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## Literacy Principles as a Tool for Policy Analysis: An Examination of the Values Embedded in Science of Reading Advocacy Documents

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**Abstract:** Debates around the Science of Reading have often been couched in consideration of research scholarship. However, before a meaningful dialogue centered on empirical evidence can fruitfully take place, there must be some clarity around shared literacy values, and around how those values might be addressed through instruction. Drawing on internationally accepted definitions and a long tradition of literacy scholarship, we identify a literacy values framework, along with 12 interdependent principles describing what literacy education should nurture and develop: capacity for communication; knowledge and understanding of the world; repertoires of purpose; capacity for

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understanding text; capacity for text composition; imagination and creativity; empathy; capacity for criticality; multimodal, embodied, and technological capacities; capacity for democratic citizenship; empowering literate identities; and requisite skills. An analysis using these principles was applied to two Science of Reading advocacy documents: *The Right to Read* report from Canada and *The Reading Guarantee* from Australia, revealing significant gaps in the types of literacy instruction being addressed and emphasized for literacy teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Science of Reading; literacy; reading; values; education policy; Canada; Australia

### **Principios de alfabetización como herramienta para el análisis de políticas: Un examen de los valores incorporados en los documentos de defensa de la ciencia de la lectura**

**Resumen:** Los debates en torno a la Ciencia de la Lectura suelen estar planteados en relación con la investigación académica. Sin embargo, antes de que pueda producirse un diálogo significativo centrado en la evidencia empírica, es necesario aclarar cuáles son los valores compartidos sobre la alfabetización y cómo esos valores podrían abordarse mediante la enseñanza. A partir de definiciones internacionalmente aceptadas y de una larga tradición de investigación en alfabetización, identificamos un marco de valores de alfabetización, junto con 12 principios interdependientes que describen lo que la educación en alfabetización debería fomentar y desarrollar: capacidad de comunicación; conocimiento y comprensión del mundo; repertorios de propósito; capacidad de comprensión textual; capacidad de producción de textos; imaginación y creatividad; empatía; capacidad de criticidad; capacidades multimodales, corporales y tecnológicas; capacidad para la ciudadanía democrática; construcción de identidades lectoras empoderadas; y habilidades necesarias. Un análisis basado en estos principios se aplicó a dos documentos de defensa de la Ciencia de la Lectura: *The Right to Read* de Canadá y *The Reading Guarantee* de Australia, revelando brechas significativas en los tipos de enseñanza de la alfabetización que se abordan y enfatizan en relación con la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de la lectura.

**Palabras clave:** Ciencia de la Lectura; alfabetización; lectura; valores; política educativa; Canadá; Australia

### **Princípios de alfabetização como ferramenta para a análise de políticas: Um exame dos valores incorporados em documentos de defesa da ciência da leitura**

**Resumo:** Os debates em torno da Ciência da Leitura frequentemente têm sido formulados em relação à pesquisa acadêmica. No entanto, antes que um diálogo significativo centrado em evidências empíricas possa ocorrer de forma produtiva, é necessário esclarecer quais são os valores compartilhados sobre alfabetização e como esses valores podem ser contemplados no ensino. Com base em definições internacionalmente aceitas e em uma longa tradição de pesquisa em alfabetização, identificamos um marco de valores de alfabetização, juntamente com 12 princípios interdependentes que descrevem o que a educação em alfabetização deve fomentar e desenvolver: capacidade de comunicação; conhecimento e compreensão do mundo; repertórios de propósito; capacidade de compreensão textual; capacidade de produção de textos; imaginação e criatividade; empatia; capacidade crítica; capacidades multimodais, corporais e tecnológicas; capacidade para a cidadania democrática; construção de identidades letradas empoderadas; e habilidades necessárias. Uma análise utilizando esses princípios foi aplicada a dois documentos de defesa da Ciência da Leitura: *The Right to Read* do Canadá e *The Reading Guarantee* da Austrália, revelando lacunas significativas nos tipos de ensino da alfabetização abordados e enfatizados para o ensino e a aprendizagem da leitura.

**Palavras-chave:** Ciência da Leitura; alfabetização; leitura; valores; política educacional; Canadá; Austrália

## Literacy Principles as a Tool for Policy Analysis: An Examination of the Values Embedded in Science of Reading Advocacy Documents

For decades, the question of how early literacy should be taught has been the subject of ongoing—and at times contentious—debate (Castles et al., 2018; Pearson, 2004; Solity, 2020). “The reading wars” was first used in 1961 by a journalist to describe this debate, but similar disagreements continue to frame much of the public dialogue on literacy education (Dejulio et al., 2024). The Science of Reading (SoR) has become the banner for the latest instantiation of an advocacy movement that sees itself very much on one side of those “wars,” and has spiked in popularity over the past decade. Advocates—including researchers, policy actors, and parent groups—have embraced the term as a call to align classroom practices with research evidence (Buckingham et al., 2013; Ehri, 2020; Ellis et al., 2023; Raynor et al., 2001; Seidenberg et al., 2018). Many have pushed for the adoption of particular approaches, including systematic synthetic phonics and structured literacy (Spear-Swerling, 2019), that heavily emphasize decoding development (Tierney & Pearson, 2024). Their advocacy movement has gained traction transnationally, with many parts of the English-speaking world aligning policies and practices with these approaches (Reinking et al., 2023; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

The movement’s critics, however, have countered that any SoR worthy of the name must include a richer trove of evidence, informed by research supporting additional kinds of approaches to teaching reading (Scull & Lyons, 2024; Tierney & Pearson, 2024; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Indeed, some have noted that treating SoR as if it were anchored in unified, uncontested scholarship risks oversimplifying both the history of reading research and the nature of scientific inquiry (Reinking et al., 2023). With all these voices in the mix, many claiming the SoR mantle, it is inevitable that there is no singular generally agreed-upon SoR: the phrase has been used in so many ways that it has no stable meaning (Aydarova, 2023). Meanwhile, the debates continue.

Differences between the opposing perspectives are often presented through competing claims about what available research supports as best practice—differences that merit close consideration. However, with few exceptions (see, for example, Perry, 2023), an equally key issue relevant to the debate is overlooked: Are both sides of the debate even talking about the same thing when they talk about literacy? Further, to what extent does SoR advocacy reflect literacy education values that have been widely embraced in contemporary societies? Esposito et al. (2015) have argued that the question, “Which literacy practices do people most value?” (p. 364) is a *sine qua non* for educational research and policy. Following their lead, we argue that the first step in formulating sound educational policy is not advocacy or the assembly of research evidence, but the articulation of values concerning the kind of literacy education children deserve. Only with such a values-based foundation can policy be meaningfully aligned with shared societal goals.

In this paper, we first describe how prominent definitions from the field and key insights from literacy scholarship together form an internationally embraced literacy values system. We consider what instructional principles must be in place to enact these values and use these principles to conduct a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) of two prominent documents that engage in policy advocacy using SoR framing: *The Right to Read Report* (OHRC, 2022) and *The Reading Guarantee* (Hunter et al., 2024). The findings suggest a troubling disconnect with the literacy principles, indicating shortcomings in the documents’ alignment with foundational educational values.

## A System of Literacy Values and Principles

### Historical Precedent for Values and Principles

Values respond to the question: What is ethical, good, and important? While values differ among individuals, cultural activity reflects values that are widely embraced, in part through the enactment of principles to ensure they are upheld. The term “principle” is etymologically rooted in a Latin term meaning “source” or “foundations” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Principles focus on required action stemming from core ethical beliefs. If “no one should go hungry” is a value, for example, a related principle might be provision of food to those in need.

The idea of values anchoring collective principles for action has existed for thousands of years. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have anchored their responsibilities in Lore, “a reflection of tens of thousands of years of traditional stories, the knowledge they provide, and the morals and responsibilities that are embedded in that knowledge” (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022). Within philosophical traditions in Africa that also date back further than written record, action is guided by an ethic of care known as *Ubuntu*, a Burundi word widely embraced in multiple African contexts (Mugumbate, 2023). In Europe, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) developed an ethical framework emphasizing acting with virtue, morality, and reason; Kant (1724–1804 CE) proposed respect for moral law based on reason and duty (Kant, 1785, 1797), arguing that both individual and collective principles serve as frameworks for ethical decision-making.

### The Centrality of Literacy Values

Values themselves cannot be proved through direct appeal to empirical research; they reflect beliefs about what is ethical, good, and important. This goes for literacy education values as for any others. Thus, the normative belief that every child has the right to a literacy education is not something a study can prove, although a study might determine, say, how widely held that belief is. And, while one could argue for literacy as a human right on the basis of empirical studies linking literacy with increased economic success (e.g., Blanchard, 2023) or other outcomes, these outcomes are themselves predicated on other values (e.g., that access to knowledge/wealth are good); go far enough down the line, and values will be apparent.

Though one might be tempted to conclude that unprovability means that literacy values are arbitrary and inconsequential, this is not the case. Ethics and philosophy have long made the case for what counts as ethical, good, and important in education broadly (Buchanan et al., 2022; Dewey, 1944) and in literacy education specifically (Ellis & Moss, 2014; Kostogriz, 2011; Pandya & Aukerman, 2020). For example, foundational thought on what constitutes a good life has led many societies to decide that access to literacy is important for all (even if such access is imperfectly realized).

When a society acts to make literacy accessible through schooling, it also anchors those actions in a working conception of literacy that reflects normative values (Freebody et al., 1990). This normative conception may never be explicitly stated; nonetheless, literacy policy, research, and teaching will heavily reflect this mooring. Literacy policies for schools aim to establish educational conditions for children to learn normative forms of literacy. Literacy research reflects normative values, which influence what is studied and means of measurement. Literacy teaching, informed and sometimes constrained by both policy and research, seeks to support students’ capacities that reflect normative values. Of course, in every moment where policy, research, and teaching embrace and enact particular values, they simultaneously reproduce and shape the values taken as normative. Thus, robust analysis of literacy policy, research, and practice should take into account their relationship with underlying literacy values (Freebody et al., 1991; Myhill, 2009; Pandya & Aukerman, 2020). Our purpose here is to illustrate how such analysis can be done.

## Literacy Definitions and Concepts as Signals of Literacy Values

An initial step is identifying a literacy values framework that captures literacy's primary potential purposes, complexities, and power. In other words, what normative conception of literacy *should* ground policy, research and practice? Definitions offered by two international bodies, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Literacy Association (ILA), signal a considerable degree of transnational consensus around core contemporary literacy values broadly recognized as valuable. We selected them because the organizations that developed them respectively function as arguably the largest and most prominent organizations focused on literacy policy and literacy research internationally, and because their conceptions of literacy are informed by research and shaped through international consultation from experts within the discipline. Their definitions are widely circulated and recognized, offering a coherent basis for articulating a shared transnational perspective on literacy.

The first body, UNESCO, is a transnational group with 194 member states (UNESCO, n.d.); its definition reflects priorities across a wide range of societies and circumstances. UNESCO (2025) defines literacy as “a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world. Literacy is a continuum of learning and proficiency.” This definition highlights a broad view of literacy that attends to the importance of human beings dialoguing with one another (“communication”), as well as the reading of texts (“identification, understanding, interpretation”) and the creative work of writing/composing texts (“creation”). It emphasizes the developmental nature of literacy (“a continuum”), its relationship to knowledge requirements (“information-rich”), and prominent, evolving media forms (“digital,” “fast-changing”).

The second body, the ILA, represents literacy education professionals worldwide; its definition reflects priorities of educators working in a broad range of contexts. The ILA offers a similar definition that additionally highlights literacy's context-specific, disciplinary, and multimodal nature: “The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context” (ILA, 2023). In recognizing the context-sensitive nature of literacy, this definition acknowledges the presence of varied geographic, cultural, disciplinary, and local contexts in which literacy plays a vital role. Similarly, neither body's definition explicitly binds literacy to a particular language, allowing for openness to literacy in multiple languages as well as multilingual instantiations that involve translanguaging (García et al., 2011).

Three aspects of literacy that implicitly fall within these conceptions of literacy put forward by UNESCO and ILA merit additional explicit emphasis: imagination, empathy and criticality. The following section considers each in turn.

Imagination has long been recognized as a powerful force in creating unique texts: three decades ago, a group of influential literacy scholars known as the New London Group (NLG, 1996) identified design as a core dimension of literacy. While design draws upon culturally available semiotic systems (e.g., linguistic conventions), design does not simply repeat. It creates: “Most written paragraphs are unique, never constructed in exactly that way ever before and—bar copying or statistical improbability—never to be constructed that way again. Similarly, there is something ineluctably unique about every person's voice” (NLG, p. 76). As the NLG (1996) and other literacy scholars (e.g., Stephenson & Dobson, 2020) have observed, imagination plays a role not only in writing traditional texts, but also in interpreting them; in speaking and listening; and in embodied and multimodal forms of expression such as drama and reading images. Imagination is vital to fully realized contemporary literate life.

Across time, empathy also has been conceptualized as one integral form of engaging with and understanding text. People can read books to encounter mirrors that enable them to see their own experiences reflected, windows that enable adopting someone else's perspective, and "sliding glass doors" that invite engagement with different realities (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). Literary fiction uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters' subjective experiences. Just as in real life, the worlds of literary fiction are replete with complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration. The worlds of fiction, though, pose fewer risks than the real world, and they present opportunities to consider the experiences of others without facing the potentially threatening consequences of that engagement. (Kidd & Castellano, 2013, p. 378)

In other words, engaging with fictional text requires putting oneself in another's shoes—also important when composing texts for audiences. And, of course, such empathy matters not only for reading and writing directly, but in the broader work of relationships in real life.

Finally, critical literacy has a robust tradition of being recognized as a pivotal aspect of literacy. As Luke (in press) argues, building on ideas brought to life by Freire (1970) half a century ago,

Democratic citizenship and everyday life require the human capacity to weigh, judge and evaluate messages and information, texts and images and their sources, intents and consequences. Critical literacy has become the new basic for learning, creativity, work, consumption and, indeed, survival. (n.p.)

Given a mediasphere seeking to capture attention and manipulate loyalties through messages, search engines, and social media, and with current trends in some parts of the world increasingly veering toward authoritarian control of what words get used and what texts get read (Wells, 2025; Yourish et al., 2025), meaningful literacy depends upon criticality and responsible democratic citizenship.

### Conceptual Domains as Signals of Literacy Values

Thus far, we have primarily considered socially valued literacy undertakings, from basic understanding to criticality, as a way of identifying important transnational literacy values. However, values are also reflected in how those undertakings get articulated, materialized, and examined. For the last half-century, three domains have predominated in educational understandings of what it means to be literate. As articulated in the Strathclyde Model (Ellis et al., 2020), these include:

*Cognitive Knowledge and Skills*, where the evidence and theoretical insights draw mostly on psychology research and which outlines the importance of, for example, phonological awareness and phonics, comprehension skills, concepts about print and syntactic processing; secondly, *Cultural and Social Capital* for literacy, where the evidence and theoretical insights draw mostly on sociological and anthropological understandings and which positions literacy as meaningful social practices forged by, and embedded in, the formal and informal dynamic social structures of communities and families, their relationships, histories, funds of knowledge and identities; thirdly, *Social and Personal Identity* which draws on psycho-social research understandings about how individuals position themselves and are positioned by others as readers and writers, how they see themselves and want to be seen, their aspirations and beliefs about literacy and learning, and their resilience and social networks in and out of school. (pp. 63-64; see also Aukerman & Aiello, 2023)

Each of these domains represents not only a conceptual domain, but also an ethical domain indicating prioritized aspects of literacy to be understood, respected and supported. For example, literate individuals should have the knowledge and skills to comprehend what they read and hear; they should have opportunities to draw on their cultural and social histories, resources and communities as they engage in literacy practices; and those practices should enable them to connect with others, develop a solid sense of self, and realize their own real-life purposes that make literacy matter *to them*. A comprehensive understanding of literacy values necessitates consideration of literacy practices across developmental, sociocultural, and critical dimensions. Consequently, policy advocacy relating to both reading and literacy more broadly needs to embrace this complexity.

## The Literacy Values Framework

Taken together, then, literacy is a varied set of purposeful, multidimensional text-related practices involving communication, understanding, composition, imagination, empathy, and criticality—practices that are simultaneously active, social, cultural, and tied to identity. This contemporary literacy values framework is solidly grounded in the aforementioned UNESCO and ILA definitions, as well as in many decades of literacy scholarship (cf. Ellis et al., 2020).

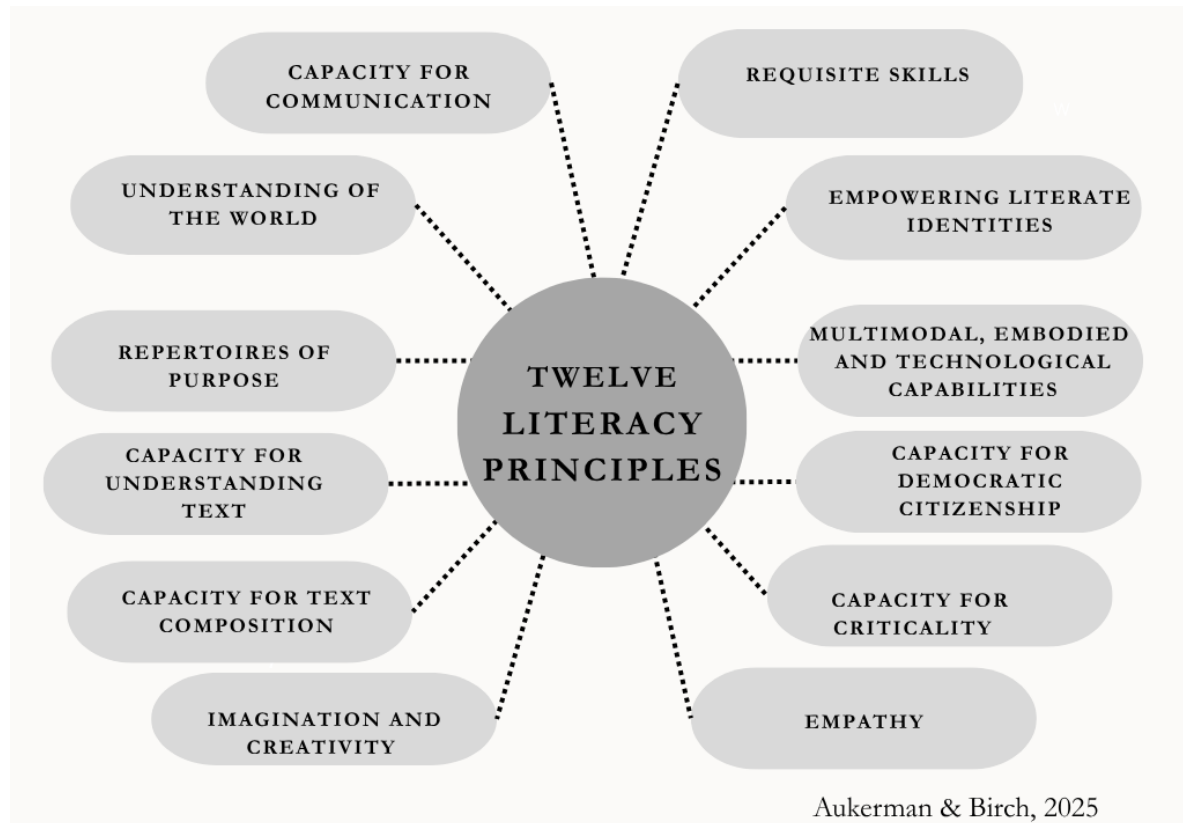
To be clear, while widely embraced, these values are not universally held. For instance, given that billionaire Elon Musk said, “The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy” (Wolf, 2025), he presumably would have little regard for empathy inside or outside literate activity. However, given the acknowledged importance of the elements of the values framework in varying contexts worldwide and in literacy scholarship, they should be recognized as broadly socially valued, and literacy education is ethically bound to provide for children’s flourishing in ways that reflect these values.

### From Values to Principles

Principles represent an intermediate step between values and examination of decision-making. To identify instructional principles informed by the literacy values framework, we examined which priority areas of instruction would support the development of its components, with preschool to Grade 6 students in mind. Figure 1 shows the 12 instructional principles identified. In the discussion of each principle below, we first provide an explanation, followed by a brief overview of relevant research examples. The examples illustrate the interdependence of the principles, as well as how instruction can leverage meaningful change in each area; after all, if an aspect of literacy were only able to develop at its own organic pace, without instruction playing a meaningful role (much the way hair grows), then an instructional principle connected to it would have little purpose.

### Capacity for Communication

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students’ capacity for communication in many forms. In addition to reading and writing to accomplish communicative purposes, children should have opportunities to discuss and dialogue with others, including listening as well as speaking about texts and other topics. Children’s capacity for communication in their home languages, and across languages via translanguaging, should be acknowledged and valued; and all children should have opportunities to build vocabulary and develop additional genres of communication.

**Figure 1***The Literacy Principles****Research Example 1***

Preschool children's oral communication is better developed through dialogue about text that centers their ideas, rather than through teacher-centered conversations about text (van der Veen et al., 2017).

***Research Example 2***

Fourth and fifth grade writers write more effective persuasive text after they provide feedback to other writers of persuasive text (Philippakos & Macarthur, 2016).

**Understanding of the World**

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop student knowledge and understanding of the world and of themselves, with an emphasis on what matters to students personally as well as what matters for meaningful participation in their social, cultural, and linguistic worlds. Children need access to literacy teaching that guides and supports them in coming to know these worlds. Such instruction should include ample, unfettered access to and involvement with texts representing a broad range of topics and genres; opportunities to expand conceptual knowledge; and exploration of wide-ranging ideas. In addition, children should be able to choose and create texts that help them develop understanding of things that are personally important to them, in addition to building knowledge generally valued in their communities and cultures. Finally, children should have opportunities to understand themselves and their own relationships with others and the world through encounters with text.

***Research Example 1***

Third and fifth graders who received an intervention emphasizing scientific exploration, student agency, and reading strategy instruction had greater gains in science concept learning than students receiving traditional instruction (Guthrie et al., 1998).

***Research Example 2***

When introduced to dual language books that included home languages, ethnic Pacific preschool children engaged with local cultural knowledge, identified connections with themselves and even acted as cultural teachers for others (Si'ilata et al., 2023).

**Repertoires of Purpose**

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' repertoires of purpose for engaging in literate practices, including purposes that are personally, socially, and culturally important. Children come to school with their own interests and things that matter to them, often informed by their cultures, communities, and personal histories. Children should have opportunities to read and write in ways that connect to these existing purposes, including access to culturally relevant texts and approaches. At the same time, instruction should invite students to develop additional purposes for literacy that may be new to them, so their literate repertoire becomes more flexible over time.

***Research Example 1***

In a preschool classroom, incorporating recipe-related literacy activities in response to children's interest in cooking spurred children to incorporate reading and writing into free play (Durán & Lopez, 2022).

***Research Example 2***

When given the option to write freely, 9-10-year-old students wrote in ways reflecting linguistic and stylistic features of texts they preferred to read, producing creative and well-crafted texts reflecting their individually differing purposes (Taylor & Clarke, 2021).

**Capacity for Understanding Text**

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity to meaningfully and effectively understand and interpret diverse kinds of texts for varied purposes. Students should have plentiful opportunities to make sense of text, and to engage in various kinds of interpretive work around text. They should have opportunities to connect reading to varied real-life uses, and to read texts with varied styles, genres, and topics.

***Research Example 1***

The degree of authenticity of reading (and writing) activities was a significant factor predicting growth of reading (and writing) skills in second and third graders, whereas the addition of explicit instruction connected to those activities provided little additional benefit (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007).

***Research Example 2***

Native Spanish-speaking fifth graders performed better in English reading comprehension after participating in peer-led text discussions centering collaborative reasoning, versus traditional teacher-centered instruction (Zhang et al., 2013).

## Capacity for Text Composition

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity to meaningfully and effectively compose diverse kinds of texts for varied purposes. Students should have ample opportunities to write/create texts for a range of audiences and purposes, including real-life ones. They should consider how audiences interpret and respond to texts; and reflect on how their communicative choices are working. They should consider how different kinds of texts and different authorial purposes might benefit from different approaches to writing.

### *Research Example 1*

A group of 7–11-year-olds who received instruction with mentor texts in the use of literary devices improved in both structural and stylistic aspects of their narrative writing (Corden, 2007).

### *Research Example 2*

Second graders classified as English learners improved their ability to cite textual evidence in their writing when given opportunities to discuss complex social studies texts with peers (Leighton et al. 2019).

## Imagination and Creativity

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity for imagination and creativity. Students should have opportunities to exercise imagination through reading, writing, and other literate activities. They should make believe things; encounter texts that stimulate imagination; and have opportunities to design, enact, and play creatively with texts.

### *Research Example 1*

Fifth graders who engaged in critical reading of scientific texts showed gains in assessed creativity, whereas students receiving traditional science instruction made no gains (Koray & Boran, 2023).

### *Research Example 2*

Research involving 12–13-year-olds determined that they wrote more creatively (using more metaphor and divergent thinking) when working from a thought-provoking image, rather than from words, as an impetus to think about philosophical questions (Auriac-Slusarczyk et al., 2018).

## Empathy

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity for empathy toward others and themselves. Students should encounter and create texts that nourish and enable exploration of theory of mind. They should be invited to put themselves in others' shoes; think through varied perspectives on events; and experience and explore emotion through engaging with text.

### *Research example 1*

Third grade students' abilities in perspective-taking improved across time when given opportunities to discuss differing perspectives of characters from authentic literature texts (Hodges et al., 2018).

### *Research Example 2*

A study of 5–12-year-olds who had the chance to engage in process drama found that they were able to develop empathetic understanding toward characters they depicted, including historical figures (Wells et al., 2021).

### **Capacity for Criticality**

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity for critical literacy, thinking, and questioning. Children should learn to analyze and think critically about texts and the world, for instance through interrogating assumptions embedded within a text. Children should think about how power operates and is (re)produced in text; pose critical questions about texts they read; and take action in the world in response to ideas that stir them.

#### ***Research Example 1***

Through instruction centered on critical inquiry, first graders were able to generate a series of questions, investigate resources to answer those questions, and produce a play animating their findings (Rogovin, 2011).

#### ***Research Example 2***

Fourth and fifth graders were better able to critique sources for bias when they received targeted instruction to develop this ability (Macedo-Rouet et al., 2013).

### **Capacity for Democratic Citizenship**

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity to participate meaningfully and effectively in practices at the heart of a functioning democracy, such as considering ideas, disagreeing, and weighing evidence. Children should have opportunities to discuss ideas, and to make and hear reasoned arguments based on textual evidence. They should learn to use texts for informed decision-making, including examining the trustworthiness of sources.

#### ***Research Example 1***

Elementary-aged children who participated in Philosophy for Children, an approach emphasizing reasoning and critical thinking via discussion of big questions, showed gains in their reasoning, ability to respectfully disagree, and understanding of the value of democratic participation (Siddiqui et al., 2019).

#### ***Research Example 2***

A group of 5–8-year-olds could effectively analyze Mother's Day advertising and critically interrogate its messaging after conducting surveys of their own mothers' wants (O'Brien, 2009).

### **Multimodal, Embodied, and Technological Capacities**

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity to engage in multimodal and embodied literacy practices that create and interpret meaning through and across varied technologies and modalities including (but not limited to) gesture; sound; movement; images; and affective experiences. Children should learn to navigate, create, and interpret multimodal text, sensory experiences, and digital landscapes. They should become fluent in making sense of still and moving images as well as the interplay of different modalities. Instruction should prepare students to act as digital citizens and to respond thoughtfully to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

#### ***Research Example 1***

Second graders responding to picturebooks interpreted texts based on their readings of two consecutive page openings, demonstrating the capacity to make inferences based on narrative carried by images (Sipe & Brightman, 2009).

**Research Example 2**

Sixth graders were better able to integrate information across multiple online texts on a topic when using specialized graphic organizers that encouraged them to capture sourcing information, rather than more generic informational graphic organizers (Lee et al., 2024).

**Empowering Literate Identities**

Literacy teaching should develop empowering literate identities and dispositions toward literacy. Instruction should foster children's ability to see themselves as capable, involved participants in literacy practices equipped to accomplish meaningful things as literate people. Reading motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy have all been identified as important literate dispositions (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021). Children should be supported in discovering ways of reading and writing that bring joy, foster meaning, and empower them to participate actively in the world.

**Research Example 1**

First grade students who were allowed to incorporate culturally relevant topics into decodable texts they themselves created found reading these texts more enjoyable and meaningful than reading basal-provided decodable texts (and they were also able to learn the targeted phonics content; Lawson, 2023).

**Research Example 2**

Participating in interactive collaborative discussions fostered greater interest and engagement than participation in business-as-usual discussions about text (Wu et al., 2013).

**Requisite Skills**

Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' fluent and accurate decoding/encoding, strategic and metacognitive flexibility, and other requisite skills and strategies for a wide range of literacy practices. Requisite skills are listed last here, but this is in no way to minimize their importance. Instruction should provide children with opportunities to learn, practice, and master the skills that they need for capacities related to the other principles listed. For example, they should get support that allows them to "crack the code" of their language's orthography; develop fluency and automaticity; and access strategic and metacognitive knowledge to comprehend and compose well. Requisite skills should not be limited to those connected to traditional reading and composing; there are also requisite skills to support other principles, such as multimodal and technological skills to be able to do multimodal digital design.

**Research Example 1**

Kindergartners who received phoneme segmentation instruction in combination with opportunities to spell the words they were learning outperformed kindergartners who only received segmentation instruction (Ehri, 2020).

**Research Example 2**

Students in an experimental condition that challenged them to invent their own phonemic awareness-related games with toys developed more phonemic awareness (and were more engaged) than comparison students who played a teacher-provided game with the same toys (Cavanaugh et al., 2016).

## Cross-Age Applicability and Interdependence

The research examples for the 12 principles indicate that children can fruitfully engage in instruction related to every instructional principle starting (at least) in the early primary and elementary years. This is important to understand because it shows that instruction aligned with all of these principles does not need to be delayed until, for example, a child has mastered decoding. While the complexity, demands, and approach to instruction will likely look different for younger children, they can benefit, starting early, from classroom instruction integrating all the principles.

In addition, many of the research exemplars illustrate that a focus on one principle inherently supports others. For example, having children develop games with toys (Cavanaugh et al., 2016) involved (at least) communication, imagination, empowering literate identities, and multimodal capacities—as well as the requisite skills explicitly targeted by the activity. Another example indicates how principles that might appear wholly unrelated are also interdependent: students who participated in a dance program incorporating embodied cognition demonstrated improved fourth grade reading achievement test scores (Corcoran, 2018). These tight relationships linking principles together are illustrative of what we call interdependence (cf. Janks, 2004), an idea central to many contemporary conceptualizations of literacy. For example, multiple scholars have noted close connections between writing and reading development, with Wyse and Hacking (2024) using a double helix metaphor to explain the ways in which they are knitted together (see also Graham, 2020). Others have made similar arguments about other dimensions of literacy (e.g., Freebody & Luke, 1990; NLG, 1999). Because the principles are interdependent, they cannot be ranked in order of importance; each one matters in its own right and in relation to the others.

Despite their interdependence, when designing instruction, deliberate attention to each principle is vital, particularly given their number and complexity. Otherwise, some may end up receiving insufficient support. While certain moments in a particular lesson will necessarily privilege some over others, neglecting any principle across time may well come at the cost of well-rounded literacy development.

## Methodology

Thus far, we have described a values framework reflecting contemporary values anchored in a long line of thought around literacy education. We have identified principles drawn from these values that illuminate important instructional goals. The subsequent analysis examines two focal policy-oriented documents from disparate locations in light of the identified principles: *The Right to Read: Public Inquiry into Human Rights Issues Affecting Students with Reading Disabilities*, a 554-page report from Canada (OHRC, 2022), and *The Reading Guarantee: How to Give Every Child the Best Chance of Success* (Hunter et al., 2024), a 107-page report from Australia.

### Selection Criteria for Reports

Both are positioned within the domain of literacy, with a particular emphasis on the teaching and assessment of reading. We chose these documents as representative of policy-oriented reports that (1) were produced within the past five years for the purpose of shaping policy related to teaching and assessment relating specifically to literacy; (2) explicitly draw upon SoR in framing both problems and potential solutions; (3) have been extensively discussed in public media and have circulated nationally and transnationally; and (4) have received considerable media coverage (e.g. Duffy, 2024; Henebery, 2024; Hobbs, 2022; Johnston, 2022). To maximize our ability to understand the national contexts in which the documents were produced, documents from countries in which at least one of the authors is professionally and socially embedded were selected.

## Production and Authorship

While the documents originated in different national contexts, both were produced by think tanks, which occupy an important place in education policy. *The Right to Read* was produced by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, which has been in place for more than half a century since it was “established as an arm’s length agency of government in 1961 to prevent discrimination and to promote and advance human rights in Ontario” (OHRC, 2024). It targets the areas of education, criminal justice, health and welfare, indigenous reconciliation, and human rights culture. The Grattan Institute, a policy think tank established in 2008 with a broad remit beyond education, promotes “high-quality public policy recommendations for Australia’s future;” it receives no ongoing government funding (Grattan Institute, n.d.).

Think tank reports may not be written by scholars with advanced degrees in the field on which they are reporting, but rather by research analysts with some research training who are not necessarily subject area experts. In the case of *Right to Read*, because no authors were named, no information could be ascertained regarding their experience. Without author attribution, *Right to Read* lacks a key element of accountability, making it difficult for educational stakeholders to take into consideration the qualifications, perspectives, or biases that may have shaped its recommendations. *The Reading Guarantee* lists three authors. According to the Grattan website, Hunter has a PhD in social/political sciences and Haywood is a former secondary school teacher with a master’s in teaching. Hobart is no longer listed at Grattan; her LinkedIn profile lists bachelor’s degrees in laws and science and describes her specialization as health economics and policy. None appear to have an advanced degree in educational research.

## Document Scope, Purpose, and Review

Both documents articulate broad ambitions to shape literacy policy and practice. While both position reading as their central focus, and the *Right to Read* specifically highlights the reading needs of children with reading disabilities, each provides a blueprint for instruction with wide-ranging instructional implications. Each makes recommendations that have bearing on all aspects of literacy instruction, including the use of time, resources and pedagogy within the general education classroom. Each promotes structured literacy (which includes aspects of literacy that go beyond decoding), and—in quite strong terms—critiques balanced literacy and methods relating to whole language (framed as in opposition to SoR). Consequently, we consider it both crucial and equitable to examine whether and how their approach and recommendations align with broader contemporary understandings of literacy.

Think tank reports can serve a variety of purposes, and both documents appear to align best with an “advocacy” style that sees its role as taking a side in a war of ideas, rather than acting as disinterested arbiter evaluating benefits and drawbacks of various approaches (McGann & Sabatini, 2011). For example, while both documents present research in support of specific phonics-based instruction—framing it as settled science that reflects broad academic consensus—they do not acknowledge or engage with scholarly critiques of phonics-centric instruction, such as Suggate’s 2016 meta-analysis indicating that phonics interventions had limited maintenance of effect on non-targeted skills such as comprehension. (*Right to Read* omits mention of this meta-analysis; *The Reading Guarantee* cites it, somewhat incongruously, as evidence that “a ‘structured literacy’ approach to teaching reading is best” [p. 21], although the meta-analysis never mentions structured literacy.)

Think tank reports, including *Right to Read* and *The Reading Guarantee*, rely on hybridized discourse that seeks to make information readily accessible to policymakers and other stakeholders with little subject-matter background, while simultaneously telegraphing a high level of academic expertise, for example, through citing research (Bruce, 2020). While they link their recommendations

to research, such reports generally have fewer external constraints in their messaging than academic articles, which are typically peer reviewed by other scholars in the field, often academics who represent contrasting assumptions and approaches (Barnes et al., 2022). While think tank reports offer insights within their respective domains, these methodological limitations set them apart from academic publications and potentially affect their rigor. Neither description of how these two reports were produced includes reference to an external scholarly review process, although *Right to Read* does list several consultants.

### Positioning as Primary Definers

Bruce (2020), who has conducted analysis of education think tank reports in New Zealand, points out that such documents are often regarded as authoritative in a media landscape driven by journalist demand for quick access to “the facts,” and Anstead and Chadwick (2018) found that journalists regularly used think tank reporting to bolster their own credibility. This intimate relationship with journalists allows think tanks to function as primary definers:

the structured institutional relationship between the media and the primary institutional definers . . . permits the institutional definers to establish the initial definition or primary interpretation of the topic in question. This interpretation then ‘commands the field’ in all subsequent treatment and set the terms of reference within which all further coverage or debate takes place. (Hall, as cited in Bruce, 2020, p. 27)

Both *Right to Read* and *The Reading Guarantee* have been taken up extensively by the media in their respective countries (e.g. Duffy, 2024; Henebery, 2024; Hobbs, 2022; Johnston, 2022). Both have also lobbied into the public sphere via social media, seeking to align broader audiences with their positioning and contributing to the construction of divisive policy perspectives within the literacy landscape (Barnes et al., 2022).

### Data Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), an explicitly values-oriented form of language analysis, was chosen as a well-suited method. As Fairclough (2013) describes, “it does not simply describe existing realities but also evaluates them, assesses the extent to which they match up to values that are taken (contentiously) to be fundamental for just or decent societies” (p. 178). One approach to CDA is to look for what is both present and absent in the discourse to understand underlying assumptions. In the case of the focal think tank reports, the use of the literacy principles as a normative point of comparison provided a concrete mechanism for determining the extent to which fundamental literacy values appeared. In addition to its normative aspect, CDA offers explanatory critique, linking realities with, for example, social forces working on and through the language. SoR advocacy is the larger social force considered in this analysis.

Foregrounding the aforementioned principles, we adopted a deductive approach, assessing how each document’s language—and its attention to relevant scholarly research—reflected the literacy principles. Specifically, we asked: to what extent does the focal document describe and advocate for *instructional practices* associated with this principle? Two coders worked through each document independently, closely reading the full document and homing in especially on the sections that described or advocated for specific instructional practices. They noted instances where the language in the document in some way explicitly connected to the principles. Each coder then synthesized those notes into a single evaluation rubric level (See Table 1). Coders compared these results, and any disagreement between the coders (which tended to be minor) was resolved through

discussion. As part of our coding and analysis process, we worked iteratively to refine the categories, for example, by adding a category to enable greater conceptual clarity between rubric levels.

It is important to note that, because of our interest specifically in the documents' values orientation, this analysis did not examine methodological approach, research basis, or other aspects of content, scope, or rigor. (Some existing analyses are strongly critical; see, for example, Caughill, 2024; Cummins, 2022; Esders, 2024; Stauffer & Van Dyke, 2023.) Below, we provide context for each document, then present our findings.

**Table 1**

*Evaluation Rubric for Policy Documents*

<b>Unaddressed</b>	<b>Incidental Mention</b>	<b>Minimally Addressed</b>	<b>Partially Addressed</b>	<b>Substantially Addressed</b>
Not mentioned	Brief and/or token mention is made, but no attention is given to instruction in domain	At least one instructional element is mentioned; there is little if any elaboration or reference to peer reviewed research	Several instructional elements are mentioned with some elaboration, but one or more key elements are missing; some peer reviewed research is referenced	Major elements are extensively represented, with reference made to a range of peer reviewed research

## National Contexts for the Reports

We provide an overview of the national context for each document to situate the report's role as a primary definer in current policy conversations. While a detailed exploration of the literacy education history of each country lies beyond the scope here, the following section offers a brief description of literacy policy currents in Canada and Australia respectively.

### Canadian Context

In Canada, most educational policy decision-making occurs at the provincial level, and policies related to literacy instruction vary considerably by province. While Canada has performed well over the past few decades on international comparisons of reading performance (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022), not all children have excelled. In 2012, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that a Vancouver school district had violated a child's rights by failing to provide the necessary supports for him to learn to read, and this decision reverberated through discussions across the nation about how literacy was being taught.

The OHRC picked up the thread by releasing the *Right to Read* report in 2022 on "human rights issues affecting students with reading disabilities." It found that a number of students with disabilities were facing enormous challenges learning to read, many with moving stories. The report concluded that literacy instruction in Ontario was fundamentally flawed, and not just for learning disabled students; balanced literacy was described as the problem, and structured literacy was the prescribed solution.

Concerns have been raised about the report's orientation from several quarters, including questions about the narrowness of its conception of literacy and its framing of the very idea of disability (Caughill, 2024; Cummins, 2023), but it has undeniably been influential. Ontario substantially revamped its curriculum in response to the report (OHRC, 2024). Two other provinces (New Brunswick and Alberta) have thus far revamped their provincial curricula in response to SoR

currents as well (Wong, 2024). In Alberta, for example, literacy practices such as writing personal letters or reading novels have been dropped from the elementary curricular standards in favor of more explicit instruction in word attack (Aukerman, 2022). Other provinces, such as British Columbia, have not revamped their provincial curricula at this point, but have added funding for additional dyslexia screening and support (Matte, 2024). Manitoba's Human Rights Commission is currently preparing its own Right to Read Report (MHRC, n.d.).

### **Australian Context**

For more than two decades, initiatives and funding have focused on improving literacy outcomes in Australia (Chamberlain & Mendina, 2020). The government's *Teaching Reading: National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* (Rowe, 2005) proposed a national framework with a standardized approach, shifting national discourse to frame literacy primarily in terms of reading (Edwards & Potts, 2008). The UK's *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (Rose, 2006) prompted further shift toward prioritization of requisite skills, an emphasis shared by a number of Australian researchers (cf. Castles & Buckingham) who further contributed to the growing prominence of SoR.

The introduction of the Australian Curriculum was designed to address inconsistencies across states and territories and provide a unified framework outlining what all students should be taught. Amid shifting literacy policy—particularly in relation to reading—the influence of SoR has notably shaped its curriculum priorities. However, because implementation is managed by individual states and territories, interpretations of SoR-informed practices vary. More recently, a prominent phonics debate, hosted in 2018 by the Australian College of Educators and the Centre for Independent Studies, contributed to further policy shifts toward systematic phonics in response to national and international assessment outcomes (Barnes, 2018). While influential bodies such as the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) have continued to raise concerns about the effectiveness of reading instruction (Marslen, 2024), others have critiqued specific SoR mandates—particularly the surrounding advocacy and media discourse—for relying on selective interpretations of research to promote standardization. More broadly, concerns have also been raised about policy advocacy that reflects a narrow reading of evidence (Mackenzie & Tassone, 2024), as well as about neoliberal frameworks for literacy instruction that risk marginalizing diverse ways of knowing and being—especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Kostogriz, 2011).

In February 2024, the Grattan Institute released *The Reading Guarantee* (Hunter et al., 2024). It outlined a policy agenda for reading instruction in Australia, linking reading and broader literacy achievement to key economic objectives. While it is too early to determine the report's full impact, it has attracted considerable media attention, with the institute hosting multiple webinars—including a speed briefing—to disseminate findings.

## **Findings**

### **Document Description**

#### ***The Right to Read Report***

*Right to Read* is a public inquiry examining systemic barriers to effective reading instruction in Ontario's public schools. Grounded in the belief that learning to read is a basic right, the report includes the results of informal surveys and queries to identify challenges. It provides 157 recommendations to the Ministry of Education aimed at reforming curriculum, early screening, intervention, and teacher training, all with the goal of ensuring that students, especially those with reading disabilities, receive needed support when learning to read.

### ***The Reading Guarantee***

*The Reading Guarantee* presents a six-step strategy to raise the reading proficiency of Australian students. The report highlights international test comparisons (e.g. Progress in International Reading Literacy Study and Program for International Student Assessment) to suggest that Australia has failed to achieve reasonable reading proficiency standards, using National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) benchmarks to define the standards required. It argues that this failure is costing the Australian economy billions.

### **Document Explanation**

Table 2 details the degree of presence of the literacy principles within *Right to Read* and *The Reading Guarantee*, determined through the evaluation criteria previously described in Table 1. Both policy recommendation documents appear at best partially aligned with the literacy principles, with *Right to Read* slightly more aligned overall. The remainder of this section offers a narrative description of how each document connects—or diverges from—the outlined principles.

**Table 2**

*Analysis of Principles in Right to Read Report*

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Right to Read</b>	<b>The Reading Guarantee</b>
<b>Capacity for Criticality</b> Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity for critical literacy, thinking, and questioning.	Unaddressed	Unaddressed
<b>Repertoires of Purpose</b> Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' repertoires of purpose for engaging in literate practices, including purposes that are personally, socially, and culturally important.	Incidental Mention	Unaddressed
<b>Imagination and Creativity</b> Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity for imagination and creativity.	Incidental Mention	Unaddressed
<b>Empathy</b> Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity for empathy toward others and toward themselves.	Incidental Mention	Unaddressed
<b>Capacity for Democratic Citizenship</b> Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students' capacity to participate meaningfully and effectively in practices at the heart of a functioning democracy, such as considering ideas, disagreeing, and weighing evidence.	Incidental Mention	Unaddressed

Principle	Right to Read	The Reading Guarantee
<p><b>Multimodal, Embodied, and Technological Capacities</b>                      Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students’ capacity to engage in multimodal and embodied literacy practices that create and interpret meaning through and across varied technologies and modalities including (but not limited to) gesture; sound; movement; images; and affective experiences.</p>	Incidental Mention	Unaddressed
<p><b>Capacity for Text Composition</b>                      Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students’ capacity to meaningfully and effectively compose diverse kinds of texts for varied purposes.</p>	Partially Addressed	Minimally Addressed
<p><b>Understanding of the World</b>                      Literacy teaching should nurture and develop student knowledge and understanding of the world and of themselves, with an emphasis on what matters to students personally as well as what matters for meaningful participation in their social, cultural, and linguistic worlds.</p>	Partially Addressed	Minimally Addressed
<p><b>Empowering Literate Identities</b>                      Literacy teaching should develop empowering literate identities and dispositions toward literacy.</p>	Partially Addressed	Partially Addressed
<p><b>Capacity for Communication</b>                      Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students’ capacity for communication.</p>	Partially Addressed	Partially Addressed
<p><b>Capacity for Understanding Text</b>                      Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students’ capacity to meaningfully and effectively understand and interpret diverse kinds of texts for varied purposes.</p>	Partially Addressed	Partially Addressed
<p><b>Requisite Skills</b>                      Literacy teaching should nurture and develop students’ fluent and accurate decoding/encoding, strategic and metacognitive flexibility, and other requisite skills and strategies for a wide range of literacy practices.</p>	Partially Addressed	Partially Addressed

**Unaddressed/Unaddressed***Capacity for Criticality*

There is no mention of fostering this capacity in the reports.

**Incidental Mention/Unaddressed***Repertoires of Purpose*

*Right to Read* notes that Indigenous students often feel a lack of belonging and states that “First Nations, Métis and Inuit students need holistic approaches to learning and high-quality learning environments that are consistent with Indigenous world views” (p. 144). However, its recommendations do not address how literacy instruction might support children in coming to know and practice specific purposes for literacy in their communities. *The Reading Guarantee* does not mention student purposes.

*Capacity for Democratic Citizenship*

*Right to Read* mentions education in general as connected to the ability to “actively take part in” and “contribute to” society (pp. 44-45). It does not mention the relationship between democracy and literacy, nor discuss literacy practices required for individuals to engage meaningfully in civic life. *The Reading Guarantee* does not mention democratic citizenship.

*Empathy*

*Right to Read*, citing the Ontario Education Act, suggests in passing that “education” is important for the development of a “caring” society (p. 44). Neither report connects empathy with literacy practices; neither discusses how education might foster empathy.

*Multimodal, Embodied, and Technological Capacities*

*Right to Read* notes that digital technologies, such as texting and internet use, still require strong word-level skills (p. 191), but it does not address teaching digital capacities in their own right. Technology is also briefly mentioned as an accommodation for students with reading difficulties (e.g., tablets, screen readers; p. 319); and there is a passing mention of drama in the introduction (p. 12). Neither report mentions any other aspects of multimodality or embodied literacies. In the case of *The Reading Guarantee*, it is noteworthy that NAPLAN, a digital assessment that the authors recommend using as a benchmark for reading proficiency, requires requisite skills in technology as well as traditional reading skills (cf. Grimes & Warschauer, 2008); yet the report offers no recommendations for developing such skills.

*Imagination and Creativity*

*Right to Read* briefly references some adults with reading disabilities who pursue fields aligned with their ability to “think outside the box” (p. 103). It also reproduces a child’s drawing of a student at a desk writing “I want to read books,” surrounded by three imagination bubbles, itself nested within an imagination bubble. However, there is no reference to *instruction* to foster imagination. *The Reading Guarantee* does not mention imagination.

**Partially Addressed/Minimally Addressed***Capacity for Composition*

*Right to Read* calls for “evidence-based, direct, and explicit instruction” in writing (p. 13); it mentions teaching composition along with writing-related skills such as spelling and handwriting (p.

159), albeit without further details; and it alludes to dysgraphia (p. 31 *inter alia*). *The Reading Guarantee* mentions the term “writing” 14 times, with nine of those instances in the context of assessment rather than instruction. All of the instances where writing does appear mention skills such as spelling, handwriting, and vocabulary without detailed information on research-informed strategies for teaching them; there is no mention of composition of meaningful text.

### ***Understanding the World***

*Right to Read* advocates for background knowledge instruction (pp. 13, 162), albeit without specific, research-driven implementation guidance. It recognizes the need for honoring cultural and linguistic heritage (p. 61), recommending the integration of related support into the literacy curriculum for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples (pp. 12, 127, 135, 143). *The Reading Guarantee* identifies value in background knowledge for literacy (p. 19) and urges a “knowledge-rich” curriculum (p. 3). However, it does not explicitly connect this emphasis on knowledge-building to students’ lives or contexts. Rather than as a form of capital, cultural background is framed from a deficit perspective, as a liability (Lowe & Weuffen, 2022): Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as well as other students from “disadvantaged” (p. 4) backgrounds, are mentioned only in terms of extra support they are believed to need to overcome performance gaps.

### **Partially Addressed/Partially Addressed**

#### ***Empowered Literate Identities***

*Right to Read* describes the psychological toll of poor decoding skills, drawing on testimonies from stakeholders to highlight impacts on self-esteem, school engagement, and social and mental health outcomes. It proposes better-quality decoding instruction as an antidote to such problems. *The Reading Guarantee* cites *Right to Read* as evidence that unaddressed reading difficulties can lead to emotional harm, including stress, anxiety, and depression (p. 14). It suggests that students who struggle with early decoding may develop lower motivation and self-confidence, leading to diminished reading enjoyment (p. 12), and proposes that a “focus on foundational decoding skills is also more likely to instill a love of reading in students” (p. 27). It also describes a case study of teaching to develop fluency and background knowledge where texts were selected to appeal to students (p. 27). Despite its aims, the report frequently used terms such as “struggling readers,” “fallen behind,” and “failing”—language that may reinforce negative self-concepts in relation to literacy (Lowe, 2016)—with over 15 instances in the overview and recommendations section alone.

#### ***Capacity for Communication***

*Right to Read* includes multiple references to vocabulary development and discusses correlational research on the importance of *oral language* within a comprehensive literacy approach (p. 445); oral language’s role in reading development (p. 142); and meeting students’ individualized communication needs (e.g., access to native language, Braille, American Sign Language, and speech-language pathologists). However, there is little mention of broader methods for teaching oral language; a single vague reference to student discussions is included, but it lacks elaboration or connection with research (p. 253). *The Reading Guarantee* identifies oral language as key to literacy and as one of six key sub-skills for reading instruction, supporting claims with research citations (p. 21). Aside from emphasizing vocabulary development, for example through “knowledge-rich curriculum” (p. 26), the only specific strategy mentioned for *building* oral language is readalouds (p. 26), and there is no explanation about how teachers can implement readalouds to support communication. Discussion of the value of oral language is consistently funneled toward how it can help with reading. For example, “rich class discussions,” unelaborated, are mentioned for their posited utility in helping students read complex texts; no research on discussion is referenced.

### ***Capacity for Text Comprehension***

The analysis considered two key aspects to this capacity: the ability to meaningfully understand texts and curricular integration of varied texts, genres, and practical reading uses. *Right to Read* mentions comprehension as a central pillar of reading and alludes to the importance of understanding both individual words and sentence structures (p. 11). The report recognizes a need for reading across print and digital contexts and prioritizes having teachers select books to “develop reading competence, language and knowledge” (emphasizing decodable readers as a key mechanism for this; p. 223). Its introduction brings up literature and the arts, although it includes no relevant citations of research in these areas, and it situates these areas rhetorically outside the domain of evidence-based instruction, advocating “having students engage with literature and other forms of art and information that reflects their diverse sociocultural backgrounds alongside using scientifically supported, evidence-based methods to teach all students to read” (pp. 12-13). It does not mention teaching that familiarizes children with using texts for specific purposes. *The Reading Guarantee* emphasizes developing comprehension skills early, describing reading as the process of extracting meaning from text and indicating that this process can be complex (p. 19). It suggests using whole-class read-aloud sessions featuring a variety of complex texts. Little detail is offered in how to support comprehension development; for the few citations included, it is unclear how they were selected. It does not include a focus on teaching specific purposes for reading.

### ***Requisite Skills***

*Right to Read* provides numerous suggestions for teaching reading-related skills, particularly phonemic awareness and phonics skills, and cites research to support its recommendations. Though less emphasized, the report also touches on fluency, spelling, and comprehension (with the teaching of comprehension strategies identified as research-based). However, encoding skills are rarely mentioned, nor does the report examine requisite skills related to other areas besides reading. *The Reading Guarantee* emphasizes the development of phonics-based decoding skills in the early years (p. 3), including orthography, phonemic awareness and systematic synthetic phonics; and phonics programs and screeners are explicitly identified as ways to “embed evidence-informed reading instruction” (p. 39). The report discusses other reading sub-skills emphasized by the National Reading Panel (2000), such as fluency and comprehension strategies. A few writing-related skills, including spelling and handwriting, are touched on; no requisite skills related to other aspects of literacy are discussed.

### **Document Interpretation**

#### ***Gaps, Authors, and Possible Reasons***

The above analysis makes clear that the literacy principles undergirding the literacy values framework are not robustly represented in these documents. Half of the principles received at best an incidental mention, and even the rest were only minimally or partially addressed, all of which raises the question: Why might policy advocates release documents that aspire to raise literacy achievement within their respective contexts, yet include such notable omissions? Two possible explanations come to mind.

The first is that the authors chose, strategically, to emphasize a limited range of material not representative of the full range of instructional literacy principles they believed to be important. There might be a number of reasons for such a choice, including practical limitations on how much material could be included as well as beliefs surrounding chronological literacy development (i.e., that certain capacities believed to be foundational are prerequisite to others or that certain capacities require children to be developmentally more mature before they are taught). Both *Right to Read* and

*The Reading Guarantee* explicitly acknowledge that their scope was limited to reading, which may explain, for example, the limited attention paid to composition. To the extent that practical limitations are the cause, the omissions would not necessarily indicate a disregard for the principles and their underlying values—though such reasoning could still suggest limited recognition of the cross-age applicability and interdependence of the principles.

There is some indication that such an explanation could apply to *Right to Read*. Its explicitly stated focus is the needs of children who have reading difficulties (assumed to be rooted in decoding challenges), and it explicitly takes care to state that “although the inquiry focused on one most frequent obstacle to students developing a strong foundation in early reading skills, the report also acknowledges the other elements of a comprehensive approach to literacy,” indicating that explicit phonics instruction, which it centers, “should be one part of broader, evidence-based, rich classroom language arts instruction, including but not limited to storytelling, book reading, drama, and text analysis” (p. 13). *Right to Read* has also been defended against accusations of an overly narrow focus on this basis (International Dyslexia Association Ontario Branch, 2022). The presence of at least an incidental mention of all but one of the principles within *Right to Read* could be an indication that the authors seek to align themselves with at least most of the literacy values while focusing on a small subset of concerns that its authors considered most directly related to the needs of the students in focus. However, there is less evidence to suggest that the same line of reasoning influenced *The Reading Guarantee*, given its broader “how to give every child the best chance of success” focus (as reflected in its full title) and the reality that fully half of the principles were wholly unaddressed.

There is another possible explanation for the lack of engagement with the full range of literacy principles in these key SoR documents: a narrow understanding of literacy that fails to align with the widely shared transnational literacy values. Within some SoR advocacy, and perhaps within some instantiations of SoR itself, there appears to be an ideological commitment to only a narrow subset of the principles; the rest are not seen as important and may even be rejected outright. At best, the marginalized principles may be included as token references, such as *The Reading Guarantee*’s quick nod to the idea that decodable texts “can be culturally appropriate” (p. 22). At worst, they are ignored entirely, as is the case in both *Right to Read* and *The Reading Guarantee* when it comes to the need to develop children’s capacity for criticality as literate individuals.

There is little doubt that some SoR advocacy is anchored in this narrowness. SoR has been explicitly embraced by U.S. Education Secretary McMahon to counter “divisive ideologies” (Schwartz, 2025) as well as by politically conservative organizations such as the U.S.-based Moms for Liberty (MfL), a right-wing group some civil rights organizations have labeled as extremist (Schwartz, 2023). In an interview discussing SoR, MfL co-founder Tiffany Justice explicitly identified narrowness as the reason for SoR’s appeal (to her): “We’re failing kids every day.... The idea that there’s more emphasis placed on diversity in the classroom, rather than teaching kids to read, is alarming at best. That’s criminal” (Schwartz, 2023). To be sure, endorsing a highly constrained view of literacy that neglects core principles does not require alignment with the views of the Trump administration or MfL, but it is telling that so many of those who perceive “traditional” values as under threat enthusiastically embrace SoR. MfL is already seeking to use the SoR mantle to justify moves to narrow literacy curriculum at the policy level, and Secretary McMahon’s recently released grant priorities explicitly highlight “proven methods based in the science of reading” while denigrating the Biden administration’s “discriminatory diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) ideology” (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Similar advocacy identifying SoR and phonics-centric policy as means to defeat “woke” values and support neoconservative political interests have also cropped up in Canada and Australia, as well as under the authoritarian regime in Brazil (Windle & Batista, 2019; Zwaagstra, 2025).

To the extent that an ideological commitment to a narrow understanding of literacy might have been behind the OHRC and Grattan Institute's decisions to neglect many of the literacy principles (in whole or part), it would represent an effort to shift what gets valued as literacy away from the internationally embraced vision put forward by UNESCO and the ILA, and to thereby shrink the kind of literacy to which children have access in school. Such a commitment need not be overtly political for it to have real and problematic effects on children's literacy opportunities.

The relative absence of attention to many of the principles in the reports, especially in *The Reading Guarantee*, provides potential evidence for this explanation of the authors' purposes. Other evidence is more indirect, often found in language used to describe alternate approaches or individuals perceived as resistant to advocated changes. *Right to Read*, for example, argues that there are major problems with current literacy teaching in Ontario due to problematic "ideology" (p. 152). Perceived problems include lingering adherence to balanced literacy and whole language approaches, which were weakly explained and somewhat elided within the report: "There is strong resistance to change and strongly held beliefs supporting whole language philosophies in parts of the education sector" (p. 153). *The Reading Guarantee* is similarly critical of balanced literacy and whole language—approaches that elevated the pursuit of instructional goals connected to many of the very literacy principles neglected in the reports. In one case study of a principal trying to shift her school toward SoR, *The Reading Guarantee* notes that she "needs to change the hearts and minds of her staff" away from their current commitments as teachers. These kinds of statements could well signal that commitment to literacy principles that go beyond the narrow ones centered in the reports is unacceptable, from the perspective of the authors.

### ***Reverberation through Media***

As we have noted, consideration of the authors' intentions can provide insight into why they made the choice to attend to a limited range of principles. However, because the reports function as "primary definers" (Bruce, 2020), what matters most from a policy perspective is how the documents are perceived, understood and taken on by public audiences. Regardless of how multifaceted the authors' actual views on literacy might or might not be, the ideas about literacy that are most prominent in the documents are likely to be picked up by the media and ultimately by stakeholders who may well never have read the original documents. Less prominent ideas are likely to disappear in public retelling, even if they received incidental mention in the original document.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the public reporting (e.g., Duffy, 2024; Francis, 2022; Henebery, 2024; Hobbs, 2022) about each of these documents primarily highlights *requisite skills*, particularly those related to phonemic awareness and phonics. While the need to develop comprehension and knowledge of the world was also briefly mentioned in some news articles, there was little if any attention to other principles. In other words, the media's coverage told a problematically narrow story of what counts as teaching literacy, attributing literacy success or failure simply to decoding skills. It told this story not only through the content that it directly attributed to the report, but also through quotes from parents of children who struggled to decode and through anecdotes from teachers. There were descriptions validating teachers for teaching requisite skills, but no stories validating, say, teachers inviting their classes to engage in drama or storytelling—even though these ideas did receive incidental mention in *Right to Read*.

Thus, even if the report authors intended their emphasis on decoding skills to represent just one part of a broader and more complex literacy framework, the way these reports were received and amplified in public discourse—particularly through media coverage—contribute to a narrowed understanding of what literacy is and how it should be taught. Consequently, to the extent that reading policy is predominantly shaped by such documents and their media portrayal, there is an unacceptable risk that resulting policies may fall short of fostering literacy in its fullest and richest

form. When SoR advocacy in the form of documents such as *Right to Read* and *The Reading Guarantee* undermine widely accepted transnational values built on many decades of literacy scholarship (intentionally or not) and instead bolster a narrowed value system that turns “literacy” into a paltry shadow of itself, it will, and should, face concerted resistance.

If SoR advocacy genuinely honors and seeks to further the full range of literacy values, then this commitment should be sufficiently transparent that the messaging comes through in how media takes up and amplifies the narrative. Recommendations made both in the primary definer documents and in the media drawing upon them should draw upon evidence around how best to support children’s long-term development in ways that take each literacy principle seriously across the course of children’s literacy learning in the elementary years. These two reports neither meet this bar themselves nor adequately frame their contributions within larger conversations centering such commitments.

## Implications

Drawing on existing definitions and scholarship, this article described a literacy values framework that encompasses widely held literacy values and reflects a long tradition of literacy scholarship. This framework values literacy as a rich and varied set of purposeful, multidimensional text-related practices involving communication, understanding, composition, imagination, empathy, and/or criticality—practices that are simultaneously active, social, cultural, and tied to identity. On the basis of this framework, 12 core, interdependent instructional principles were identified to support the development of literacy. These principles, in turn, were used to analyze two policy-shaping documents, *Right to Read* (Canada) and *The Reading Guarantee* (Australia). Each document’s focus aligned partially with some instructional principles, but paid others little heed. It is particularly concerning that neither document so much as mentioned developing children’s criticality, what Luke (in press) has argued is *the* most central literacy capacity for these times; but the lack of substantive attention to other principles is also troubling.

There are a number of implications of this analysis, beginning with a reinterpretation of how the debate around SoR is taking place. Some SoR advocates have suggested that skepticism about SoR-related reforms sweeping across the globe is indicative of ignorance or even underlying antipathy toward evidence-based practice (e.g., Hanford, 2019). Our analysis here, by contrast, raises the possibility that in many cases resistance to SoR mandates may stem not from disagreement with the aspects of literacy they address, but rather from concerns about the dimensions they neglect.

The tension around values may be particularly damaging for teachers, who usually have little control over the literacy policies they are required to implement. Teachers asked to align their practice with SoR mandates may resist, not because they underestimate the importance of requisite skills or fail to understand the importance of research, but because they cannot embrace a form of teaching based on an incomplete vision of what literacy is and how to support it (Mosley Wetzel et al., 2020). Placing teachers into a position where they must teach literacy in ways that conflict with core values—due to political pressures and restrictive bureaucratic demands, both external to and within school communities—can heighten their stress levels and has already led some educators to leave the profession (Brandenburg et al., 2024).

It is crucial to recognize that primary definer documents like *Right to Read* and *The Reading Guarantee*, whether or not on purpose, are shaping the foundation of a contemporary literacy education in which key aspects of literacy learning are either insufficiently addressed or completely overlooked, and potentially narrowing how literacy itself gets imagined. Without deliberate focus on a comprehensive set of literacy principles in public discourse and policy-making, children are likely to miss crucial opportunities in school developing their capacity to engage fully in the societies they

are part of—where meaningful and fulfilling literate participation requires far more than fluent decoding or even skilled comprehension.

Keeping children in mind, the findings from this analysis also invite a radically different approach for those SoR advocates who do recognize value in the full range of literacy principles. How might SoR advocacy imagine and build a deeper relationship with core literacy values? An incidental mention is insufficient; what is genuinely valued must be embedded at the heart of advocacy, not relegated to a preface or afterthought. Doing so well requires clear articulation of values, as well as commitment to making those values clearly visible within and across the work being done, be it policy, research or practice. It also demands substantive engagement with research involving *every* literacy principle, not just a preferred subset. No single document will be able to comprehensively address all dimensions, but recognition of the full range of literacy should come to reverberate within the corpus of SoR advocacy, if it is to reach critics and adequately represent a robust vision of literacy likely to be taken up in schools. Finally, a deeper relationship with literacy values means re-imagining how advocacy conversations take place and how advocacy documents such as the ones discussed here get written: rather than emphasizing differences and dismissing opponents, it may be more fruitful to begin with the values that so many people share. If SoR advocates took this approach, their conversations with those who disagree could be on different, and more productive, footing. The resulting debates—and there would, of course, still be debates—could move the literacy education field forward with more thoughtful and well-tailored instruction aligned with *all* the principles.

Where scholars and other stakeholders do hold substantively different literacy values from those discussed in this paper (be they SoR advocates or not), these differences need to be surfaced, talked about, defended and explicitly connected to their work in policy, research, and practice: there is a collective ethical responsibility to ensure values transparency, enabling others to reflect on and respond to those values as they decide on how to engage with the work. Maintaining open, values-explicit dialogue is crucial for promoting thoughtful, ethically grounded policy, research and practice. The values framework we have identified here, however anchored in contemporary literacy discussions and scholarship, is not intended as the final word.

For literacy researchers both within and outside SoR advocacy circles, the principles-based analysis conducted here provides a systematic way of understanding how literacy values are—or are not—reflected in policy discourses. Because the critiques surfaced here may well apply in other contexts shaped by SoR discourses, there is further work to be done to uncover how values get represented (or disappeared) elsewhere in the world of literacy policy, research and practice. This form of analysis could be used by researchers to analyze other literacy-centered policy documents, as well as by policymakers and educators seeking to understand how possible policies, curricular standards, and classroom practices measure up to a robust contemporary understanding of literacy.

For those concerned about the direction of literacy policy, be they in the world of policy, research, and/or teaching, the literacy values framework and interdependent principles also offer a concrete anchor for action within, and in response to, policy discussions. Given the stakes, now is a time—indeed, when has it ever not been the time? —to insist on values transparency from those who seek to enact their vision of literacy instruction (SoR or anything else). It is a time for those who care about children’s literacy to demand that children are able to benefit from the textured and varied aspects of literacy that they so richly deserve.

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