

The OHRC 'Right to Read' Report:

A Sincere,
Passionate, but
Flawed Call to Action

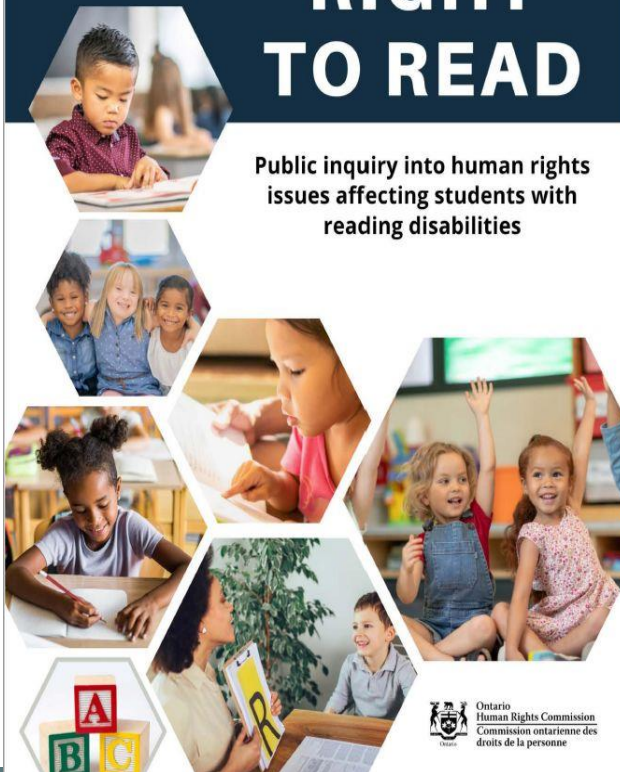
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Western University Webinar, May 9 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RIGHT TO READ

Public inquiry into human rights
issues affecting students with
reading disabilities



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Dialogue & Commentary

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

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Abstract

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

What the OHRC Report Gets Right

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

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

Undermining the Central Message

Unfortunately, the authors of the *Right to Read* report risk undermining their own urgent and powerful message when they stray from the specific challenges faced by children with dyslexia, and other forms of reading difficulties, into a more general condemnation of the Ontario educational system.

The report makes two dubious claims to 'explain' the reading difficulties of children in Ontario schools.

First, it attempts to make a case that Ontario schools are failing to teach reading skills effectively for all students, not just those with specific reading disabilities.

Second, it attributes this 'failure' to the fact that most Ontario schools implement a 'balanced' approach to reading instruction, which they claim pays insufficient attention to teaching sound/letter correspondences (phonemic awareness and phonics) in a systematic, explicit and intensive way.

Toronto Sun, March 1, 2022

Ontario schools need sweeping changes to help children learn to read: Human Rights Commission

The report concluded that overwhelming scientific evidence on the best way to teach reading has been ignored

Jacque Miller
Mar 01, 2022

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, and says the youngest children should be screened twice a year to pick up problems early. ...

The report concluded that overwhelming scientific evidence on the best way to teach reading has been ignored and Ontario students are suffering the sometimes lifelong consequences. ...

However, while there is an “enormous body of settled scientific research on how children learn to read and the most effective way to teach them,” those methods are not used in Ontario, said the report.

It recommended the Ontario Grade 1 to 8 language curriculum be replaced with an “explicit, systematic approach based on reading science” called structured literacy. ...

[A ‘balanced literacy’] approach has been discredited in “many studies, expert reviews and reports on teaching” and is ineffective for teaching a significant proportion of students to read words, said the report. ...

“Currently, Ontario teachers are required to deliver a curriculum that is inconsistent with a science-based core curriculum that meets the right to read.”

Contrary to the unsubstantiated claims of the OHRC, Canada is among the top performers internationally and across Canada in reading performance.

PISA 2018 Data (OECD, 2019) (79 countries' reading performance compared)

Ontario average for English language schools was 527. This places Ontario English language schools' reading performance second in Canada (behind only Alberta), and behind only China (4 provinces) and Singapore internationally.

Ontario 15-year-old students' performance is far superior to that of most other English-dominant countries (e.g., UK - 504; US - 505; Australia - 503; New Zealand - 506)

Contrary to OHRC claims, Ontario students' reading scores (as measured by PISA) are not in decline. They have been stable between 2000 and 2018. According to the OECD, this stable performance in reading over the past 20 years contrasts with the 'steadily negative' trend experienced by countries such as Australia, Finland, Iceland, and New Zealand.

Grade 8 Cross-Canada Assessment

Pan-Canadian Assessment Program

PCAP 2019

Report on the Pan-Canadian Assessment of
Mathematics, Reading, and Science

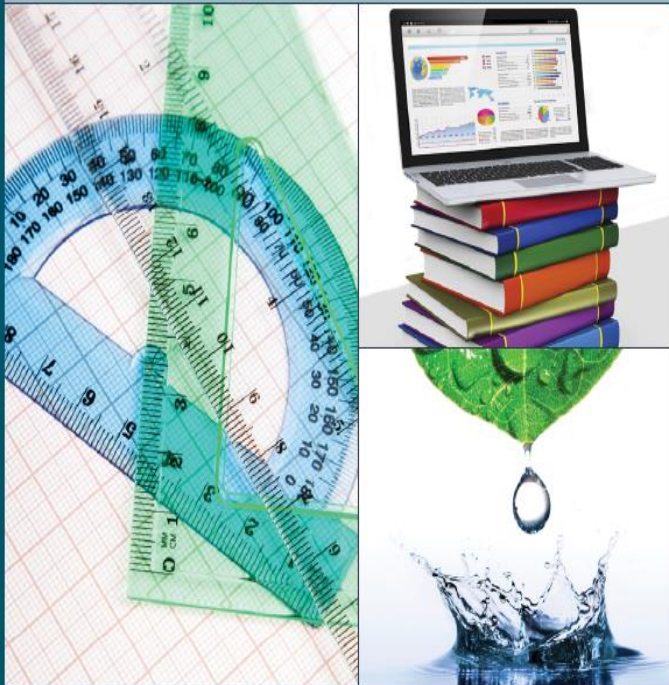
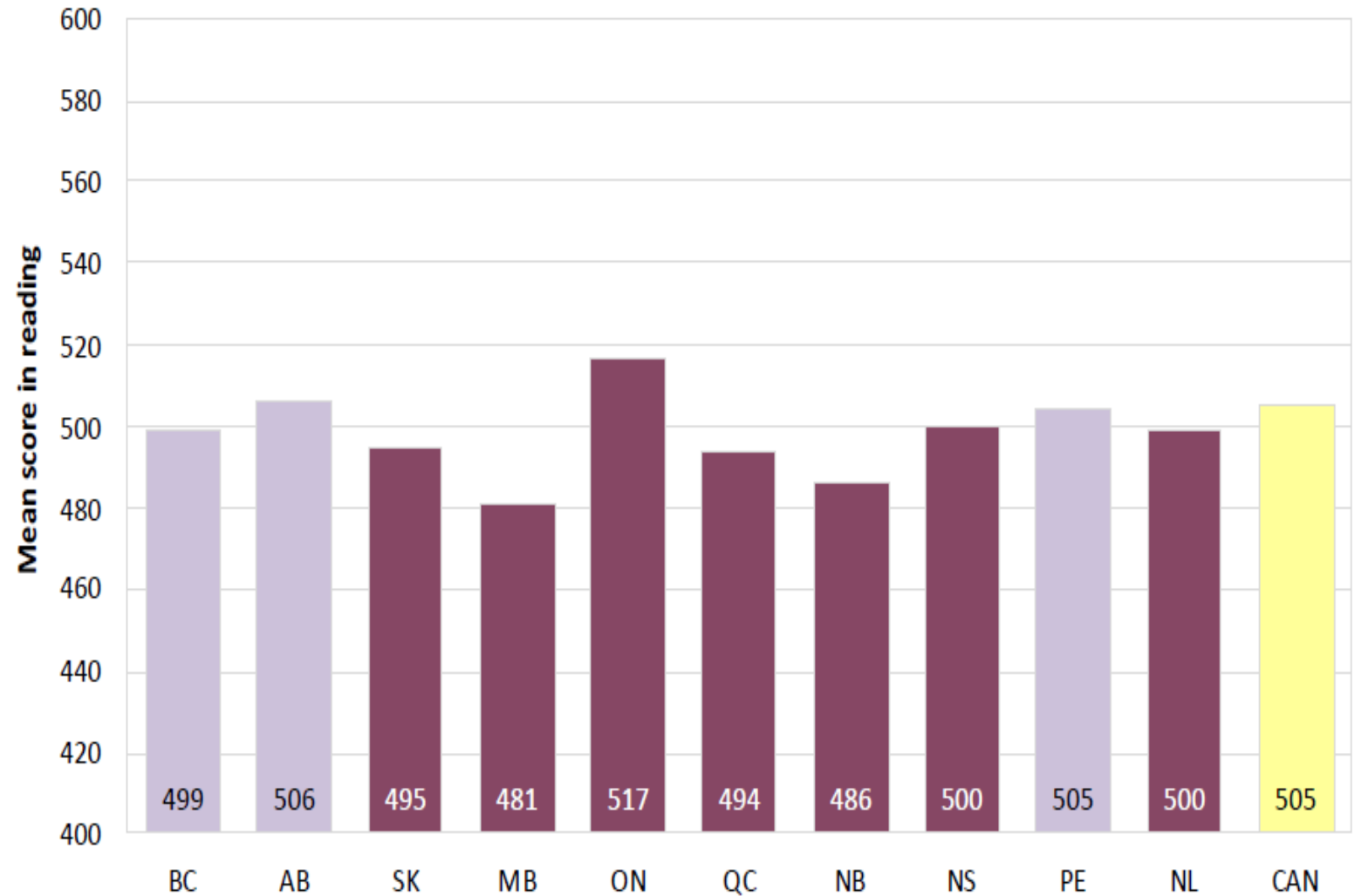


Figure 2.1 Achievement scores in reading

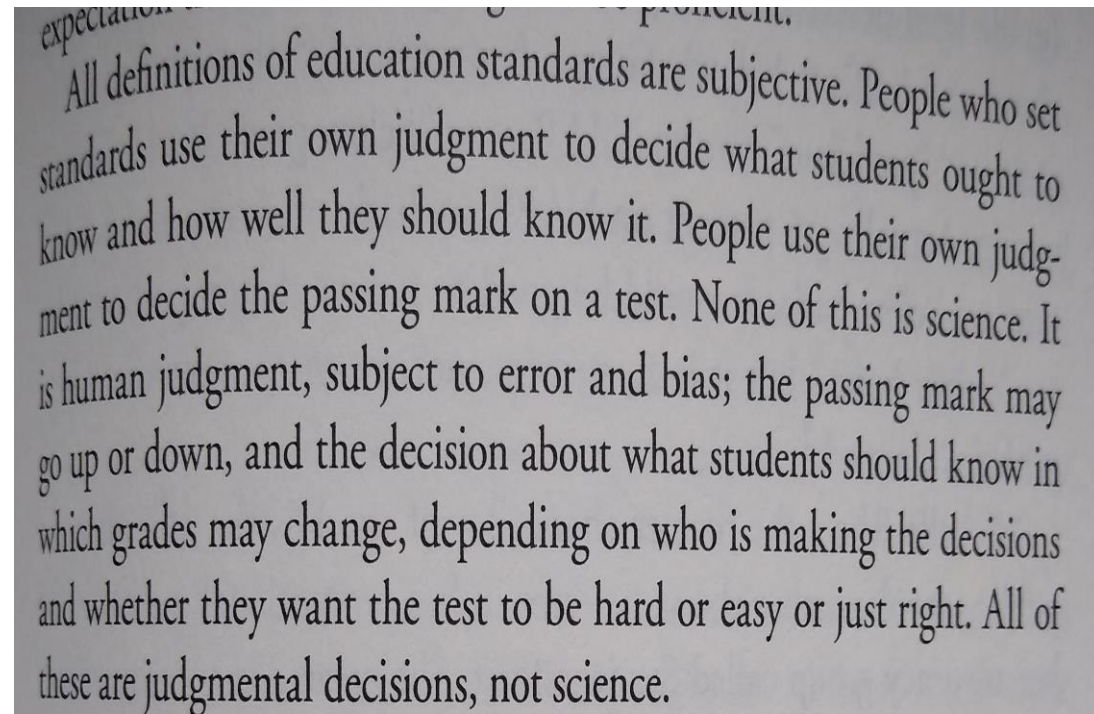


Note: Darker shade denotes significant difference compared to Canada

What Do EQAO Scores Tell Us about Reading Achievement?

Education Quality Accountability Office reading assessment data

- According to the EQAO's 2018–19 Provincial Elementary School Report, ... **only 74% of all Grade 3 students met the provincial reading standard** on the primary-division assessment. ...
- This means that one-quarter of Grade 3 students in Ontario are not good readers and are already at risk of, or have started to experience, the negative impacts described earlier in this report. As well, only 62% of students met the standard unassisted (without scribing or assistive technology). ...
- On the junior-division assessment, **81% of Grade 6 students met the provincial reading standard**. ... In other words, in 2018–2019, one in five Grade 6 students struggled with reading. Only 72% of students met the standard unassisted

A photograph of a book page with text about education standards. The text is slightly blurred and tilted. It discusses how education standards are subjective and based on human judgment rather than science.

expectation...
All definitions of education 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 judgmental decisions, not science.

Diane Ravitch (2013). *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*. (p. 47)

Conclusion

The International and cross-Canada research data clearly refute the OHRC claim that Ontario is failing to teach its students to read, as alleged by the OHRC *Right to Read* report.

Ontario education is *not* experiencing a crisis with respect to literacy outcomes. The OECD PISA data demonstrates that Ontario 15-year-old students, on average, are reading significantly better than their peers in most other English-speaking countries, as well as outperforming students in countries around the world.

However, as argued by the OHRC report, Ontario could be doing a much better job of addressing the reading difficulties of students who are experiencing dyslexia.

The Myth of Phonics as Panacea

- The OHRC report locates its analysis squarely within the 'Science of Reading' movement in the United States (e.g., p. 3 OHRC Executive Summary).
- The claim in all these accounts is that there is consensus among the scientific community, supported by a vast amount of research evidence, that explicit 'stand-alone' systematic phonics instruction is a crucial element in helping children learn to read.
- Within this narrative, systematic phonics instruction is typically contrasted with balanced reading instruction, which is caricatured either as not teaching phonics or teaching it in an ineffective 'non-systematic' way.

The science of reading

This report uses terms like the "science of reading," "reading science," "research-based," "evidence-based" and "science-based" to refer to the vast body of scientific research that has studied how reading skills develop and how to ensure the highest degree of success in teaching all children to read. The science of reading includes results from thousands of peer-reviewed studies and meta-analyses that use rigorous scientific methods. The science of reading is based on expertise from many fields including education, special education, developmental psychology, educational psychology, cognitive science and more.

Demonization of 'Balanced Literacy' as 'Whole Language in Disguise'

"Approaches such as...balanced literacy do not complement text reading and writing with strong, systematic, skills-based instruction, in spite of their claims. Only programs that teach all components of reading, as well as writing and oral language, will be able to prevent and ameliorate reading problems in the large number of children at risk" (Louisa Moats 'Whole Language High-Jinks' files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED498005.pdf).

(Quoted in OHRC full report Chapter 8, p. 13)

- The OHRC report does acknowledge that more than just phonics is required in an effective reading program:

"Early word-reading skills are critical, but they are not the only necessary components in reading outcomes. 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" (Executive Summary, p. 5).


- Unfortunately, the report says nothing more about what the 'balance' should be between these components and explicit, systematic phonics instruction.

Bowers' (2020) systematic analyses of meta-analyses

Educational Psychology Review (2020) 32:681–705
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09515-y>

REVIEW ARTICLE

Reconsidering the Evidence That Systematic Phonics Is More Effective Than Alternative Methods of Reading Instruction

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Abstract

There is a widespread consensus in the research community that reading instruction in English should first focus on teaching letter (grapheme) to sound (phoneme) correspondences rather than adopt meaning-based reading approaches such as whole language instruction. That is, initial reading instruction should emphasize systematic phonics. In this systematic review, I show that this conclusion is not justified based on (a) an exhaustive review of 12 meta-analyses that have assessed the efficacy of systematic phonics and (b) summarizing the outcomes of teaching systematic phonics in all state schools in England since 2007. The failure to obtain evidence in support of systematic phonics should not be taken as an argument in support of whole language and related methods, but rather, it highlights the need to explore alternative approaches to reading instruction.



Conclusion

Despite the widespread support for systematic phonics within the research literature, there is little or no evidence that this approach is more effective than many of the most common alternative methods used in school, including whole language. This does not mean that learning grapheme-phoneme correspondences is unimportant, but it does mean that there is little or no empirical evidence that systematic phonics leads to better reading outcomes. (p. 703)

Comprehensive reviews of the research literature support a balanced approach to reading instruction that integrates an explicit focus on phonics with strong promotion of print access and active engagement with reading and writing for authentic (meaning-focused) purposes

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RESEARCH REPORT

Review of Education  **BERA**

Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers' practices for teaching phonics and reading

Dominic Wyse | Alice Bradbury

- On the basis of a systematic qualitative meta-synthesis of the empirical evidence, University College of London researchers Dominic Wyse and Alice Bradbury (2022) concluded that the intensive phonics approach implemented over the past 20 years in England “is not sufficiently underpinned by research evidence” (p. 1).
- Their overall conclusion is that: “**The teaching of phonics and reading in curriculum policy and practice should more closely reflect the evidence that *contextualised teaching of reading, or balanced instruction, is the most effective way to teach reading***” (p. 2).
- *These findings illustrate the fact that, contrary to OHRC claims regarding consensus in the scientific community, there is significant ongoing debate among educational researchers about how phonics instruction should be integrated into early reading instruction.*



Integrating Literacy and Science Instruction in Kindergarten: Results From the Efficacy Study of *Zoology One*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the efficacy, cost, and implementation of an integrated science and literacy curriculum for kindergarten. The study was conducted in a large urban district and included 1,589 students in 71 classrooms in 21 schools. The research includes a multi-site cluster-randomized controlled trial and mixed-methods cost and implementation studies. Analysis revealed significant impacts on comprehension, letter-naming fluency, and motivation to read. No main impacts were observed on decoding, word identification, or writing; however, exploratory analysis revealed that students whose teachers implemented the treatment with fidelity performed statistically significantly better in writing and decoding. The cost to produce the observed effects was estimated at \$480 per student, two-thirds of which was borne by the school. Despite this cost, treatment classrooms achieved savings by using an average of three fewer instructional programs than control classrooms. Teachers reported positive effects from the integrated curriculum on student engagement, learning, and behavior.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Early literacy; early science; curriculum; cluster-randomized controlled trial; cost study; motivation to read; comprehension

Effective reading instruction involves a balance between code-focused instruction and high-volume print exposure

“Program elements include code-focused instruction emphasizing alphabet knowledge, phonics, and phonological awareness. ... Significant evidence supports the effectiveness of code-focused reading instruction for beginning readers.” (p. 3)

...

“Evidence further suggests that high-volume print exposure yields important benefits for beginning readers (Jorm & Share, 1983; Share, 1995). This includes both complex-text exposure via teacher read-alouds or shared reading, and teacher-supported independent reading practice in leveled high-interest texts (Duke, 2000; Miller & Moss, 2013; Reutzel et al., 2008; Topping et al., 2007). ... The explanatory power of print exposure on reading achievement increases as students age, suggesting that the benefits of early high-volume reading are exponential.” (p. 4)

The Central Roles of Motivating Literacy and Engagement with Text in Developing Strong Reading Comprehension Skills

Duke, Ward, & Pearson (The Reading Teacher, 2021)

“Given the absolute necessity of foundational word-reading skills, it is tempting to think that instruction should begin with a focus on developing those and later turn to comprehension. **However, research has supported a simultaneous, rather than sequential, model of reading instruction.** Along with the development of phonological awareness, print concepts, and alphabet knowledge, young learners in preschool and early elementary school benefit from efforts to develop oral language comprehension, including efforts to develop oral comprehension of written language (i.e., through read-alouds; e.g., Cervetti, 2020; Swanson et al., 2011). (p. 665).

Engaging with text—whether through reading widely and in volume, discussing and analyzing texts read, or writing about or in response to texts read—is central to developing students’ reading comprehension. (p. 668)

... motivation activates engaged reading behavior, which in turn affects the degree to which instruction leads to greater achievement.” (p. 669)

Duke & Cartwright (Reading Research Quarterly, 2021)

“Reading motivation involves expecting value in, having interest in, and having a desire to read; motivation facilitates engagement, which is active participation in reading and interaction with text. (p. S35)

It is critical that practitioners are presented with a model of reading that names vocabulary and makes clear that vocabulary knowledge may not only be affecting students’ language comprehension but also their word recognition. (p. S29)

Motivation and engagement also reflect active, self-regulated reading and predict reading ability above and beyond word recognition and language comprehension. (p. S31)

Efforts to implement practices for fostering reading motivation have been shown to improve reading achievement.” (p. S31)

Conclusions

- The OHRC analysis highlights the urgent need for Ontario educators and policymakers to set up an **identification and intervention infrastructure** to ensure that children who are having difficulty learning to read receive timely and effective support to assist their journey into literacy.
- Improving provision for children experiencing dyslexia does **not** require a major overhaul of the ways in which Ontario schools teach reading. Ontario schools (particularly English-medium schools) are among the top performers both across Canadian provinces and in the OECD PISA assessments of reading performance among 15-year-old students.
- The **lack of attention in the OHRC 'Right to Read' report** to evidence-based dimensions of effective reading instruction other than phonics and word-study skills, such as the importance of maximizing print access and literacy engagement, risks communicating to policymakers, parents, and educators that intensive phonics instruction is a panacea for resolving all forms of reading difficulties.
- Policies implemented on the basis of this type of rhetoric, such as the US Reading First initiative, have produced dismal outcomes. These policies also clearly violate the National Reading Panel's (NRP) (2000) finding that systematic phonics instruction was **not** effective in improving reading comprehension after grade 1 for normally achieving and low-achieving students. **The NRP explicitly endorsed a balanced approach to reading instruction** and warned 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).
- The research clearly highlights the need for instruction that ensures that students acquire decoding/foundational skills, while **at the same time** becoming motivated and actively engaged with literacy. This is the essence of balanced/contextualized reading instruction.
- Far more attention needs to be paid to the **complexities of identifying dyslexia** among students from low-income families, multilingual home environments, and Indigenous communities. The validity of current assessment tools for these culturally and linguistically diverse students is questionable, at best.

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