

Reading is a human right

In 1961, the [Ontario Human Rights Commission](#) was formed to “prevent discrimination and to promote and advance human rights” in the Canadian province. It is with this remit that, at the end of February, the Commission [released its findings](#) of its Right to Read inquiry.



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The inquiry report is vast and cannot be downloaded as a pdf. Instead, we have to navigate through a number of different headings. Heroically, I still managed to find [a reference](#) to my own book, *The Power of Explicit Teaching and Direct Instruction* – the ego finds a way. However, for most people, the still substantial [executive summary](#) should be enough to give a flavour of the findings.

Perhaps of most interest to readers of this article are the findings and recommendations on curriculum and instruction. For the first time, we have something approaching a clear description of that slipperiest of eels – balanced literacy:

Ontario’s Kindergarten Program, 2016 and Grades 1–8 Language curriculum, related Ministry guides for reading instruction, board resources, and teacher education provided by Ontario faculties of education emphasize teaching early reading skills using cueing systems for word solving and balanced literacy. Cueing systems encourage students to predict or guess words using cues or clues based on context or prior knowledge ...

Cueing systems and balanced literacy for word reading are consistent with a whole language philosophy which assumes that children will “discover” how to read through exposure to spoken and written language. In these approaches, students receive little or no direct, systematic instruction in the building blocks of written language such as phonemic awareness and phonics and how to use these skills to decode words.

Such an approach is, of course, a disaster – one most keenly felt by disadvantaged students and those with specific learning difficulties. The ‘cues’ that children are taught to use are compensation strategies typical of poor readers and are woeful for decoding complex text. The report makes plain that an alternative approach, structured literacy, is more effective:

The best way for students to gain word-reading skills, beginning in Kindergarten, is with explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and word-level decoding, learning grapheme-phoneme correspondences and how to use these to decode words, including blending sounds and segmenting words into sounds to read words and segmenting words into sounds



to write words. Explicit instruction includes more advanced skills as children progress, such as studying word structure and patterns (for example prefixes, word roots, suffixes). This explicit, systematic approach based on reading science is also referred to as structured literacy.

You may wonder what's new here. The evidence has been clear on the advantages of structured, code-based reading instruction for at least the last 20 years and yet school systems and education faculties have been ignoring it, as the report makes plain:

The inquiry found that pre-service teacher education courses and in-service Additional Qualifications (AQ) courses in reading ... focus on ineffective cueing systems and balanced literacy approaches (and discovery and play-based approaches in courses about Kindergarten). There is little time or instruction on making sure pre-service teachers

understand general language and early reading development.

In the face of such intransigence, what function will a reiteration of this evidence serve?

The difference is that this new report comes from a human rights perspective. Bizarrely, phonics denialists still see themselves as the virtuous ones. They do not realise they are the educational equivalent of anti-vaxxers. They assume that any criticism of Balanced Literacy – or whatever it is called now – comes from nasty right-wingers who have evil plans to wring all the joy out of childhood, and they obtain some support for this view from the general lack of interest in the issue from figures on the left of politics and its championing by figures on the right. As long as misguided children's authors can frame the issue politically, this perspective will persist.

And yet what could be more progressive than ensuring every child can read? Reading is a critical tool for acting in the contemporary world. Deny it to the disadvantaged and you reduce their agency. Despite [my differences](#) with the views of Paulo Freire, he saw this clearly. To further his aim of political change, he devoted his life to improving the literacy of peasants.

And we can forgive Freire some of his mistakes. When he was teaching in the 1960s, we did not have the mass of evidence available today.

Has the Ontario report got everything right? Maybe not. I was concerned by references to Universal Design for Learning, [an educational philosophy in search of an evidence base](#), but I was cheered to see a call for evidence-based criteria for the deployment of accommodations:

Accommodations (and modifications to curriculum expectations) should not be used as a substitute for teaching students to read. Accommodations should always be provided along with evidence-based curriculum and reading interventions.

We should apply that principle in Australia.

So, I welcome the report and I hope that it is able to achieve what other reports have failed to achieve – lasting and substantive change to the way early reading is taught.

This article originally appeared on the author's blog, [Filling the Pail](#).

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