

An Analysis of the Alberta Kindergarten to Grade 6 English Language Arts and Literature (ELAL) Curriculum

Katie Brubacher & Jacqueline Filipek

Introduction

The complexities and possibilities of literacy instruction in Alberta are evolving, as we now have the fastest growing immigrant population of any province in Canada (Alberta Government 2017). Alberta has also recently seen an unprecedented growth in population; from July 2023 to July 2024, population increased by 204,209, which reflects the highest growth rate since 1981 (Alberta Treasury Board and Finance 2024). This is all happening in the context of Alberta historically being acknowledged in an international setting for its strong literacy programming. For example, Alberta has traditionally ranked high on PISA¹ literacy scores compared to other English-speaking countries (Wyse and Bradbury 2022), recently ranking highest among English-speaking nations and subnations and in Canada in 2018 (OECD 2019). Within Canada, other districts or locations, particularly the Northwest Territories (NWT), had adopted the Alberta curriculum for use in their classrooms; however, they have now switched to the British Columbia curriculum (Government of NWT 2023, October 11; Mertz, December 16, 2021, <https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/en/curriculumrenewal>). In the midst of all of this change and uncertainty, Alberta has released a new English language arts and literature (ELAL) curriculum for students in Grades K to 6.

Worldwide, the Science of Reading movement has captured parents' and educators' interest, fueling an excitement in phonics programs. But it is also leading to a narrowing of reading, such that skill building is prioritized over engagement with reading and meaning making (see Aukerman 2024 to learn more about comprehensive approaches to reading research). Moreover, multilingual

educators are raising critical concerns about how the Science of Reading movement exists within an English, monolingual research paradigm (Brubacher and Filipek 2025; Cummins 2007; Soltero-González, Gillanders and Hasenohr 2025). In Alberta, there have been some shifts in literacy programming and, particularly, in how reading is shaped and understood. For the purposes of this paper, we understand that all components of literacy should be developed starting in kindergarten, alongside skills and comprehension (Luke 2005). This is done within a framework where reading engagement, motivation and self-efficacy are important, all while paying close attention to the linguistic and cultural diversity in one's classroom (Aukerman and Schuldt 2021). We bring this comprehensive and contextualized understanding

Worldwide, the Science of Reading movement has captured parents' and educators' interest, fueling an excitement in phonics programs.

of literacy into our analysis of the new ELAL curriculum and of how teachers and teacher educators are experiencing it. Considering the present tensions in theory, curriculum and pedagogy for English language arts (ELA), this paper aims to describe our analysis of the ELAL curriculum and, through examples, illustrate how some teachers and teacher educators are interpreting and enacting it in their classrooms.

Contexts

Following the release of the draft curricula in 2021, The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) engaged in a study involving more than 6,500 teachers in an analysis and critique of the drafts. The results raised concerns such as the proliferation of nondevelopmentally appropriate outcomes and narrowly defined ideas of literacy, numeracy, citizenship and practical skills that do not reflect the demands of twenty-first-century learning (The Alberta Teachers' Association 2021, v). Preceding the published survey report, Jason Schilling, ATA president, wrote in a letter to the Minister of Education that

the draft curriculum does not measure up. It is not what Albertans deserve and have become accustomed to over the previous decades.

Further, it will not serve Alberta's students in preparing them for an uncertain future or equip them to respond to the economic, social and technological challenges ahead (Schilling 2021).

In addition to the required implementation of the new curriculum, teachers and schools in Alberta are overwhelmed by overcrowded classrooms (Bellefontaine 2024). Across Canada, there are persistent cuts to education funding, including to teacher librarians and school libraries, making

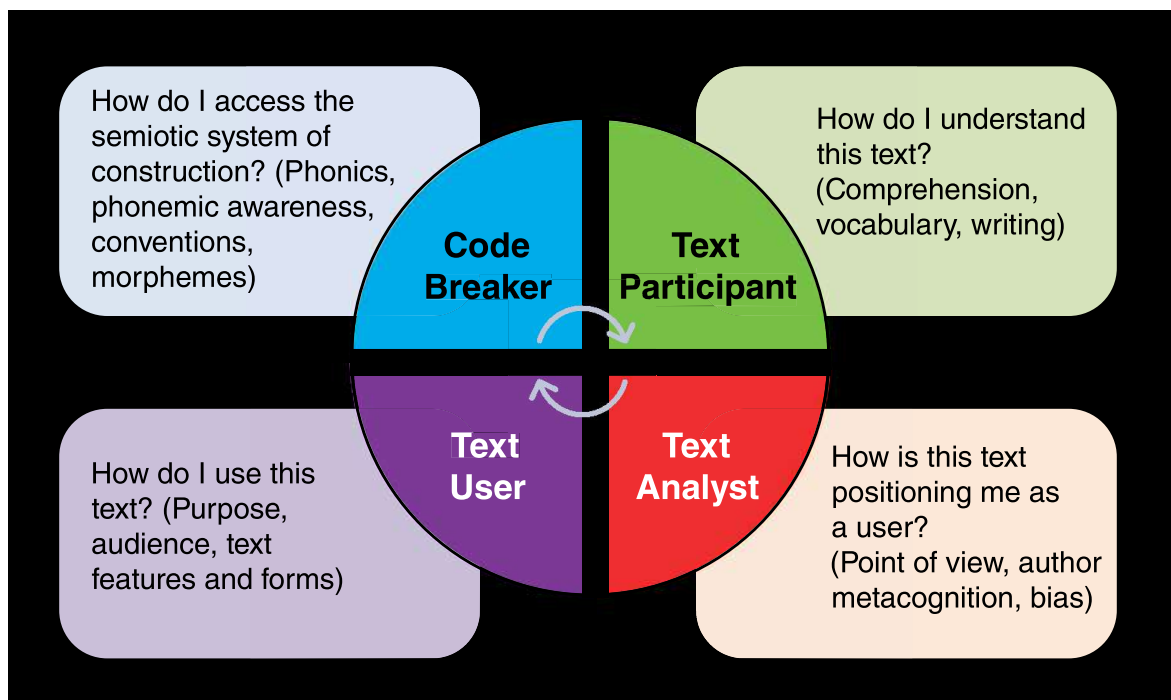
access to books and resources more challenging (Cummings 2017). In the midst of these changes and uncertainty, teachers are being expected to understand and implement a new curriculum in almost all subject areas, including literacy, with very limited resources.

Theoretical Perspectives

To better understand the curriculum, we draw from Freebody and Luke's (1990) four resources model, which is a framework that describes the different ways in which readers engage with texts. There are four dimensions to the model: code breaker, text user, text participant and text analyst/critic. Each describes a role that readers take, or resources they draw from, when reading (Luke 2012; see Figure 1).

The four resources model has informed our work as teachers, students and researchers. It has been used previously by other scholars for curriculum analysis as a way of mapping the curriculum (Pandya and Aukerman 2014) or to understand readers' engagement with texts in various contexts (Luke 2017; Serafini 2012). The following is how we understand the four resources model as a framework for our curriculum analysis:

Figure 1: Four resources model



This qualitative research understands policy as social practice such that both what is written in actual policy documents (the curriculum) and how it is enacted by local communities (teacher educators and teachers) are considered (Levinson, Sutton and Winstead 2009). To better understand the curriculum, we read it thoroughly and analyzed and coded it for themes using various conceptual understandings of reading such as the four resources model (Freebody and Luke 1990) and multilingual literacies, as well as Indigenous critical literacies (Reese 2012) and Anishinaabe pedagogy (Peltier 2017), which is the focus of a previous publication (Brubacher and Filipek 2025). Our analysis framed many of the questions we later asked local teacher educators and practicing teachers, through

This qualitative research understands policy as social practice...

semistructured interviews, about their experiences of enacting the curriculum. We then analyzed and coded the interviews separately for emerging themes and then returned to our curriculum document analysis to identify connections between what the teachers and teacher educators were saying and what our analysis revealed of the curriculum.

Participants

Teacher Educators:

Charlotte: thirty-two years of teaching in elementary and junior high schools; completed PhD after retiring and is now a teacher educator; has worked on developing curriculum in the past

Elena: background in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) in elementary; taught in Africa and in Indigenous communities; completed a PhD; instructor in teacher education; has worked on developing curriculum in the past

Sarah: teacher educator in Alberta; was a kindergarten teacher in Ontario and did learning support in Africa, which was influenced by Reading Recovery²

Teachers:

Ella: first-year teacher; currently teaching Grade 2 in a rural community (public school)

Christy: thirty-two years of teaching elementary grades (K–6); currently teaching combined Grades 3 and 4; urban setting (separate school)

Jill: in third year; first two years in kindergarten and now teaches Grade 2; teaches in an urban setting (religious independent school)

Ling: fifteen years of teaching Grades 3 to 5; first year teaching Grade 2; teaching in an urban setting in a large school district (separate school)

Maggie: fourth-year teacher with experience in kindergarten, and Grades 1 and 2; currently teaching Grades 1 and 2 (separate school)

Mike: in second year, Grade 6 teacher; teaches in an urban setting (separate school)

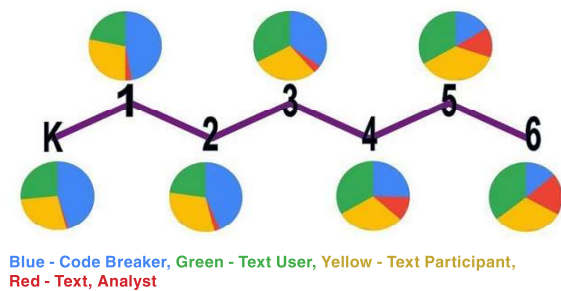
The Basic Structure of the ELAL Program of Study

Starting in kindergarten, Alberta students work through nine organizing ideas (OIs) in the ELAL program of study: text forms and structures, oral language, vocabulary, phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, writing and conventions. The phonological awareness OI only exists up to the end of Grade 2, the phonics OI until the end of Grade 3 and the fluency OI until the end of Grade 4. Each grade level's OI also has one guiding question (GQ) and one learning outcome (LO). There are also knowledge, understandings and skills and procedures (KUSPs) that provide more specific breakdowns of what the government expects for the LO for each grade.

Findings: Curriculum Analysis

Coding the curriculum was quite challenging at times partly because of the inconsistency in voice and organization. For example, we decided early on that a curriculum point followed by a list would receive one code; however, in other sections, items in the lists were almost separate curriculum expectations themselves and, therefore, needed separate codes. Figure 2 depicts our analysis of how each KUSP aligns with each of the four resources and how they are distributed in each grade level.

Figure 2: The Four Resources and the English Language Arts and Literature Curriculum



To make these connections to the four resources model, we conducted a document analysis by focusing on each KUSP in each OI for each grade level and coding it as one of the four resources based on its literacy demands. The four resources model is not meant to be viewed as an equally balanced model because readers' roles shift and change as they encounter different and more complex texts over grade levels; however, our analysis identified a clear overemphasis on code breaking in division one (K–3).

Code breaking skills existed across all OIs and all seven grade levels. These involve various encoding and decoding skills and draw on phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle, grapheme-phoneme relationships, morphological awareness and conventions. Coding the phonics OI was very straightforward as it is all about code breaking without any reference to using, participating in or critiquing texts. The phonemic awareness section offered some contextualized expectations within the Grade 2 guiding question: “How does sound contribute to understanding oral language?” Unfortunately, all the skills and procedures attached to this question fell into the code breaking resource and seem divorced from understanding:

Segment sounds in words that have five or more phonemes.

Identify phonemes in words that have three or more syllables.

Segment sounds in words that have consonant blends.

We are not sure how these skills are meant to connect with understanding as there are no links to making meaning from sound, only these isolated actions of segmenting and identifying sounds. Additionally, only a very small number

of outcomes supported students' development as text analysts/critics in division one and, even up to Grade 6, still received less focus than text user or text participant skills.

Themes

Key findings arose from the data that we discuss through the following four themes:

1. Code breaking through commercialized phonics programs
2. Reading for meaning
3. Text forms, features and the expression of self and ideas through writing
4. Critical literacy and metacognition

Code breaking through commercialized phonics programs

Extensive research supports the important role of early literacy skill development in the areas of phonemic and phonological awareness (Ehri 2022; Shanahan 2020). Despite this, we found that the curriculum's overrepresentation of code breaking, which includes phonics, phonemic awareness, morphemes and conventions in our analysis, led to classroom practices that involve the regular use of isolated phonics programs, particularly ones in which meaning making does not accompany phonological awareness.

Table 1: K–6 Teachers' Commercialized Programs

Teacher	Grades Taught	Commercialized Programs
Christy	K–6	Heart Words
Ella	2	Heggerty, UFLI
Jill	K, 2	Abeka, Bob Jones University Curriculum, UFLI, Heggerty
Ling	2–5	UFLI
Maggie	K–2	UFLI
Mike	6	Phonics Companion

All six teachers referenced using or knowing about the University of Florida Literacy Institute's program, called UFLI (<https://ufl.edu/>), and four referenced a phonemic awareness program called Heggerty (<https://heggerty.org>)

(see Table 1 for programs used in each teacher’s classroom). The programs involve teacher-ready materials and scope and sequence outlines. Schools purchase the teacher guides, but there are some supplementary resources available for free online. All the teachers recognized the large quantity of outcomes for phonological awareness skills and, except Mike, the Grade 6 teacher, implemented phonics programs in a whole class format. Ling explained that last year she tried Heggerty, which involves adding, substituting and deleting phonemes and other word parts in a “repeat after

Both the teacher educators and the practicing teachers acknowledged that they are engaging in or noticing changes in pedagogical practices across schools

me” format as a whole class. She remarked, “They [the students] are half-asleep. They’re just mimicking,” despite her other comments that she loves the phonics addition to the curriculum and thus starts “each morning off with phonics.” In her reflection on trying some commercialized phonics lessons, Christy said, “I just really think for the amount of time I spent doing it, the amount of bang for my buck was minimal.” Maggie, Mike, Jill and Ella expressed a different perspective, and they all commented on the ease of the programs as they offered readymade lessons from a teacher guide or those that were accessible online. Thus, the commercialized programs that have appeared along with the new curriculum are appealing to many teachers.

Teacher educator Charlotte reflected on her experiences of using a commercialized phonics program early in her teaching career:

In the long run, by the end of the year, I thought, wow, that’s not the best approach to deal with this because it wasn’t very successful. They might learn the sounds of the letters, but they really couldn’t read by the end of Grade 1. And it’s scary to see all these phonics programs being picked up and thinking that’s the only way to teach children how to read and write.

Thinking about her current students and practicing teachers, she also commented,

So many of the early career teachers actually had to learn about phonics all over again or tried to learn phonics. It’s hard; I don’t know where you even start. And then they get these phonics programs from somewhere and just follow it without questioning.

Both the teacher educators and the practicing teachers acknowledged that they are engaging in or noticing changes in pedagogical practices across schools, including more time being spent on commercialized, one-size-fits-all programs. However, as Charlotte pointed out, there is more than one way to teach literacy, and time needs to be allocated for literacy development beyond daily phonics instruction.

The more experienced teachers and the teacher educators discussed their own experiences and concerns about these scripted literacy programs. Charlotte, in reflecting on the increased use of commercialized programs, commented,

And the other real worry that I have is that it’s so easy to go buy a program to teach phonics because it gives you resources, directions and how to teach it. So, I could see quite a few early career teachers just going to pick up these programs.

Elena highlighted her concerns about applying phonics to reading in context, particularly because of the high number of phonics-related outcomes in the curriculum. Furthermore, these outcomes are considered skills that are developed, as opposed to the perspective that literacy is about meaning making and is connected to social and cultural practices (Street 1995). Elena commented, “In the [previous curriculum draft],³ for example, it was very clear that children have to apply phonics strategies when reading in context. Now it’s not really clear that they have to apply it when reading in context. They’re falsely assuming that if a child can pass a test on it, they will apply it, but we all know it doesn’t work that way.” Returning to Elena, she also acknowledged that the code breaking curriculum outcomes lend themselves to a particular pedagogical approach that impacts assessment:

And the concern we had with the old draft that I see happening here is that teachers are going to be spending a lot of time teaching it [code

breaking] in isolation, especially to pass the test. But there's no requirement that children have to be able to apply this knowledge to text. So, I don't think they're doing a good job at all of the code breaking.

As an experienced teacher and researcher, Elena emphasizes that readers who learn words and sounds in isolation will struggle with comprehension if there is no connection to meaning making while reading.

Reading for Meaning

The text user aspect of the four resources model involves reflecting on how reading for meaning is an important practice that requires many complex processes. In the curriculum, however, excessive attention is paid to building skills at the loss of an understanding of reading for meaning and communication, as reflected on by Sarah:

So I feel there's a whole lot of detail provided about the kinds of things that kids should be doing skillwise in the classroom that I don't really have any particular disagreement with. But I guess my concern with it is that in going on and on and on about this set of skills, and then forgetting all the rest that's connected to literacy, that it paints a very limited picture of what literacy is and does for those who might not have been through sort of an expansive understanding of literacy and ELA in their teacher education programs, or maybe in their school.

This sentiment is reflected on by Jill who, when working with multilingual students, states, "But I have for sure, four students who really struggle with English being a primary language, and have seen amazing growth in their ability to read, but not so amazing growth in their understanding of what we're reading." To these participants, the curriculum does not focus on important aspects of reading like inferring, drawing conclusions, analyzing, making connections, visualizing, monitoring and questioning, to name a few. This leaves all students, and especially multilingual students, who are learning English at a disadvantage.

In outcomes in which the curriculum focuses on literacy complexities other than code breaking skills, specifically those related to reading comprehension, most expectations focus primarily on making predictions and connections. This delays,

or completely leaves out, many important reading comprehension processes until Grades 4 to 6.

The text user aspect of the four resources model involves reflecting on how reading for meaning is an important practice that requires many complex processes.

For example, the very first mention of inferencing in the curriculum is in Grade 3, in the outcome "Make inferences by combining background knowledge with information that is not explicitly stated within a text" (Alberta Education 2022). Students in K-2 have not yet been prepared in other strategies such as synthesizing or combining background knowledge with text cues, as the comprehension goals they would have worked on up to this point are narrowly focused on predicting and connecting. In fact, the words *predict* and *connections* are used 42 and 48 times, respectively, in the curriculum, much more than other processes (eg, synthesize - 10, infer - 16, summarize - 20, evaluate - 7). The following indicates some of what is said in the Comprehension section of the curriculum about making predictions:

- Predicting includes imagining what might happen based on information (critical thinking), including title, pictures, details within the text, background knowledge.

- Predictions can be made prior to or during reading, viewing, or listening to texts.

(Kindergarten)

Similar expectations are repeated throughout Grades 1 to 3.

In Grade 4, different reading processes begin to be integrated, but predictions remain central to the expectations: "Significant information that is synthesized to make predictions includes background knowledge, personal experience, specific clues from a text, and anticipation of logical outcomes or events" (Comprehension). Students in Alberta are therefore likely to be strong predictors and can

make personal connections to texts, but they are also likely to struggle with inferring, drawing conclusions, analyzing, feeling and even formulating

Moreover, schools do not seem to pay a lot of attention to the aspects of reading for meaning that are present in the curriculum, and teachers seem to lack adequate professional development in this area.

opinions about texts. The decision to emphasize predicting and connecting over other strategies feels arbitrary, rather than based on research that supports more comprehensive perspectives on reading comprehension (Duke and Cartwright 2021; Pressley, Allington and Pressley 2023).

Moreover, schools do not seem to pay a lot of attention to the aspects of reading for meaning that are present in the curriculum, and teachers seem to lack adequate professional development in this area. When questioned about meaning and comprehension in her interview, Jill responded, “It’s hard to say. I’m just skimming through the program of studies, it’s hard for us because we don’t do a ton.” Jill is unsure of where to begin because, as she states, we [presumably her school] don’t do a ton [reading for meaning]. Later, however, some of the key processes related to reading for meaning do come to Jill’s mind:

I mean, we do a lot of, how do we personally relate to it [reading], or what similarities and differences [between texts]. Again, vocabulary ties into where the story is set. I guess, if that all connects to that [reading for meaning], then we do do a lot of that in terms of what is the purpose of the story.

Here, we can see Jill listing off the different text participant activities she does with her class. Not surprisingly, *relate*, which is mentioned extensively throughout the curriculum, and *vocabulary*, which has its own OI, are some of the ideas that come to her mind when pushed to think about reading for meaning practices in her classroom.

Mike, who teaches Grade 6, does see meaning-based activities as essential to his literacy programming:

The meaning-makers [reading for meaning] and the text users [understanding texts forms and purpose] are definitely [there]. [The curriculum does not] use those words specifically, but they’re definitely in the outcomes for Grade 6 in the new curriculum. And the text users specifically: we have to [learn] a variety of genres, and kids need to write a variety of genres. The meaning-makers: I do a lot through read-aloud with my kids.

Here, we can clearly see the divergence between how the curriculum frames literacy in K–3 as opposed to Grades 4 to 6, where the latter includes a more comprehensive approach to literacy instruction.

The curriculum addresses various literary elements, such as character, setting and events. Interestingly, theme, another literary element, is almost completely absent in the curriculum. It is mentioned only twice in the whole curriculum. It appears in Grade 5 in text forms and structures:

Knowledge: Elements of fiction include theme, the underlying message of a text.

Skills and Procedures: Examine elements within a variety of fictional texts, including theme.

It also appears at the end of the comprehension OI statement: “Text Comprehension is supported by applying varied strategies and processes and by considering both particular contexts and universal themes.” Considering the only outcomes that include any aspects of theme are the two mentioned above, we wonder how students will understand the notion of universal themes as they consider them for comprehension purposes since they barely learn about theme at all in elementary school.

Text forms, features and the expression of self and ideas through writing

In many ways, we were surprised at the extent to which the curriculum focused on the third resource: text user (the use of text forms and features as well as purpose and audience). Although text user is an important aspect of reading and literacy, in Grades 1 and 2, it had more codes than the text participant, which is vocabulary and comprehension, as well as the writing process and expressive writing. It is also interesting to note that the curriculum is organized with the text forms

and structures OI first and the writing OI near the end. This is indicative of the attention paid to these aspects of literacy, as there were over 500 codes for text forms/features/structures but only about 100 for writing. Quite interestingly, when asked about the text user resource during our interview, Mike tells us

We have to write [using] persuasive writing, opinion-based writing, news articles. We talked about structure a lot within the writing. And that's in the new curriculum outcome for sure — different writing pieces.

For Mike, writing, in relation to the curriculum, is predominantly about text forms.

Text form and purpose are important but what about meaning making? Ella, one of our teacher participants, reflects on the importance of meaning making, stating, “I believe that through reading and writing is how you form beliefs and how you develop who you are in a way.” Mike further adds, “My most meaningful LA lessons come through *thinking routines* easily. [On] the Harvard website⁴ with all those *thinking routines* is when I get the most engagement and most meaningful lessons for my students, whether it's just talking, writing, or presenting.” In these ways, when discussing writing and reading, in general, these teachers find beliefs, identity and thinking to be core concepts.

Although the focus of the four resources model is on reading, scholars have further expanded the model to include multimodal and visual texts (Serafini 2012). While coding the curriculum, we discussed where to place the codes that emerged from the writing OI, such as the writing process, expressive writing, inquiry and keyboarding/handwriting. Informed by work such as Bearne and Wolstencroft (2007), we decided that the writing process and expressive writing are examples of understanding writing, meaning making and idea generation. At times, the writing process is described in detail and also included the editing of conventions (code breaker); for example, in Grade 6, it references the planning process by encouraging “consideration of audience, purpose, and form” (text user). Situating the writing process and expressive writing in the text participant section of the four resources model was not a straightforward decision, but we understood writing to

be predominantly about generating ideas and communicating meaning. If we had placed these two codes in the text user as opposed to the text participant resources, the text user would have taken an even larger section of the pie. We draw attention to this to clarify how much meaning making and comprehension are minimized in this curriculum — this cannot be overemphasized. We continue to wonder about the decision to place all the research/inquiry components in the writing OI because it feels a bit arbitrary. Much of inquiry is about comprehension and understanding, but inquiry can also be a text form with its own

“I believe that through reading and writing is how you form beliefs and how you develop who you are in a way.”

features. We question if this arbitrary decision to place inquiry in the writing OI was because there was so little in the curriculum about writing, especially as a meaning making activity, that there was space to place it there.

Writing expressed as meaning making shifts across grade levels throughout the writing OI of the curriculum. In Grade 1, the GQ is “How can writing be used to communicate meaning?” Writing and meaning appear to be intricately intertwined; however, by Grade 3, the focus shifts to “How can writing craft combined with skills and processes contribute to written expression?” For Grade 3, “idea generation” is listed as part of the planning process under the Knowledge section. Then with Understanding, the expectation is “writing can capture ideas, memories, investigations, and stories”; however, the actual Skills and Procedures section barely mentions idea generation at all. The only mention of an idea was in connection to not constructing run-on sentences: “Create drafts of writing that maintain audience interest by focusing the number of ideas in sentences and limiting repetitions.” Therefore, although we understood the writing process as being focused on generating and expressing ideas, the curriculum barely recognizes ideas and meaning making

in reference to writing in the early years. Instead, it goes back to what is essentially conventions and text forms and structures, ignoring meaning making, thinking and idea generation. Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on the mechanics of physically writing by using keyboarding and handwriting in the writing OI. According to Christy, a teacher, “One thing, though, that’s on here is cursive writing, keyboarding and printing. Do you ever have time to teach that in school? I never have.” The curriculum, however, positions it so that time must be made for the mechanics of writing, with generating ideas for writing holding minimal space in the early years.

We end this section by discussing both the inconsistent vagueness of the curriculum and the high level of specificity in certain areas. In the Grade 1 Text Forms and Structures section, the curriculum describes how texts can be shared through particular modes. Looking specifically at the LO for Grade 1, it states, “Students examine ways that messages can be organized and presented for different purposes”; however, the knowledge connected to this outcome is so open-ended that any component of literacy could be addressed:

Messages can be shared for different reasons (purposes), including to learn, have fun, and stay safe

Messages can be shared digitally or non-digitally through

- reading
- writing
- listening
- speaking
- viewing
- representing

Messages can be shared in a variety of forms, including

- books
- stories
- pictures
- land

Despite this very general knowledge statement of the various components of literacy, the skills and procedures associated with this significantly expansive outcome are very specific:

Read print from left to right with a return sweep.

Read print with accurate one-to-one word matching.

Examine sentences that start with a capital letter, have spaces between words, and end with punctuation.

Our analysis shows that critical literacy is not focused on significantly in the first half of elementary school

These skills appear to be concepts of print, and we are unsure of why these specific skills are placed in the Texts Forms and Structures section under such a broad and general outcome. This inconsistency is something we noticed throughout the curriculum, and it may be one that limits teachers’ choice of mode and form if they cannot be experienced in the particular ways expressed in the skills section.

Critical literacy and metacognition

Our analysis shows that critical literacy is not focused on significantly in the first half of elementary school, with only point of view, metacognition, author’s message and bias being given some attention. In fact, when examining the four resources pie chart results (Figure 2), the text analyst role is almost nonexistent in K–3. Charlotte, one of our teacher educators, reflects on this: “Reflective thinking, I think sometimes related to critical thinking, there’s really a lack of that. I don’t think that was even on their radar.” Sarah, another teacher educator, takes this discussion further by connecting her thoughts back to the four resources model:

But I don’t see much, if anything, of critical literacy, which is just so disheartening when you think of young children, right? We have this idea that somehow critical literacy comes later [beyond Grades 1 to 3] and I think Luke and Freebody [our theoretical framework] were spot on that these are four resources [code breaking, text participant, text user, text critic] that all students need; they will interact with them in different ways. But I do not see critical literacy included at all in the curriculum.

Later in her interview, Sarah further discusses critical literacy stating that “there’s that sense of making meaning in terms of there being one right meaning held within the text. [For example, finding] the author’s intent, rather than that transactional understanding of meaning making.”

One of the Grade 2 teachers, Jill, reflected on this absence of critical literacy when asked specifically about it during her interview:

Honestly, I don’t see it [critical literacy] a ton. And again, it’s not something that we would cover thoroughly. It’s sad. They changed it, it’s not here. We [teachers] have no time to add it. I don’t see a ton in the program of studies in terms of being really explicit.

Similarly, Ella struggles to explain how the curriculum supports her in incorporating critical literacy into her literacy programming:

When looking at the new curriculum I had to find and go out of my way to find places to actually implement critical literacy. It wasn’t really written into the curriculum, which I think is all right. But if people don’t try to implement it, then it could be easily missed.

Both Jill and Ella do not see critical literacy as being addressed.

Learning to make inferences is a step toward developing a critical literacy perspective; however, the curricular outcomes do not encourage students to think about multiple perspectives nor to see the power in literature or its connection to identity and social justice. Elena, a teacher educator, commented, “They’re not recognizing or developing the relationship between language and thought, and inferencing only gets an emphasis in Grade 3; that’s way too late. Inferencing and problem-solving should be kindergarten.” In the Grade 4 curriculum, students finally begin to learn critical thinking skills, but they are limited to cause and effect relationships, answering personal wonderings, combining information to draw conclusions and reading between the lines to discover the author’s meaning. Ideas of critical literacy, such as thinking beyond the text itself by examining what the text or images are saying, both implicitly and explicitly, and by considering what is included or excluded, are unfortunately missing from the curriculum.

Jill reflects on the powerful impact critical literacy can have on students, especially newcomers and multilingual students, when multiple languages are incorporated into the lesson:

We have a very high population of Ukrainian students, and we were talking a little bit about perspectives we have as a reader. And I read to them, while we watched a video of a book being read in Ukrainian, and it was fascinating because all the English-speaking kids [said], “What is happening? This is so crazy.” And it was a little bit of a perspective taking exercise we were doing, and all my Ukrainian kids were eyes wide, “Oh, we understand this.” And we can make connections, and we can understand the world in this whole new way. Again, that ties into a little bit of my purpose in doing it. It was a little bit of the empathy piece of we’re all learning at different paces here. But again, it wasn’t explicitly tied to a curricular outcome, except honoring different traditions and stories.

Even thinking, and specifically thinking about thinking, is encouraged to a limited extent in the curriculum.

In this one-off literacy lesson, Jill incorporates the children’s languages (other than English) to build empathy and talk about perspectives; however, as she states, the curriculum did not guide her toward doing this work. It was something she had to initiate on her own.

Even thinking, and specifically thinking about thinking, is encouraged to a limited extent in the curriculum. For example, metacognition is not introduced until Grade 4 and only appears in the Comprehension section. According to the curriculum, “Metacognition is an awareness of thoughts and how one thinks and involves connecting thinking and learning, identifying problems, considering options reflecting on strategies, and skills adjusting thinking based on information or experience” (Alberta Education 2022). Within the same section, the curriculum then further explains that “the reading comprehension process

involves checking for understanding, problem solving, and metacognition.” However, despite all of this, the examples provided seem to suggest that metacognition is about monitoring reading skills and not reflecting on one’s own thinking, problems and options, as the definition suggests: “Apply self-monitoring skills to self-correct when comprehension breaks down during reading” (Alberta Education 2022). Metacognition in the curriculum thus falls short of going into depth about goal-setting, understanding your development around reading processes and not just skills, reflecting on your writing and collaborating with peers, to name a few.

Discussion

The four resources model requires that teachers make careful decisions about literacy programming that are based on assessment and analysis of their students’ literacies (Luke 2005). The disproportionate emphasis of the four resources across each grade level contributes to an overemphasis on some skill development teaching practices at the expense of others. These challenges were evident in how our participants described their adoption of new teaching practices, such as their reasons for using a commercialized literacy program. For example, participants commented on how programs were systematically laid out and easy to follow. Some teachers felt they could handle the commercialized literacy programs they felt they were being pushed to implement in their classrooms as they were scripted, achievable and required little planning, and also because they met what the teachers felt were outcomes for phonics in the new ELAL curriculum. It was clear that the teacher educators worried that new and student teachers would use these scripted programs simply because they are often overwhelmed with the newness of learning to teach, and because of a new curriculum in which there are still limited resources available through school districts and experienced teachers. We also continue to wonder if the layout of the curriculum, in its regimented structure of the OIs, is also contributing to the influx of daily phonics drilling described by the teachers and their reasons for choosing a structured phonics program over rich, differentiated phonics teaching based on students’ needs and embedded within understandings of meaning.

Relatedly, our data demonstrated how meaning making and comprehension are defined across the ELAL curriculum in limited and simplistic ways. Making connections and predictions is not enough. We need to go deeper. Prior knowledge, the purpose of reading, topic familiarity, cultural background and inferential knowledge are important aspects of reading (Aukerman and Schuldt 2021). “The processes of comprehension call upon the reader to draw inferences, connecting textual evidence and background knowledge” and include the child’s personal response to the text (Freebody and Luke 1990, 9). None of these important reading processes are possible within a decontextualized phonics program and, although the curriculum does highlight some other processes, the scope is not wide enough in K–3 to prepare children for the complexities of reading in the future. Moreover, Fisher and Frey (2010) tell us that metacognition, which is key in developing self-monitoring strategies, requires “students to consider ways to solve problems (heuristics) and to reflect upon their learning” (39). Instead of giving young children opportunities to participate in this work, metacognition is only introduced in Grade 4, where there is an emphasis on reflecting on reading skills, something that should have been established in kindergarten.

Although a very small number of outcomes in K–3 were related to text analysis skills, it is also not until Grade 4 that more emphasis is placed on these aspects of literacy development. Text analysis skills, according to Freebody and Luke (1990), go beyond typical literary analysis of structure, meaning and form, and include critical literacy. Vasquez, Janks and Comber (2019) write that students’ cultural knowledge from their home and community should be used to build curriculum as they believe that students learn best when their learning is important to their lives. Teachers, then, must “show [students] how to assume agency and act to make a difference, however small” (306). By not addressing critical literacy in the K–3 curriculum, the curriculum reinforces some teachers’ beliefs that it is not important. This is in opposition to research (Aukerman and Schuldt 2021; Brownell 2018; Comber 2001; Norris, Lucas and Prudhoe 2012), which finds critical literacy to be an essential component of reading in the modern world and an important aspect of the

early years classroom. The delay in critical literacy until Grade 4 also compromises students' ability to read the more complex texts they will encounter in Grades 4 to 6 from a critical stance and to understand the roles literacy plays in identity, power relations and in our social, cultural and linguistic positioning (Freire and Macedo 1987).

Deficit talk, Luke (2003) argues, creates a cycle of lowered performance and even respect. More successful schools do not speak of deficits, he writes, rather operating on a strengths-based approach that assumes all students can critically engage with literacy activities. In one lesson, Jill seized the opportunity to incorporate Ukrainian into her teaching, finding ways to build the multilingual students' engagement and the whole classroom's understanding of perspective and use of empa-

Not being able to read in English does not equal illiteracy.

thy. However, in general, students were typically engaged in sound and letter recognition activities and not meaning making and critical literacy. She did not feel that the curriculum supported her decision to centre the students' multilingualism in a rich task that incorporated empathy and perspective. The narrow scope of many of the phonics programs teachers are using as their primary drivers for reading instruction results in fundamental gaps in building critical literacy and literacy dispositions, especially with diverse and nonnative English-speaking learners (Aukerman and Schuldt 2021).


If a child immigrates to Canada already knowing how to read and write, just not in English, these print literacy skills will transfer to the child's new languages (Cummins, Mirza and Stille 2012). Not being able to read in English does not equal illiteracy. This is part of what Luke (2003) means by deficit talk. Moreover, most phonics instruction research is focused on monolingual, white students, potentially creating knowledge gaps for diverse learners (Gabriel 2021). Instead of devaluing the children's rich literacy knowledge, we must centre that knowledge in the classroom. In fact,

access to what Cummins, Mirza and Stille (2012) describe as identity-affirming literacy engagement is essential. This means making available a wide range of books that are contextualized, culturally sustaining and in multiple languages.

Implications

Alberta's new curriculum claims to "spark the imagination, inspire a love for learning, and develop appreciation for the rich diversity of human experiences shared through language, literature, and story" (Alberta Education 2022); however, these claims are nestled within a political discourse that pushes a narrow understanding of literacy that goes back to the basics of phonics, diminishing contextual, social, multimodal, multilingual and critical components of literacy (Holloway and Peterson 2022; Shanahan 2020). Literacy researchers such as Luke (2005) propose building literacy strategies from a basis of local school autonomy, community responsiveness and accountability, informed by a wide body of social science research. What might this look like for teachers in local classrooms?

- Incorporate students' rich, multilingual literacy practices into an engaging, authentic literacy program (Cummins, Mirza and Stille 2012; García and Kleifgen 2020).
- Move beyond the curriculum to focus on critical literacy and metacognition starting in kindergarten (Brownell 2018).
- Find ways to bring children's multilingualism and literacy experiences into phonemic awareness and phonics activities (Soltero-González, Gillanders and Hasenohr 2025).
- Work on inferring, synthesizing, drawing conclusions, forming opinions and character motivation in K to 3 (Aukerman and Chambers Schuldt 2021).
- Consider using commercialized literacy programs only as a resource to supplement student-centred literacy planning (Freebody and Luke 1990).
- Keep the read-aloud, including interactive read-alouds and shared reading, as a central component of the K to 6 literacy classroom, being mindful of book choice based on identity, culture, language, content and meaning (Krashen 2011; Wyse and Hacking 2024).

- Think about adding love, joy and desire to your reading program through the use of high interest books, graphic novels and other multimodal texts (Comber 2001). Decodable texts⁵ are only mentioned three times throughout the entire curriculum.
- Self-assessment and reflecting on one’s own learning, thinking and progress are important metacognitive processes for elementary students (Fisher and Frey 2010). 

Notes

1. PISA literacy scores are collected at the age of 15, demonstrating the longitudinal correlation between early literacy practices and children’s long-term literacy, compared across countries internationally. It “measures the capacity to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve goals, develop knowledge and potential, and participate in society” (OECD 2019).
2. Reading Recovery is an international reading program that helps the lowest-achieving Grade 1 students develop effective processing systems for reading and writing. In practice, it is a daily 30-minute individualized lesson to develop students’ knowledge, skills and literacy strategies (Stouffer and Van Dyke 2023).
3. Before the current curriculum was implemented, Elena worked on a 2019 draft of the curriculum, as part of curriculum renewal. That curriculum was scrapped in favour of the current one.
4. Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2022). Types of Thinking Categories. Project Zero. <https://pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines>.
5. Children’s books focused on building phonics and phonemic knowledge (Wyse and Hacking 2024).

References

- Alberta Education. 2022. “English Language Arts and Literature K–6.” Alberta Education website. <https://curriculum.learnalberta.ca/curriculum/en/s/laneng>.
- Alberta Government. 2017. “2016 Census of Canada: Language Characteristics of Albertans.” <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/249af6f8-092e-44f4-a065-0a5e48ffc337/resource/82d4417f-71b9-4842-958a-279baec851e3/download/2016-census-language-characteristics-of-albertans.pdf>.
- Alberta Treasury Board and Finance. 2024. *Current Provincial Population Estimates*. Government of Alberta website. <https://www.alberta.ca/population-statistics>.
- Aukerman, M. 2024. “Toward Comprehensive, Research-Informed Literacy Instruction: Thinking With, Against, and Beyond the Science of Reading.” *Special Education Freedom Lecture Series, Ithaca College*, February 22. <https://www.ithaca.edu/academics/school-humanities-and-sciences/education/spring-educational-freedom-lecture-series-2024>.
- Aukerman, M, and L Chambers Schuldt. 2021. “What Matters Most? Toward A Robust and Socially Just Science of Reading.” *Reading Research Quarterly* 56: S85–S103. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.406>.
- Bearne, E, and H Wolstencroft. 2007. *Visual Approaches to Teaching Writing: Multimodal Literacy 5–11*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Bellefontaine, M. 2024. “Alberta Announces \$8.6B Plan to Build New Schools Amid Surging Population Growth.” *CBC News*, September 17. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-announces-8-6b-plan-to-build-new-schools-amid-surging-population-growth-1.7326372>.
- Brownell, C. 2018. “From Sheltering to Social Challenge: Critical Conversations in Childhood” *Literacy Today*, 14–15.
- Brubacher, K, and J Filipek. 2025. “The Complexities and Promise of Standing Beside Indigenous Literacy Scholars: A Language Curriculum Analysis.” *Journal of Teaching and Learning* 19, no 1: 85–106.
- Comber, B. 2001. “Critical Literacy: Power and Pleasure with Language in the Early Years.” *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 24, no 3: 168–81.
- Cummings, M. 2017. “School Library Staff Get Creative as Collections Age, Number of Teacher-librarians Dwindles.” *Edmonton Journal*, February 1. <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/school-library-staff-get-creative-as-collections-age-number-of-teacher-librarians-dwindle>.
- Cummins, J. 2007. “Pedagogies for the Poor? Realigning Reading Instruction for Low-income Students with Scientifically Based Reading Research.” *Educational Researcher* 36, no 9: 564–72. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07313156>.
- Cummins, J, R Mirza and S Stille. 2012. “English Language Learners in Canadian Schools: Emerging Directions for School-based Policies.” *TESL Canada Journal* 29, no 6: 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v29i0.1121>.
- Duke, N K, and K B Cartwright. 2021. “The Science of Reading Progresses: Communicating Advances Beyond the Simple View of Reading.” *Reading Research Quarterly* 56: S25–S44.
- Ehri, L C. 2022. “What Teachers Need to Know and Do to Teach Letter–Sounds, Phonemic Awareness, Word Reading, and Phonics.” *The Reading Teacher* 76, no 1: 53–61. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2095>.

- Fisher, D, and N Frey. 2010. *Guided Instruction: How to Develop Confident and Successful Learners*. ASCD.
- Freebody, P, and A Luke. 1990. "Literacies' Programs: Debates and Demands in Cultural Contexts." *Prospect: A Journal of Australian TESOL* 11: 7–16.
- Gabriel, R. 2021. "The Sciences of Reading Instruction." *Educational Leadership* 78, no 8: 58–64. <https://ascd.org/el/articles/the-sciences-of-reading-instruction>.
- García, O, and J A Kleifgen. 2020. "Translanguaging and Literacies." *Reading Research Quarterly* 55, no 4: 553–71.
- Government of Alberta. 2024. "Alberta Accredited International Schools. Alberta Education website. <https://www.alberta.ca/alberta-accredited-international-schools>.
- Government of NWT. 2023. "GNWT Updating Assessment Tools as Part of JK–12 Curriculum Renewal." Government of Northwest Territories website. <https://www.gov.nt.ca/en/newsroom/gnwt-updating-assessment-tools-part-jk-12-curriculum-renewal>.
- Holloway, S, and S S Peterson. 2022. "Why Ontario's 'Right to Read Inquiry' Needs to Broaden Its Inquiry." *The Conversation*, May 31. <https://theconversation.com/why-ontarios-right-to-read-inquiry-needs-to-broaden-its-recommendations-182378>.
- Krashen, S. D. 2011. *Free Voluntary Reading*. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited.
- Levinson, B A U, M Sutton and T Winstead. 2009. "Education Policy as a Practice of Power: Theoretical Tools, Ethnographic Methods, Democratic Options." *Educational Policy* 23, no 6: 767–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904808320676>.
- Luke, A. 2017. "Critical Literacy, School Improvement, and the Four Resources Model." In *Global Conversations in Literacy Research*, ed P Albers, 1–13. Routledge.
- Luke, A. 2012. "Critical Literacy, School improvement and the Four Resources Model [Webinar]." *Global Conversations in Literacy Research*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnA1faVAiF8>.
- Luke, A. 2005. Evidence-based State Literacy Policy: A Critical Alternative." In *International Handbook of Educational Policy*, ed N Basica, A Cumming, A Datnow, K Leithwood and D Lingstone, 661–75. Springer.
- Luke, A. 2003. "Making Literacy Policy and Practice with a Difference." *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 26, no 3: 58–82.
- Mertz, E. 2021. "Northwest Territories to Stop Using Alberta Curriculum, Will Adopt B.C.'s." *Global News*, December 16. <https://globalnews.ca/news/8457469/alberta-curriculum-northwest-territories/>.
- Norris, K, L Lucas and C Prudhoe. 2012. "Examining Critical Literacy: Preparing Preservice Teachers to Use Critical Literacy in the Early Childhood Classroom." *Multicultural Education* 19, no 2: 59–62.
- OECD. (2019). PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): *What Students Know and Can Do*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en>.
- Pandya, J Z, and M Aukerman. 2014. "A Four Resources Analysis of Technology in the CCSS." *Language Arts* 91, no 6: 429–35.
- Peltier, S. 2017. "An Anishinaabe Perspective on Children's Language Learning to Inform 'Seeing the Aboriginal Child'." *Language & Literacy* 19, no 2: 4–19. <https://doi.org/10.20360/G2N95C>.
- Petscher, Y, S Q Cabell, H W Catts, D L Compton, B R Foorman, S A Hart, C J Lonigan, B M Phillips, C Schatschnieder, L M Steacy, N P Terry, and R K Wagner. 2020. "How the Science of Reading Informs 21st Century Education." *Reading Research Quarterly* 55, no 1: 267–82. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.352>
- Pressley, T, R L Allington, and M Pressley. 2023. *Reading Instruction that Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching*. New York: Guilford Publications.
- Reese, D. 2012. "Critical Indigenous Literacies." In *The Sage Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, 2nd ed., ed J Larson and J Marsh, 251–62. Sage.
- Serafini, F. 2012. "Expanding the Four Resources Model: Reading Visual and Multi-modal Texts." *Pedagogies: An International Journal* 7, no 2: 150–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2012.656347>.
- Shanahan, T. 2020. "What Constitutes a Science of Reading Instruction?" *Reading Research Quarterly* 55, no 1: 235–437. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.349>.
- Schilling, J. (September 29, 2021). [Letter from Jason Schilling, Alberta Teachers' Association President to Adriana LaGrange, Minister of Education]. Retrieved from https://teachers.ab.ca/sites/default/files/2024-09/coord-184_curriculumresponsereport_2021-09-29.pdf.
- Soltero-González, L, C Gillanders and F V Hasenohr. 2025. "Broadening English-centric Early Literacy Pedagogies: Building on Young Spanish-English Bilingual Children's Language and Home Literacy Practices." *The Reading Teacher* 78, no 5: 279–88. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2371>.
- Stouffer, J, and J Van Dyke. 2023. "Stones from a Glasshouse: The Paradoxical Condemnation of Reading Recovery in the Ontario Human Rights Commission Right to Read Report." *Journal of Teaching and Learning* 17, no 1: 52–71.

- The Alberta Teachers' Association. 2021. *Professional Curriculum Analysis and Critique of Alberta Education's 2021 Draft K-6 Curriculum*. https://teachers.ab.ca/sites/default/files/2024-09/coor-184_curriculumresponsereport_2021-09-29.pdf.
- Vasquez, V M, H Janks and B Comber. 2019. "Critical Literacy as a Way of Being and Doing." *Language Arts* 96, no 5: 300–11. <https://doi.org/10.58680/la201930093>.
- Wyse, D, & A Bradbury. 2022. "Reading Wars or Reading Reconciliation? A Critical Examination of Robust Research Evidence, Curriculum Policy and Teachers' Practices for Teaching Phonics and Reading." *Review of Education* 10: e3314. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3314>.
- Wyse, D, and C Hacking. 2024. *The Balancing Act: An Evidence-Based Approach to Teaching Phonics, Reading and Writing*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003442134>.

AUTHOR BIOS:

Katie Brubacher is an assistant professor in elementary education at the University of Alberta, specializing in language and literacy. She joined the Faculty of Education after almost twenty years of teaching children in K–12 schools. As a member of the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (LLRC) executive, she works closely with researchers and educators across the country, organizing annual conferences and facilitating the dissemination of research-based practices on language and literacy. She is currently studying the connection between laughter, belonging and translanguaging with racialized children from a refugee background.

Jacqueline Filipek is an associate professor of education at The King's University in Edmonton, Alberta.