as we examined our selves-in-practice and the human and more-than-human relationality of our work (Strom et al., 2018). First, we focused our analysis on the teaching practices of each author, identifying the human and non-human intra-actions that produced the pedagogies and evidenced through our teaching artifacts. We discussed our intentions behind each artifact and the movement or change experienced in our practices as teacher educators. Then, we looked across both author's practices to identify similarities and differences. Throughout our analysis, we recognized the data representing our pedagogies as "partial, incomplete, and always in a process of a re-telling and re-remembering" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. ix) while keeping in mind the theoretical elements that grounded our work (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). *Thinking with theory* helped us focus in-between the human and more-than human entities (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) that were a part of our pedagogies and contemplate how our pedagogies were entangled with our past practice and collaborations (e.g., McKee & Scheffel, 2019; Scheffel & McKee, 2019) while also being open to surprises in the data.

### *Findings: Naming Movements*

A key movement that emerged from our exploration was a more explicit naming of contexts and concepts than in our previous years of teaching. In this section, we trace examples of this naming and related movements. A second interconnected movement focuses on the ways this naming was entangled with our intentional decisions as teacher educators to create spaces that invited thinking critically.

### *Naming Contexts and Concepts*

Our critical friend conversations brought forward our intentions to name tensions within the current state of the field in relation to reading. As we shared an annotated syllabi together, we pondered, how we, as teacher educators situate and articulate key elements within our instructional practices. Tara-Lynn’s course syllabus situated a multiliteracies approach within a critical literacy/social justice stance and noted the addition of the phrase to “consider both the acquisition of skills/strategies and opportunities for building identities and belonging.” This change to the syllabi reflected the need to “make visible” (Critical Friend Conversation) what was already taking place in practice but had not been named as directly in previous syllabi. Though we recognized our course syllabi as “a partial representation of the course,” (Critical Friend Conversation) we had become more aware as teacher educators of the potential for our syllabi to be surveilled/scanned without opportunity to explain its contents. Tara-Lynn wondered, “Could I be misunderstood?” (Critical Friend Conversation). In her annotation of Figure 1, Lori highlighted the expansion of the description of phonics on her syllabus, as well as the inclusion of additional readings, noticing, “...I was reading the syllabus in relation to the other one [Tara-Lynn’s syllabus], what do responsive materials and pedagogies look like?” (Critical Friend Conversations).

Module 5	Early Literacies	<b>Please Read: Phonics (Beers, 2023)</b> (chapter from book for practicing teachers of Grades 4-12)
Week of Oct 1-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are the differences between phonics, phonemic, and phonological awareness?</li><li>• Running Records workshop</li></ul>	<b>Optional: Squats, Lunges, and Phonemes (Web-based article)</b>  <b>Synthesis of ELA learning #1</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Due: Sunday, Oct. 8 11:59pm</li></ul> <b>Participation in the Learning Community</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Due: Sun. Oct. 8 @11:59</li></ul>

*Figure 1.* Example of Annotated Syllabus

*Note.* Content highlighted in yellow indicates annotations made during individual analysis.

We named the need to be intentional and aware of opposing viewpoints throughout our courses. For example, when speaking about Figure 2 in class, Lori recalled emphasizing, “It [our classroom environment] has to be a safe space. We have to be able to ask questions.” (Critical Friend Conversation). We noticed a greater sense of urgency in our efforts to explain why a supportive community was important.

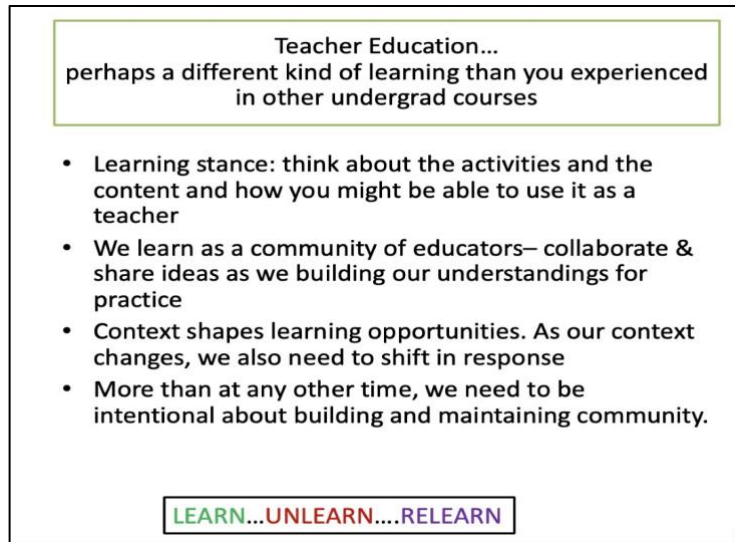


Figure 2. A Need for a Supportive Classroom Environment Within a Challenging Context

We also named the instructional context as challenging. For example, when introducing a class on early literacies, Lori used the word “turbulent” on her slides to describe the current context, noting a resurgence of the ‘reading wars’ and a history of movements from whole language to phonics to balanced literacy to SOR along with current calls for equitable education for students with reading disabilities (SHRC, 2023). This same slide highlighted the heatedness of debates and (mis)information in the media. Within our critical friend conversations, we discussed that the slide was developed weeks after the release of the SHRC (2023) report and within Lori’s recognition that the information would open spaces for PSTs to share differing opinions. Tara-Lynn also sensitized PSTs to the challenging context as she invited PSTs to read an excerpt from Gabriel’s (2021) article about “polarizing pitches” in the media, and the dangers of an ‘all-or-nothing’ approach (p. 59). Tara-Lynn recollected this as a part of pushing back against the notion that SOR is a singular, settled science.

We recognized that the debates in the field would result in changes to instructional practices in reading, and that changes to practice would happen at different rates and in different ways. As we introduced running records, we both named them as a potentially contested pedagogy, noting disagreements in the field. Prior to the study, we had informal conversations about whether to continue teaching about running records. In Fall 2023, we both continued to teach running records, but in less detail than in previous years. Through analysis, we recognized a shift in practice: previously, we focused on *why running records are important and how to do them*. We moved to a focus on *what running records look like and why educators might find them helpful*. Tara-Lynn’s slides (Figure 3) pointed to the debate about the usefulness of running records with the goal to build conversation around *when* and *why* they might be useful. A second slide noted: “A concern raised by some SOR proponents is that these language systems or cueing systems lead to guessing. Let’s consider this as we look at examples.” We recognized the tricky space of shifting practices in the field where some educators have moved away or were told to move away from the practice of running records, while others still saw the benefits.

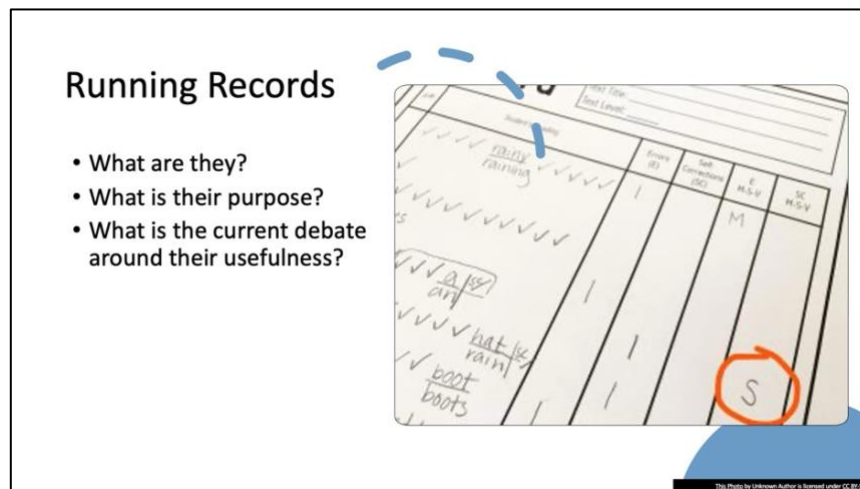


Figure 3. Introductory Slide for Running Records

We named more theories of literacies and discussed them in greater depth than we had in the past to show how the field was changing. For example, we both named posthumanism, a perspective introduced in the most recent version of the *Constructing Meanings* textbook (Heydon et al., 2022). Related to reading instruction, we also both named *The Simple View of Reading* (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and showed how this had grown to the *Active View of Reading* (Duke & Cartwright, 2021), highlighting how the field was not static but continuing to move. Lori called this “complex entanglements” in teaching (Critical Friend Conversation).

Our movements in practice were occurring at the same time as the programmatic curriculum documents shifted in Ontario. We pondered the relatively static nature of a curriculum document in relation to movement in the field in our critical conversations: “Here is what’s new? [in the curriculum documents] (But is it really new?). Teachers move in relation to the curriculum and other influences” (Live Notes).

Influenced by the potential for increased surveillance of our practices as teacher educators, our artifacts showed a more direct naming of concepts than in the past. Some of these concepts were previously embedded in the course (e.g., phonemes, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness) but were now named more specifically on the course syllabi. Tara-Lynn noted how, “Some things are new, but they’re actually not new...they are just featured, in maybe stronger ways or naming them” (Critical Friend Conversations). The inclusion of terms like ‘decodables’, ‘CVC/CVCC’, ‘SCHWA’, and ‘morphology’ reflected a resurgence of these terms in commercial reading programs and social media posts, often in relation to teaching the SOR. These terms and concepts were often featured in supplemental readings but took a more centred focus on our slides offering specific ideas for instructional practices. We recognized our movements as connected to SOR, but also pondered if the “movements might be due to PSTs desire for tangible things they can do” (Critical Friend Conversation), which is something we noticed prior to the SOR movement.

Intentionally, we spoke to where the field was moving, but at the same time were careful to avoid showing our bias. Lori recalled students asking to hear her stance despite recognizing she did not want to force her point of view. She recollected explaining to her class:

. . . who I was as a teacher 20 years ago is not who I am today, and I have some things that have endured over time. But as I have grown in my understandings or experienced different things, my understandings have changed. And they're like, "You're allowed to do that?" (Critical Friend Conversation).

This explanation of expanding theoretical views and instructional practices over the course of a teaching career was another reflection of movement.

### *Invitation to Think Critically*

Our intentions to help PSTs view themselves as pedagogical decision makers was entangled with our decisions to invite critical thinking. At the end of the course, Tara-Lynn directed PSTs to look back at an earlier chapter in *Constructing Meanings* (Heydon et al., 2022) that offered a comparison between doctors and jugglers. Tara-Lynn reflected:

You're not a juggler just practicing new tricks. As a teacher...like a doctor, you engage in problem solving with your patients in a professional capacity....this is what you've been learning this whole course...so that you'll be able to make those decisions when you're working with your learners. (Critical Friend Conversations)

Through our critical friend conversations, we recognized the importance of framing teaching as professional discernment rather than the repetition of practicing skills. We noted these analogies as meaningful ways to help PSTs see their professional practice as teachers differently. We named the dichotomy within the field (Heydon et al., 2022) but invited PSTs to take up a movement from "either/or" (Scanlon & Anderson, 2020) to one of seeing "no pedagogy as innocent" (Lori's Slide) and to "notice the complexities, complications, entanglements, and movements that refuse simplistic solutions" (Tara-Lynn's Slide). Discussions of equity were central to these conversations. Figure 4 is a new slide created by Lori (for 2023) who recalled:

...we had this discussion about what do we need to do to be prepared to be a literacy educator who works toward and values equity at the same time as teaching language arts....it's not separate...that was pretty radical for us... (Critical Friend Conversation)

Tara-Lynn encouraged a similar discussion around equity in relation to the Gabriel (2021) article.



Figure 4. What Does It Mean to be a Skilled and Responsive Literacy Educator?

Our assignments offered examples of our intentional moves to invite critical thinking around literacies pedagogies, in particular that of *pedagogical monsters* (Thiel & Kuby, 2019). The concept of *pedagogical monsters* was introduced to the students through the course textbook that draws on the work of Thiel and Kuby (2019) to explain that pedagogies can “produce unintended consequences, not all of which are desirable” (Heydon et al., 2022, p. 21); these pedagogies are “monsters” (p. 21). The text further explains that educators must “account for...what gets produced in and through literacy education” (p. 21). With this idea in mind, Lori incorporated a “Make and Share Literacy Fair” assignment, explaining that

Teachers often search for resources on the internet to support ELA teaching/learning in their classroom. How do we know if these resources can support the diverse learners in our classes or whether/how they might become pedagogical monsters?

PSTs were invited to “research, critically evaluate, and share a literacy resource that can be used in an elementary literacy classroom.” Tara-Lynn, as part of a Teaching Reading Toolkit, similarly asked PSTs to “take a critical lens to how this strategy can support readers but also what cautions you will keep in mind as an educator ...”

The critical lens was also employed when introducing decodables. We both engaged in more focused conversation around decodables than in previous teaching. We acknowledged that in most recent years our focus, and that of the surrounding school boards, was on leveled texts. Looking back, we thought about the ways we had used decodables in our careers. In our initial year as elementary teaching colleagues, we selected a program with printable decodables, recalling them as often disengaging, black and white printouts. The resurgence of decodables in relation to SOR was observed by our PSTs as they also noticed the removal of leveled texts in place of decodables. This banning or removal led Tara-Lynn to invite PSTs to explore examples of both levelled texts and decodable texts and create a comparison T-chart to identify the purpose of each. As PSTs identified the purposes of each, many were drawn to the decodables. Contemporary versions are colourful, include better imagery, and are available in a digital format. This discussion offered a space to consider the pedagogy that surrounds the type of text along with the affordances and consequences.

#### *Discussion: Unpacking Movements*

This study examined the relational movements of teacher education literacies practices with/in a context fraught with debates about the “right” way to teach reading (Soler, 2016) supported through the SOR movement (e.g., OHRC, 2022). Entangled with/in the production of these pedagogies were our intentions to prepare PSTs for this challenging context, our previous histories in sharing pedagogical resources, and the social/political/theoretical/historical context itself, with each element having agency (Barad, 2007). The research design invited additional relational elements to this entanglement: our relationships as critical friends and colleagues in the past and present, and the digital tools that we used for annotation and live notetaking as we met together over Zoom to share teaching artifacts.

Our inquiry was oriented through posthumanism and focused on the “processes, becomings, movements, and fluidity” (Kuby et al., 2019, p. 12) in our teacher education literacies pedagogies as we examined ourselves-in-practice (Strom et al., 2018). “*Thinking*

with” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) theories of entanglement and intra-actions (Barad, 2007) directed our lens toward the intra-actions of context  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  pedagogies that produced these movements. We use the bi-directional arrows to signify that the movements in our pedagogies did not always follow a linear pathway forward but moved more fluidly in an ebb and flow as the context pushed against our pedagogies, and our pedagogies pushed back.

The data show many instances where the challenging context (Pearson, 2004) provoked movements in our pedagogies. Within this context, the advocating of code-based approaches as the best or only way of teaching (Holston et al., 2024; OHRC, 2022) alongside (mis)conceptions of what balanced literacy (Cummins, 2022) is or what it can do (OHRC, 2022) were forces that pushed against our pedagogies provoking us toward our reconsideration of what to include in our pedagogies and how (e.g., running records example). Added to this were accusations of teacher educators being uninformed (Seidenberg, 2017) and at fault for children failing to learn to read (Aukerman, 2022; OHRC, 2022).

The context also prompted changes to our syllabi. We were concerned about being “misunderstood” (Tara-Lynn) given the practices of scanning syllabi for key words (Hoffman et al., 2020; Holston et al., 2024; OHRC, 2022) without further opportunities to discuss the content or our teaching. In response, Tara-Lynn revised her syllabi to name “both the acquisition of skills/strategies and opportunities for building identities and belonging” and Lori revised her syllabi, specifically naming phonics terms to make content about phonics more visible. Despite these syllabi revisions suggesting change, the reality was that this was not a fulsome change to our practice. Both past and present, we consistently taught with expansive understandings of literacies. Further, we had consistently taught about phonics despite accusations in the field that we had “deflected” (Seidenberg et al, 2020, p. S12) or neglected this content (Holston et al., 2024; OHRC, 2022).

The context prompted us to expand our discussions on code-based skills and introduce new content. For example, for the first time, and in response to student questions about the SOR context, we both directly named terms like CVC/CVCC, schwa, and morphology in our teaching. We added content about decodable texts; this was spurred on in Tara-Lynn’s class when the PSTs witnessed the banning of levelled texts in classrooms and the replacement of these with decodable texts. In this example, and others, we altered our pedagogies to show instructional practices in relation to each other and invited PSTs to analyze the purpose of literacies pedagogies for each.

Returning to the example of running records, we named this practice as contentious (OHRC, 2022) and recognized shifting guidance about its use as it aligned with the *balanced literacy* approach (Stouffer & Van Dyke, 2023). We also believed that teachers continued to use running records due to its benefits (Stouffer, 2021). Rather than ignoring this practice altogether, we shifted our focus toward supporting PSTs in recognizing “What is the current debate about their usefulness?” (Tara-Lynn’s slide). The inclusion of resources from multiple and opposing instructional approaches dismantles the either/or approach to instruction (e.g., Goodwin & Jiménez, 2020; MacPhee et al., 2021; Yaden et al., 2021). Even as we felt the context provoking movements in our pedagogies, it was not a unidirectional force.



*Thinking with theory* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) as we examined ourselves-in-practice (Strom et al., 2018) opened up opportunities to view our pedagogies in new ways. Where we had initially viewed our pedagogies as reacting to a contentious context (OHRC, 2022; SHRC, 2023), analysis helped to reveal the agency of our pedagogies (Barad, 2007). Our pedagogies moved against the context, holding space for more expansive understandings of literacies that honour cultural and linguistic diversity as well as diversity of instructional models (e.g., Heydon et al., 2022) amidst a context of narrowing pedagogies (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021). To do so, we named the context as polarizing, inviting the PSTs to contemplate a complexified view of pedagogy (Tara-Lynn) where no pedagogy is innocent (Lori). We discussed an array of instructional methods (e.g., balanced literacy, code-based, whole language) (Hammond, 1999; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022) and intentionally focused on nurturing the PSTs' critical thinking skills. For example, we each had assignments (*Make and Share Literacy Fair*, Lori; *Reading Toolkit*, Tara-Lynn) that invited PSTs to evaluate materials for how they worked rather than the name of the instructional model (Hammond, 1999; see also Table 1), or by categorizing materials by whether they were promoted by SOR or not (Holston et al., 2024; OHRC, 2022).

As we moved against the context, we increased our teaching about theoretical concepts, including those associated with SOR. Though it may seem ironic to consider our increased teaching about SOR theories as moving against the context, we taught with the intention of highlighting how the field was continuing to move (Duke & Cartwright, 2021), underscoring that the field of reading instruction and research is “evolving” (ILA, n.d., n.p.) and not settled or static (Cummins, 2022; Goodwin & Jiménez, 2020). As we explained the theoretical and instructional landscape of literacy teaching, we attempted to avoid sharing our personal stance to enable the PSTs to make their own philosophical and instructional decisions (Darling-Hammond, 2023). It seemed PSTs felt theories were stable and that they needed to commit to a particular approach for their career. Lori's explanation to her class that her theoretical and instructional understandings had expanded over time left one PST questioning “You're allowed to do that?” (Critical Friend Conversation).

Within these movements, we emphasized the view of a teacher as a professional (Darling-Hammond, 2023; Grimmert, 2022), and as more than a juggler (Heydon et al., 2022) who was simply learning “new tricks” despite literature that emphasizes movement toward training approaches (Hindman et al. 2022). Though we were aware of this teaching, *thinking with theory* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) prompted us to a closer examination of our pedagogies and what was informing them. Through analysis, we recognized that our beliefs about the purpose of teacher education were entangled in the production of our pedagogies. Like Grimmert (2022), we viewed our role as teacher educators as preparing teachers to be decision makers and curriculum makers (Grimmett, 2022). We viewed “a commitment to open inquiry, the enlargement of perspectives, and the crossing of boundaries [as]... critical features of the ideal of university education” (Darling-Hammond, 2023, p. 155). This view is at odds with the mandating of teaching SOR and evaluating compliance of these methods (Hoffman et al., 2020; Holston et al., 2024; OHRC 2022).

### *Final Thoughts*

This S-STEP uncovered elements of which we previously unaware. We had originally viewed our questions about the SOR movement as entangled with our

understandings of instructional methods and the ways these methods work (Hammond, 1999) and their theoretical underpinnings (Stooke, 2020; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). The research confirmed these entanglements and also made visible our beliefs about the purpose of teacher education and the role of teacher educators within this entanglement (Darling-Hammond, 2023; Grimmett, 2022). As we considered the intra-actions of context ← → pedagogy, we uncovered the pedagogies as resisting or pushing back against the context (Heydon, et al., 2022; Kuby et al., 2019). Initially, we viewed the movement in our pedagogies as responding to the context, but *thinking with theory* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) enabled us to see the agency of our pedagogies (Barad, 2007) that we were pushing back on the context, holding space for expansive understandings of literacies (Heydon et al., 2022) and enabling PSTs to “acculturate persons into the culture of curriculum making and pedagogical inventiveness” (Grimmett, 2022, p. 38). As our pedagogies move with/in our turbulent contexts, we continue to “navigate the terrain thoughtfully” (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021, p. S96), but with a renewed committed to pedagogical decision-making, inspired by Darling-Hammond (2023) and Grimmett (2022). We invite others to join us in asking, *how can we create a culture that honours the expansiveness of research in English Language Arts and creates spaces for curriculum-making and pedagogical inventiveness?*

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