The OHRC’s ‘Right to Read’ inquiry is constructed upon a set of values that all educators and stakeholders share: the right to read. The R2R is connected to many other Rights-related calls and mandates; for instance, the UNC on the Rights of the Child mandate children’s rights to be heard and freedom of expression “orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the children’s choice.”1 Childhood is a “critical period for the realization of these rights”2 and they must accompany the critical rights in our settler colonial context to Indigenous languages and literacies as called for in numerous reports3, 4 and policies. Further, UNESCO5 calls for inclusion of critical literacies, attending to reading of new text forms, and educational reform predicated in teacher professionalism. Collectively, these calls share an emphasis on contextualization, responsiveness, and collective knowledge-generation.

However, in lieu of discerning how to better serve children by drawing on the full breadth of knowledge and research available, this report reifies the authors’ position as the scientific knowledge, thereby privileging itself as “policy-based evidence” within a narrow and highly selective collection of certain evidence followed by proposed ‘solutions’ that are normative,8 and often linked to commercial programs. The report ignores calls to diversify conceptualizations of what research can be considered part of a pluralized “sciences of reading”9, evidence that there is no single, agreed upon approach to teaching reading to children who struggle with print literacy10,11, evidence that the vast majority of children in Ontario are well-served by public education12 and that there are numerous reasons for why children struggle with their reading achievement13. It perpetuates binaries and a derision of teachers’ knowledge14 and public education, rather than supporting their capacities as adaptive experts15. Though the broad literature reflects the complexity of reading under-achievement16, the report singles out systematic phonics instruction as the ‘perfect method’17 or ‘silver bullet’18. Contrary to the report’s characterization of what is currently happening in Education, researchers in the literacy education field agree that systematic phonics instruction benefits children’s reading accuracy; where it differs from the report, is the understanding that systematic phonics should be one part of a repertoire of strategies19,20 in a professional teacher’s co-development of reading pedagogy. Western’s courses, for example, include the teaching of systematic phonics, along with a range of modes and strategies that include attention to all of the language arts, embedded within culturally responsive teaching, differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, and integrated attention to reconciliation, equity diversity and inclusion - in both our Initial Teacher Education, and Additional Qualifications programs.

There is no longitudinal empirical evidence that the implementation of phonics-based curricular reforms in the US has systematically solved the problems of unequal and inequitable access to early reading for all children21. While there are quasi-experimental data on the efficacy of program A or program B, the curriculum and teacher training policy issue, is a large-scale system implementation of proposed reforms based on scientific findings. Schools are not labs, but complex institutional systems22, 23, 24, 25 and large-scale adoption of recommendations much consider implementation in ways that are appropriate to existing successful practices, local and individual needs26. Ignored in the report are hundreds of published papers over decades27, including those that reported on the US No Child Left Behind Policies that demonstrate that mandates of phonics-based programs have led to a host of collateral educational effects and failed to address the systematic underperformance of cultural and linguistic minority student populations as well as and historically and currently marginalised working-class kids28, 29, 30.

On one hand, the authors explicitly limit the problem of reading to a focus on ‘dyslexia’, yet on the other hand, their recommendations exert significant overreach from this focus by arguing for the removal of certain reading strategies for all children31. There is no clear scientific consensus that difficulties or differential achievement patterns in early reading and literacy more generally can be attributed to ‘dyslexia’, which itself is variously and contentiously defined.32 In a parallel move, the report speaks generally about ‘literacy’, but narrows the matter to reading – specifically initial reading, while selectively excluding or purposively interpreting data (e.g., PISA, TIMMS) on writing33, 34 spelling and other language capacities35. The report is not informed by (critical) disability studies (or any experiential knowing) privileging those who have historically spoken for/over ‘disabled’ people36 and perpetuating a deficit tone toward difference. The intersectionality discussions are valuable but are unable to drill down into specific language groups, second language/dialect issues of specific Canadian First Nations and immigrant communities37.

The recommendation to remove all references to cueing and cueing systems38 ignores the value of these strategies in the social practice of reading39 and ignores research that contends that a balance of approaches is indeed “the most effective way to teach reading”.40 A set of binary41 straw person arguments are set up using historic debates around whole language: e.g., that advocates of ‘balanced reading’ programs preclude curricular foci on direct or explicit instruction on phonemic awareness, grapho/phonemic capacity etc. and an ‘assumed reader’. They assert a normative and unsubstantiated claim that a version of phonics will solve or address the problems of unequal and poor performance in early reading, with longitudinal effects on student growth, development, and academic
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achievement. A similar argument was made in the US NRP and the UK Commission despite a lack of “strong RCT evidence that any one form of systematic phonics is more effective than any other.”42 Consensus43 within the Science of Learning community recommends forwarding an understanding of why phonics is so central, (especially in early instruction), but moves beyond phonics alone to demonstrate how it is integrated appropriately in a well-balanced literacy instruction program44, 45, 46, 47.

Finally, there is little clear consensus even amongst phonics-advocates about which scientific version of phonics instruction ‘works’. A review of the UK phonics literature and policies counts at least a half dozen contending approaches to phonics (e.g., synthetic, analytic, linguistic based, etc.48) with minimal effect and “not sufficiently underpinned by research evidence.”49 Phonics research is increasing matched with commercial programs spawning an international cottage and corporate industry. Research has tied past government mandates of commercial programs to inappropriate financial interests littered with conflicts of interest50, 51 leading researchers to examine the ethics and the fragile relationship between research, policy, practice, and government intervention.52

We agree that an inability to read presents a crisis for children who struggle, and their families.53 The complexity of learning to read demands that we make complementary efforts 54, 55 through an inclusive portfolio56 that views phonics as a necessary but insufficient component in unlocking the transition to reading. Readers must gain all of the important knowledges of “vocabulary, complex syntax, text structures concepts and general knowledge that comes from wide reading.”57 58. A reconciliatory view of the historic debates in the field59 cautions against overcorrection (adopting singular solutions and prohibiting other approaches); in favour of taking a ‘both/and’ approach. We applaud the report’s recommendation to set up an assessment and intervention infrastructure. Western’s annual course and program planning will attend to the recommendations from the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Ontario College of Teachers. And we will include knowledge and strategies - grounded in research - that serve most of our Teacher Candidates well as they enter the classroom to work with all children and youth.

Western Recommendations

Faculties, Teachers and Schools are continually called upon to respond to new knowledge, demographic changes, new forms of work, youth pathways, technologies, and planning for a post-pandemic culture and so on. Contrary to the OHRC claims, Canada’s record on reading performance of students (Ontario 2nd) is among the top performers globally.50 At Western, we work closely with our Board partners and engage in ongoing annual programmatic research to ensure our courses are responsive to new research. Additional funding61, 62 would allow us to expand on these efforts by reinstating the Teaching Literacy in Kindergarten course or doubling the length of the mandatory Teaching Reading to Struggling Readers course we have offered since 201563 (the mandatory expansion of the B.E.d program to two years came with a decrease of approximately 30% in government funding). We are committed to bringing knowledges and practices from all relevant research to support struggling readers, as we do for all students. We would add:

- Invest in support for families through early literacy64, 65 family programs66 to support school success67;
- Maintain the focus of concern on all struggling readers, not only those with dyslexia;
- Build on the strengths of teachers whose concern is for all students, including all struggling readers68.
- Strengthen Response to Intervention approaches including appropriate use of early screening efforts, adequately resourced in-school intensive instruction as imperfect tools69 in support of classroom programming70, 71 . Invest in sufficient staffing of qualified teachers to staff Tier 1 and Tier 2 specialist staff support in schools72;
- Remove thresholds that create unnecessary barriers to service; daily classroom assessments by educated professional teachers can inform the need for support but pathways to those supports must be available.
- Invest in comprehensive and responsive ongoing professional development (beyond a single MOE focus) that supports teachers’ goals to develop knowledge critical to their work,73 extending the positive reports of learning reported by Teacher candidates74 especially where researchers and practitioners can be brought together75.
- Continue inclusion of systematic phonics instruction 76, 77, 78 that works on a continuum to ensure we are providing explicit direct instruction at the point in a child’s learning when it is most needed to develop all literacy skills including oral language, reading comprehension and writing. A helpful example is offered by Burkins and Yates, 2021.79 Reduce and cap class sizes in the early years and primary grades to allow teachers to do this work well.
- Attend to Universal Design for Learning instruction that “promotes both short-term acquisition and long-term development in more complex aspects of literacy, and whether it is differentiated enough to reduce initial disparities without compromising the longer-term needs.”80
- Collaborate with communities to develop culturally appropriate materials for students from non-Anglo-Canadian culture, including Indigenous students.
- Do not mandate specific commercial programs. Programs come and go, and they are too often tied up in the financial interests of businesses or individuals. Rather, work with teachers to critically select appropriate materials81 understanding the limitations of what they offer and how they may be used in a comprehensive program offering.
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ENDNOTES

8. (International Literacy Association, 2020, p. 1)
9. [e.g., International Literacy Association, 2016; Johnston & Scanlon, 2021; Worthy et al., 2018]
14. McNaughton, S. (2020). The literacy landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand: What we know, what needs fixing and what we should prioritize. Office of the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor, NZ.
24. The Literacy Research Association https://lraprod.wpengine.com/
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38 Report reference.
60 O’Grady et al., Measuring up: Canadian Results of the OECD PISA 2018 Study: The performance of Canadian 15-year-olds in Reading, Mathematics and Science.
61 Conference Board of Canada. (2019). The Economic Case for Investing in Education. Ottawa, ON.
63 In 2015, the Ontario Ministry of Education extended the Initial Teacher Education program to four terms from two, doubling the time students have spent learning. In this move, our program increased the time in Language Arts and introduced additional courses, including Teaching Struggling Readers.
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80 McNaughton, S. (2020). The literacy landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand: What we know, what needs fixing and what we should prioritize. Office of the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor, NZ.