Volume 5 Issue 1

English Language Arts Journal

ELAC
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS COUNCIL

The Alberta Teachers' Association

A Journal of the Alberta Teachers' Association

The *English Language Arts Journal* is published by The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) for the English Language Arts Council (ELAC).
The annual membership fee (regular and affiliate $35; student $0; subscription $40) entitles members to all regular ELAC publications.
Fees are payable to the
Alberta Teachers' Association
11010 142 Street NW
Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1.

The *English Language Arts Journal* is a member of the NCTE/CCTE Information Exchange and is indexed in NCTE/ERIC and in the Canadian Education Index.
ISSN 2563-4844 (Print), ISSN 2563-4852 (Digital).

Individual copies of this journal can be ordered at the following prices: 1 to 4 copies, $7.50 each; 5 to 10 copies, $5.00 each; over 10 copies, $3.50 each. Please add 5 per cent shipping and handling and 5 per cent GST. Please contact Distribution at Barnett House at distribution@ata.ab.ca to place your order.

Personal information regarding any person named in this document is for the sole purpose of professional consultation between members of The Alberta Teachers' Association.

Cover image www.pexels.com; image taken by Emre Can Acer. All pexels images are free use.

CONTACTS

President | Bailey Almberg
ELACteachers@gmail.com

Journal Editor | Kevin McBean
editorelajournal@gmail.com

ATA Staff Advisor | Dan Coles
Bus 780-447-9402 | 1-800-232-7208
dan.coles@ata.ab.ca

Contact information for the complete ELAC executive can be found at http://elacata.ca.

ELAC
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS COUNCIL

The Alberta Teachers' Association

CONTENTS

Summer 2025 | Volume 5, Issue 1

CELEBRATING WORDS

Editor's Message

Kevin McBean, Editor
English Language Arts Journal

It is my pleasure to share with you the latest edition of the *English Language Arts Journal*. I am confident that the articles in this issue will be thought-provoking and highly relevant to your teaching practice and/or research. From an analysis of the new Alberta K–6 English language arts and literature curriculum, to an exploration of bringing the science of reading into conversation with balanced literacy, to an evaluation of a career-education unit in English language arts, this issue provides ELA teachers with a range of ideas to ponder, percolate on or implement in classrooms immediately.

I am grateful to the authors of all the articles in this issue. Their work provides a valuable contribution to the field of English language arts education, and I know that their articles will be appreciated by researchers and practitioners alike. Thank you also to the many reviewers whose valuable feedback helped to enrich the work of the authors. My heartfelt appreciation goes out to our former editor, Amanda Thomson, for her diligence in ensuring quality in previous issues of the journal and for her patience in helping me navigate the transition to editor during a personally tumultuous year.

Finally, to all the teachers reading this: Thank you for the work that you do in your classrooms everyday. The learning that you enable and the impact that you have on your students could fill a lifetime of academic journals. Please know that you are appreciated. I hope that these articles serve as a reminder about why you joined the profession and inspire you to continue making a difference.

Thank you for the work that you do in your classrooms everyday.

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 PISA[1] 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 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.

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

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).

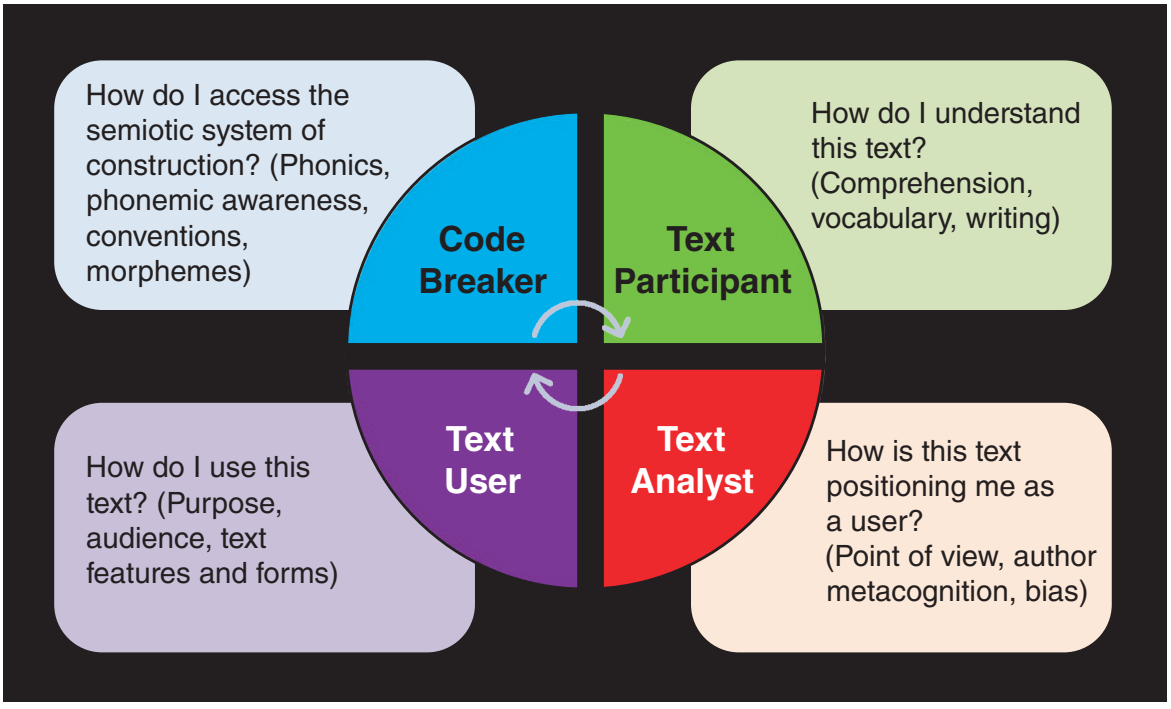
In addition to the required implementation of the new curriculum, teachers and schools in Alberta are overwhelmed by overcrowded classrooms (Bellefontaine 2024). Across Canada, there are persistent cuts to education funding, including to teacher librarians and school libraries, making access to books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

This qualitative research understands policy as social practice...

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 Recovery[2]

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)

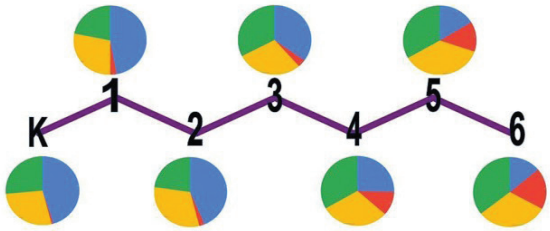
The Basic Structure of the ELAL Program of Study

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



Blue - Code Breaker, Green - Text User, Yellow - Text Participant, Red - Text, Analyst

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://ufli.education.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 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.

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

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 meanin 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 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.

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 website[4] 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 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.

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

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 empathy. 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).

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

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 texts[5] 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/10.1080/15544 80X.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/coor-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.*

Teacher Perception of the Impact of *Shifting the Balance* on Motivation and Reading Ability

Colleen M Whidden and Garrett S Fredeen

Introduction and Background

In the past decades, the optimal approach for teaching reading to students in a classroom setting has been debated significantly. The main approaches currently are balanced literacy and science of reading, with supporters of both maintaining that their approach results in the best reading foundation for young students (Fountas and Pinnell 2009; National Reading Panel 2000). Burkins and Yates (2021), in their book *Shifting the Balance:6 Ways to Bring the Science of Reading into the Balanced Literacy Classroom* (referred to as *Shifting the Balance*), have aimed to mediate the debate by showcasing where balanced literacy and science of reading overlap, connect and complement one another and how approaches in a balanced literacy-focused classroom can be shifted to incorporate more science of reading approaches. *Shifting the Balance* asserts that teachers must be mindful of the neurological processes involved in reading and, armed with this knowledge, create a connection between the instructional practices of balanced literacy and the science of reading (Burkins and Yates 2021). To fully understand how *Shifting the Balance* is hybridizing these two reading approaches, it is important to understand the fundamentals of each and the debates around them.

Balanced Literacy

Balanced literacy is based on the philosophy that children require a balance of decoding instruction, guided reading using leveled texts and independent learning using high-quality literature. It is a flexible, comprehensive approach to teaching reading that integrates various methods, including phonics, whole language and reading comprehension strategies, and aims to strike a balance between whole language and phonics programming for reading instruction (Calkins 2017; Fountas and Pinnell 2019; Routman 2014; Serravella 2015; Tobin 2020). One main way of teaching reading is to guide students to use meaning, structural and visual (MSV) cues to identify words and comprehend the text. This MSV three-cueing system encourages students to ask the following questions when reading and deciphering words: Does it make sense? Does it sound right? and Does it look right? (Calkins 2017; Fountas and Pinnell 2009; 2016; 2019; Goodman 1997). Advocates state that balanced literacy supports diverse learning styles by providing a mix of structured and contextual reading instruction through strategies like reading aloud, shared reading and independent reading (Calkins 2017; Fountas and Pinnell 2019; Routman 2014; Serravella 2015). The importance of balancing phonics with opportunities for students to engage with rich, authentic texts is also emphasized by proponents. Balanced literacy is considered adaptable, allowing teachers to cater to the needs of individual students while encouraging critical thinking, problem-solving and comprehension skills (Fountas and Pinnell 2009; Routman 2014; Serravella 2015). However, as with any reading approach, this approach has also faced criticism. In recent years, there has been a re-evaluation of balanced literacy as a viable reading approach because, although it claims to provide an equal distribution of explicit decoding and phonics instruction, its focus is on having children derive meaning from context clues, graphics and images (Castles, Rastle and Nation 2020; Goldberg 2022). Critics are claiming that a lack of explicit, structured phonics instruction can hinder students' understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds, which

is foundational to learning to read (Castles, Rastle and Nation 2020; Moats 2020).

Science of Reading

The science of reading refers to both a collection of interdisciplinary, evidence-based research on the acquisition of the cognitive skills required for reading and the pedagogical strategies based on those studies. This body of knowledge helps educators identify the incremental stages that developing readers progress through and informs instructional practices to strategically advance learners (Gentry and Ouellette 2019). The science of reading gained prominence when the National Reading Panel (2000) released its report, re-establishing the importance of explicit phonics instruction, phonemic awareness, fluency and vocabulary in improving reading comprehension. Since then, the science of reading has evolved and expanded, with proponents describing learning to read as the construction of a personalized internal dictionary that allows individuals to fluently access context from the orthographic representations of words (Gentry and Ouellette 2019; Snowling, Hulme and Nation 2022). Gentry and Ouellette (2019) state that phonetic decoding and orthographic recognition are needed for proficient reading. They also suggest that using both is likely the most effective model for teaching all children to read adeptly. Advocates argue that science of reading offers a proven approach for helping all students by addressing the cognitive processes involved in reading, while showing that phonics instruction helps students decode words, which is essential for fluency and comprehension (National Reading Panel 2000). Nonetheless, similar to balanced literacy, the science of reading has also garnered criticism. Hahn and Hood (2022) suggest that explicit phonics instruction and improper use of decodable texts could decrease children's motivation to read. They express concerns that some assessment methods aligned with the science of reading may be detrimental to children's critical thinking skills. This is because comprehension is not prioritized in reading instruction, although it is considered the ultimate goal of reading. Instructional practices often assume that if a student develops decoding skills and a broad knowledge base, comprehension will inevitably follow. This consequently leads to testing that is mainly based on decoding, with minimal comprehension components, which diminishes the multidimensional experience of reading. This singular approach could then be insufficient for addressing diverse student needs (Cabell and Hwang 2020; Hahn and Hood 2022).

Differences between Balanced Literacy and Science of Reading

While balanced literacy and science of reading classrooms share fundamentals of reading instruction, the approaches used to teach those fundamentals are different. See Table 1 (Burkins and Yates 2021; Calkins 2017; Fountas and Pinnell 2019; Moats 2020; Routman 2014) for a description of what each fundamental of reading instruction looks like in the classroom.

Table 1 ***Differences in Fundamentals of Reading Instruction between Balanced Literacy and Science of Reading***

Fundamentals of reading instruction	In a balanced literacy classroom	In a science of reading classroom
Phonics	Taught implicitly alongside other strategies	Taught explicitly through systematic direct instruction
Comprehension	Emphasized at the beginning of reading instruction	Built on a foundation of phonics and decoding skills
Instructional Strategy	Uses variety of methods, including read-alouds, guided and shared reading	Uses highly structured methods focusing on phonemic awareness, decoding and fluency
Use of Texts	Uses authentic literature (trade texts) and a range of texts	Uses decodable texts in early stages, with authentic literature introduced later
Teaching Approach	Employs a range of instructional methods	Employs structured and systematic methods
Research	Draws on theories around whole-language and social constructivism	Draws from cognitive science, neuroscience and linguistics

Shifting the Balance

Shifting the Balance is a resource that aims to integrate key teaching principles from the balanced literacy approach with insights from science of reading research to disrupt systems that perpetuate reading failure and the reading wars (Burkins and Yates 2021). The authors are two literacy teachers and advocates who designed a resource to assist teachers in cultivating more effective reading practices in the classroom (Burkins and Yates n.d.). The authors acknowledge the inherent tension in reconciling two seemingly divergent perspectives on reading instruction. However, they also recognize the value and validity of both approaches and provide concrete definitions and illustrative examples of how this modified approach can be implemented. *Shifting the Balance*, while exploring both approaches, is grounded in balanced literacy principles. It encourages teachers to take a broader, more adaptable approach where balanced literacy and science of reading fundamentals can support reading instruction (Burkins and Yates 2021). In each chapter of the book, common misunderstandings that drive current practices, a short summary of the science behind the shift, recommendations for making the shift and reflection questions are included. Specific tools designed for student use are also included, along with practical examples of what each of the six shifts to balanced literacy would involve. These shifts include the following:

> Shift 1 - Rethinking how reading comprehension begins: Prioritize comprehension from the start, focusing on meaning making alongside decoding.
>
> Shift 2 - Recommitting to phonemic awareness instruction: Reinforce phonemic awareness as a core skill for early literacy development.
>
> Shift 3 - Reimagining the way we teach phonics: Integrate phonics instruction with a focus on meaning and context, not only memorization.
>
> Shift 4 - Revising high-frequency word instruction: Teach high-frequency words strategically to support recognition and understanding.
>
> Shift 5 - Reinventing the ways we use MSV three-cueing systems: Re-evaluate the reliance on MSV cueing systems, promoting a more balanced approach.
>
> Shift 6 - Reconsidering texts for beginning readers: Select texts for early readers that are accessible, engaging and meaningful (Burkins and Yates 2021).

The authors evaluate, hybridize and blend ideas from both approaches to create what they feel is the best learning situation for students.

The focus of all shifts is on incorporating more science of reading fundamentals into classrooms where teachers are predominantly teaching using balanced literacy fundamentals. This resource is different than other balanced literacy or science of reading resources as it shifts the approach to reading instruction. The authors evaluate, hybridize and blend ideas from both approaches to create what they feel is the best learning situation for students. The authors share this sentiment in their introduction where they ask, "Is it possible that a few simple but powerful shifts *could* help us unlock literacy for more children than ever before, especially those for whom the current systems do not work, or do not work well enough? ... The shifts we need to make are not big shifts! They may take courage, but they are manageable, yet powerful changes that you can make without sacrificing the heart of balanced literacy" (Burkins and Yates 2021, 4).

Since its publication in 2021, *Shifting the Balance* has received diverse reviews that span a spectrum between concern and elation. For instance, some critics express concerns specifically regarding Shift 5, which involves reinventing the MSV three-cueing system, as it potentially overlooks the essential speech-to-print connection, instead positioning reading primarily as a visual activity (Stollar 2021). Conversely, advocates of the resource highlight that, overall, it offers an honest consideration of the polarization of the balanced literacy and science of reading debates and seeks to find sources of commonality (Ginsberg n.d.). This is seen throughout the book and reinforced by starting each chapter with an invitation to reimagine, revise, reinvent or reconsider current balanced literacy practices without asking teachers to

abandon them (Burkins and Yates 2021). *Shifting the Balance* offers accurate and lucid insights into effectively integrating and complementing the strengths of both approaches for the benefit of early readers (Burkins and Yates 2021; Ginsberg n.d.).

Overview of Research

As a postsecondary literacy instructor, the possible impact of this resource on reading instruction warranted exploration. The research objectives were therefore to discover the impact of this hybridized reading approach on both students' motivation to learn to read and/or motivation to read and their reading ability. The research questions were twofold and focused on ascertaining elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact of the incorporation of *Shifting the Balance* shifts on students' motivation and their reading ability. While some scholars indicate that classroom teachers may not consistently rate students' reading ability accurately (Gatlin-Nash 2021; Hamilton and Shinn 2003), others find moderate to high correlation between teachers' predictions and their students' reading fluency (Feinberg and Shapiro 2003; Juhkam, Soodla and Aro 2022). Since research on this topic is inconclusive and given this study is based on perceptions of the impact of this reading approach, teachers' perceptions are situated in this premise without a desire for definitive results.

Context of Teacher Environment

The research project involved collecting interview responses from four professional elementary teachers teaching at the same primary school within a public-school division in Alberta, Canada. This school was deliberately selected as it had committed to incorporating the shifts of *Shifting the Balance* across all grade levels. This provided a significant opportunity for teachers at the school to talk about the depth of the impact of adopting these shifts not just in their own class but across grades. Prior to data collection, all teachers in the school had undergone an intensive six-week *Shifting the Balance* professional development and training session with an external facilitator in the previous year, and they had been actively implementing the shifts in their classrooms for almost an entire academic year. The project was open to all teachers in the school with one Grade 1 teacher, two Grade 2 teachers and one Grade 3 teacher volunteering to be part of the in-person interview process.

Research Methodology

Semistructured interviews and a qualitative research method were chosen because the lived experiences of the classroom teachers who had incorporated a new approach for reading instruction were to be examined. The opportunity to participate in the research project was proposed by a postsecondary instructor (who has no influence in the public school system) to the school literacy lead, thus diminishing the possibility of coercion or a power imbalance between participant and researcher. This research project received postsecondary research ethics approval before commencing. Given that a qualitative research method and a small sample size was used in this study, it is important to acknowledge that the findings provide a snapshot in time and do not aim to establish a hypothesis or causality.

The semistructured interviews lasted for one hour and were conducted in person, with two interviews being one-on-one and one being in a group of two. All interviews were held during the school day at the teachers' primary elementary school to maximize accessibility and comfort. Structured interview questions were divided to answer the two research questions pertaining to perceptions regarding the impact of *Shifting the Balance* shifts on students' motivation to learn to read and/or the motivation to read and on their reading ability. See Table 2 and 3 for interview questions.

Table 2 ***Interview Questions on the Perceived Impact of Shifting the Balance Shifts on Students' Motivation to Learn to Read and/or Motivation to Read.***

1. Overall, how has the inclusion of these shifts impacted motivation to *learn* to read and/or motivation to read?
2. Shift 1: How has the focus on improving oral language development in your teaching practice impacted your students' motivation to *learn* to read and/or motivation to read?
3. Shift 2: How has the focus on a systematic and intentional teaching of phonemic awareness in your teaching practice impacted your students' motivation to *learn* to read and/or motivation to read?

4. Shift 3: How has the focus on an explicit and systematic teaching of phonics, rather than the "leave-too-much-to-chance" approach, impacted your students' motivation to *learn* to read and/or motivation to read?
5. Shift 4: How has focusing on decoding high-priority words instead of memorizing such words impacted your students' motivation to *learn* to read and/or motivation to read?
6. Shift 5: How has prioritizing print and decoding and not focusing on meaning, structure and visual (MSV) cues impacted your students' motivation to *learn* to read and/or motivation to read?
7. Shift 6: How has the inclusion of thoughtfully included decodable texts impacted your students' motivation to *learn* to read and/or motivation to read?
8. Are there any strategies or approaches from *Shifting the Balance* that have been ineffective or had a detrimental impact on students' motivation to learn to read and/or motivation to read?

Table 3 Interview Questions on the Perceived Impact of Shifting the Balance Shifts on Students' Reading Ability.

1. Overall, how has incorporating any or all of the *Shifting the Balance* approaches in your teaching impacted students' reading ability?
2. Shift 1: How has the focus on improving oral language development in your teaching practice impacted your students' reading ability?
3. Shift 2: How has the focus on a systematic and intentional teaching of phonemic awareness in your teaching practice impacted your students' reading ability?
4. Shift 3: How has the focus on an explicit and systematic teaching of phonics, rather than the "leave-too-much-to-chance" approach, impacted your students' reading ability?
5. Shift 4: How has focusing on decoding high-priority words instead of memorizing such words impacted your students' reading ability?
6. Shift 5: How has prioritizing print and decoding and not focusing on meaning, structure, and visual (MSV) cues impacted your students' reading ability?
7. Shift 6: How has the inclusion of thoughtfully included decodable texts impacted your students' reading ability?
8. Are there any strategies or approaches from *Shifting the Balance* that have been ineffective or had a detrimental impact on students' reading ability?

Follow-up questions and prompting gave each teacher the opportunity to share more specifics from their individual experience. During the interviews, all teachers answered the questions with little hesitation. The vast majority of questions were met with excitement, and participants were eager to share insights and examples. All interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed using a voice-to-text transcription software, with necessary edits made by the research assistant to rectify any inaccuracies in the transcriptions.

Once transcribed, the researcher and research assistant coded the data to discern themes around teachers' perception of the impact of incorporating the *Shifting the Balance* shifts on student motivation and ability to read (Delve and Limpaecher 2021). For perceived impact on motivation, three themes emerged. For perceived impact on reading ability, four themes emerged. At the culmination of the analysis, recommendations for future educators and researchers were drawn from these seven themes; these are shared in the Discussion section. After this article was written for the *English Language Arts Journal*, ChatGPT 3.5 was used with a specific prompt for grammatical accuracy, with the researcher, research assistant and a copy editor performing the final edit to ensure clarity and accuracy in the intention of writing and information included (https://openai.com/).

Results

Perceived Impact on Student Motivation of *Shifting the Balance* Shifts

All four teachers discussed the positive impact on student motivation when they implemented the shifts from *Shifting the Balance* to teach reading in the classroom. They shared that when they taught with these shifts as their pedagogical foundation, students appeared excited to learn to read regardless of their reading level. When analyzing the teachers' responses, the following three themes emerged regarding teachers' perceptions of students' increased motivation to learn to read:

Theme 1: importance of decoding skills being taught through systematic and structured instruction

Theme 2: importance of access to decodable books

Theme 3: school-wide commitment to teaching with the shifts as foundational in reading instruction

Theme 1: Importance of Decoding Skills Being Taught through Systematic and Structured Instruction

The teachers perceived that teaching decoding skills through systematic and structured instruction influenced students' motivation to learn to read. They shared that when students grasped the relationship between phonemes and phonics, they felt empowered and excited to tackle previously inaccessible words. Students developed confidence in approaching any word because they were no longer relying on guesswork. For instance, Leslie, a Grade 1 teacher, shared that she can teach her students more complex words now because they are acquiring the necessary decoding skills to tackle most words because of her systematic reading instruction. She shared, "when we take words apart and put them back together, they're actually building into words which leads to reading the big words." This early reading success was also noted by teachers from Grades 2 and 3 during the interview process. These teachers shared that students were coming to them with a deeper understanding of the connection between phonemes and graphemes. They attributed this to structured reading instruction in previous grades and its continuation in upper grades. For example, Candace said, "It reaffirms that we need to give them a code for reading ... It's a full breakdown from that phonemic area all the way through to that graphing kind of correspondence." Furthermore, these three teachers shared that the seemingly positive impact of systematic and structured instruction on motivation has reinforced their commitment to continue using such an instructional practice when teaching phonemic awareness, phonics and their correlation to graphemes.

Another theme for the possible increase in motivation to read was access to decodable books.

Theme 2: Importance of Access to Decodable Books

Another theme for the possible increase in motivation to read was access to decodable books. Decodable books are designed for early readers and contain a high percentage of words that follow conventional spelling patterns and phonetic rules, rather than irregular spellings or high-frequency words. Shift 6 explicitly emphasizes the importance of teaching reading in conjunction with appropriate, decodable books, indicating that when students spend much of their reading time with texts they can decode, they have ample opportunity to practice phonics, improve fluency and enhance comprehension (Burkins and Yates 2021). When asked how the inclusion of decodable texts impacted motivation to read, Kristi, a Grade 2 teacher, noticed that students were drawn to decodable books and were engaged and excited about reading because they experienced success with the text. She shared, "I have many more decodables in my classroom than I used to as of last year and [after] taking this course and when students are able at free reading time or at guided reading to select a decodable book on a skill that we are learning or have learned, they gravitate to those books very much so ... They have an extension of the phonics in real context." Kristi also commented on her own past perception of decodable books when she said, "I always, in my head, for some reason had thought that decodable texts didn't make sense because they're just focused on the sounds, not the story. But it's not true. There are some really good ones out there now."

Theme 3: School-wide Commitment to Teaching with the Shifts as Foundational in Reading Instruction

The final theme focuses on teachers' perceptions indicating that the adoption of the *Shifting the Balance* shifts school-wide greatly impacted motivation. Teachers commented that using the shifts across all grade levels allowed their students to hear and use consistent decoding language and terminology, which reduced the need to learn new instructional frameworks when moving grades. Resources such as Heggerty (https://heggerty.org/), Secret Stories (https://www.thesecretstories.com/) and the University of Florida Literacy

Institute (UFLI) (https://ufli.education.ufl.edu/), which individual teachers had used in the past, were now being used consistently and intentionally across grades. Kristi noted that she had less to review at the beginning of the year because her Grade 2 students already understood the terminology and had the confidence to engage with reading in a new teacher's class. She said, "I would say that they *[Shifting the Balanc*e shifts] are motivating in the fact that we are able to ensure that there are very minimal gaps in their learning. Hence, they [students] are able to build on what they've already learned in a scaffolding-type way." When asked a follow-up question pertaining to the plausibility of this approach actually having an impact on motivation across multiple grades, she shared that there has been a positive impact on student motivation and teacher engagement. She said, "It [*Shifting the Balance*] feels different; it really does ... The advantage of this approach is that it's holistic rather than piecemeal. So, it feels different."

"The advantage of this approach is that it's holistic rather than piecemeal."

Amber and Candace in Grades 2 and 3, shared the same positive sentiment. When asked why it was important that these shifts be school-wide, Candace stated, "It's the common language moving through and, you know, that building up, moving through the grades, they understand when we say let's do our phonemes now or let's sound it out or map it. They understand it all. So, it's not something that they're like, 'what are you talking about?' It's familiar to them." Amber added, "So, I'm excited to see how this is going to go. How is it going to translate like a couple years from right now? Once we start getting those kids that have been getting it since junior kindergarten and kindergarten!"

Perceived Impact on Learning to Read

When all four teachers were asked for their views on the impact of implementing the *Shifting the Balance* strategies on students' learning to read, their response was unanimously positive. When exploring their results, the following themes emerged:

Theme 1: importance of intentional, systematic and structured instruction

Theme 2: importance of using decoding tools

Theme 3: need for focused use of books that support and inspire reading in a real context

Theme 4: need for comprehension to be supported in multiple ways

Theme 1: Importance of Intentional, Systematic and Structured Instruction

Teachers felt that the *Shifting the Balance* practices had a positive impact on learning to read because of their focus on intentional, systematic and structured reading instruction, particularly in the areas of phonemic awareness and phonics (Burkins and Yates 2021). All the teachers shared that they noticed an improvement in their students' reading ability when robust and consistent phonemic and phonics instruction was incorporated in their reading instruction. For example, Leslie expressed that through explicit phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, her Grade 1 students consistently succeeded in decoding the text. She joked about constantly having to bring in books with more advanced language because "... they're ahead of where I think they should be. So, then I have to go get new books. So, then it's fun!" Kristi felt that for her Grade 2 students there were fewer gaps in student learning, which led to more students mastering decoding skills. She also found that students were more advanced in rhyme production and sound manipulation when these concepts were taught systematically. She said, "We talk about how many sounds there are in a word, how many syllables and so forth. And I've noticed that there are way better results in sound manipulation and rhyme production."

Theme Two: Importance of Using Decoding Tools

Shift 5 is comprised of specific instructional tools focused on teaching decoding skills. The teachers in this study shared that explicitly using these instructional tools created a solid reading

foundation. Kristi claimed, "So in the past, when I would work in small groups with students or even one on one, oftentimes I would be a little bit too quick to either want to sound it out or help them. And so, some of the strategies *Shifting the Balance* suggested was that I not be so quick in jumping in to help them but instead use the suggested tools." For example, in her Grade 2 class, she incorporated a decoding tool mentioned in Shift 5 called "touch the text" (Burkins and Yates 2021, 123). This high-leverage instructional tool was designed to support word-solving by suggesting that when a student stops reading and asks the teacher for help, the teacher simply touches the text to reinforce the concept that all the information needed to solve the word lies in the text itself (Burkins and Yates 2021). Kristi found that when she used such reliable tools, it translated into an improvement in reading and writing skills. She found that most students demonstrated overall improvement on spelling tests with less polarization of test scores, which aided in both reading and writing success. She said, "And you know, this [learning to decode through specific instructional tools] allows the newly emergent writer to experience success, whereas there used to be a wide gap between spelling scores with the cans and the maybe cannots."

Decodable books provide opportunities for students to extend their phonics learning into comprehension through engaging and authentic storylines.

Theme 3: Need for Focused Use of Books that Support and Inspire Reading in a Real Context

One of the recommendations in *Shifting the Balance* is to use books that support and inspire reading in an authentic context. Shift 6 specifically supports using both decodable and independent-choice texts to promote multiple ways and means to read. Burkins and Yates (2021) have provided the following definitions for these two types of literature: decodable books contain a high percentage of regularly spelled words and are specifically crafted for early readers while independent-choice texts encompass any kind of literature selected by the student, typically driven by personal interest. Independent-choice literature encompasses a range of materials, such as decodable books, graphic novels, textbooks or trade books (Reading Rockets n.d.).

Burkins and Yates (2021) have proposed that students should have access to decodable and independent-choice literature for different reasons. Decodable books provide opportunities for students to extend their phonics learning into comprehension through engaging and authentic storylines. The teachers in this study indicated that current decodable books offer substantial narratives, which support deeper comprehension. Leslie, a Grade 1 teacher, shared an example of her thoughts while referencing a well-known book. "They [*Shifting the Balance*] talk about reading and being intentional with the books you choose because[for example] *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, it's a really great book, but what is it getting at? Like how much conversation can we have about that book?"

Nevertheless, students also need access to diverse independent-choice literature for two reasons: 1) when students are allowed to choose books that are of interest to them, they are more engaged during reading time (Kittle 2013) and 2) they have more opportunities to try alternative reading strategies for text comprehension (Burkins and Yates 2021). This year, Amber organized her Grade 2 classroom library by topic rather than according to traditional reading levels, and she found that all students, particularly struggling readers, became more excited about reading when they were allowed and encouraged to read books that interested them. She noted, "So now they get to pick, you know, books on sharks, even if they're just looking at the pictures and thinking about you know, what's happening in them. … And they might try and attack some of those hard words because they want to know what's happening in there. But we, for years, had them read those books that were important for guided reading but yeah, not for enjoyment. No wonder they didn't want to read. They would rather go to the bathroom!"

Furthermore, independent-choice literature is essential to enable students to explore alternative

reading methods for text comprehension. Shift 6 introduces the concept of "read-in-other-ways" (Burkins and Yates 2021, 154). This method includes students studying and discussing the pictures in the book with a small group, attempting to decode words, or orally explaining concepts using their background knowledge instead of print knowledge (Burkins and Yates 2021). By offering such alternative methods to reading a text, students are encouraged to use their previous knowledge and experiences with the topic to generate connections between new orthographic representations and existing phonological and contextual knowledge (Burkins and Yates 2021; Gentry and Ouellette 2019). Both Amber and Candace, Grade 2 and 3 teachers, discovered that having decodable books accessible during guided reading time was crucial. However, they also believed that it was important for students to explore various reading skills using trade books during free reading time. For example, when Amber's students read trade books, they used illustrations to infer the story, attempted to decode unfamiliar words and engaged in discussions drawing on their prior knowledge to comprehend the text. Amber praised such methods as they provided her students with additional reading skills.

Theme 4: Need for Comprehension to be Supported in Multiple Ways

The teachers in this study indicated that implementing *Shifting the Balance* practices appeared to help with comprehension. Burkins and Yates (2021), in their chapter focusing on comprehension, ascertain that comprehension is based on three different processing systems: phonological, meaning and context. Comprehension of language begins with hearing (either orally or "in your head") and recognizing words that the brain then reviews with stored vocabulary to connect a possible meaning to, with the culmination being that an appropriate meaning is chosen based on context. For teachers in the classroom, this means using high-leverage instructional routines for language development, such as asking quality questions, using interesting words, reading aloud and teaching with texts set across all reading instruction types to build content area knowledge (Burkins and Yates 2021, 26). Comprehension is considered the goal of reading instruction, and it is emphasized in Shifts 1, 2, 3 and 4 (Burkins and Yates 2021).

Shift 1 emphasizes the importance of developing a strong foundation in oral language skills to support comprehension. All four teachers, after implementing recommendations from Shift 1, such as engaging in interactive read-aloud, now recognize oral language as a crucial and foundational component of the reading process. They have discovered that an intentional focus on oral language comprehension leads to improved reading comprehension. For example, Amber engages her Grade 2 class in oral discussions about background knowledge when introducing new books, which she has found enhances their understanding of the text. She said, "We've always done kind of read-alouds, like where I'm reading from a novel, but just that reminder that, Shift 1 had taught us that how that listening comprehension can translate to their own reading comprehension. So just, it was a reminder for me to like make it more meaningful, be stopping more, talking about it and covering those complex reading comprehension kind of questions, and then having it translate to like their decodable books that they're reading."

Kristi, also working with Grade 2 students, incorporates short story read-alouds and encourages students to sketch during the oral reading. When asked about the effectiveness of this approach in increasing comprehension, she shared, "I can't believe how successful it is and what they recall or remember just by drawing it. I had a student, the other day, retell a story I read three months ago, and he knew it verbatim. He remembered!" By intentionally integrating oral language at different stages of the reading process, these teachers have observed that students comprehend texts at a higher cognitive level.

Focusing on teaching decoding skills by recommitting to phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, as highlighted in Shifts 2 and 3, equips all students with the necessary tools to tackle a majority of the text. When students can successfully decode most of the text, they can devote more time and energy to extracting meaning from it (Burkins and Yates 2021). Leslie expressed that through explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, her Grade 1 students achieved success in decoding, which freed up cognitive

capacity for comprehension. She also shared that previously when students were taught in primary grades to use pictures to extract meaning from a text, they often struggled with comprehension in higher grades. When asked why, she stated that reliance on this one tool to extract meaning meant they were ill-prepared to comprehend the text when visual prompts were no longer included and there was a shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."

Shift 4 suggests that learning high-frequency words, such as "are," "give," "the," "who" and "you," is crucial for supporting comprehension. In the past, many of these words were described as sight words that needed to be memorized (Burkins and Yates 2021). However, Shift 4 discusses that most high-frequency words are at least partially decodable so a combination of memorizing and decoding can be used to unlock these common words (Burkins and Yates 2021). Even high-frequency words with irregular spellings still follow decoding rules, which reduces the number of words that solely rely on memorization (Secret Stories n.d.). By focusing on both memorization and decoding of high-frequency words, Kristi shared the following observation about her Grade 2 students: "I find that this takes away some of the hard work when students read a book because their brains don't have to decode every single word. And imagine the effort that that takes to do that." Candace, teaching Grade 3, has also found success when students need to memorize a part but not necessarily the entire word. She states, "It just takes us back to reminding them to break those [high-frequency words] into their phonemes. Just that practice again going back to let's pound out or tap out those sounds and then they get that excitement and say 'Oh yes, I do know my sounds. I can do this'." Ultimately, the ability to quickly recognize high-frequency words through both decoding and memorization improves fluency and, more importantly, has a positive impact on comprehension.

In conclusion, when all themes were analyzed based on the teachers' perceived impact on motivation to read and learning to read, these four teachers were adamant that the use of *Shifting the Balance* shifts had a positive impact in their classrooms. When asked whether they were satisfied with the results of using these shifts, Kristi commented, "Yes, I am very pleased ... Yeah, I do think [using *Shifting the Balance* practices] makes a difference." When questioned about any disagreements with the shifts, Amber responded, "I kind of agreed with every one [*Shifting the Balance* practices] ... " and Candace stated, "Everything made a lot of sense."

Recommendations and Conclusion

Through thematic coding of these teachers' voices, it became evident that these four teachers perceived the use of the shifts in *Shifting the Balance* to have a positive impact on students' motivation and ability to read. These shifts were deemed successful in the classroom due to their emphasis on systematic and structured instruction in decoding skills, as well as the incorporation of decodable and independent-choice texts. Additionally, the commitment to implementing the *Shifting the Balance* shifts school-wide was identified as a contributing factor to their success.

Five overarching recommendations for consideration emerged that may be relevant when deliberating on reading instruction. These recommendations include the following:

- Students, regardless of their reading ability, benefit from explicit instruction in decoding skills and the use of appropriate tools. This systematic and structured instruction in decoding ensures that students employ these skills effectively.
- Providing students with the right resources, such as decodable and independent-choice literature, at the appropriate time promotes engagement and facilitates the acquisition of reading skills.
- Prioritizing comprehension as the goal of reading instruction encourages students to view reading as a means of deriving meaning from texts, which leads to increased engagement and deeper discernment.
- A school-wide commitment to systematic and structured reading instruction across all grades fosters consistent language and facilitates the development of strong foundational literacy skills across grade levels.
- Teachers who instruct reading bear the responsibility of evaluating and implementing evidence-based practices in their classrooms.

In researching new reading instructional

approaches, teachers are continually asked to navigate a multitude of ideological viewpoints. The four teachers in our study unanimously shared that implementing the shifts outlined in *Shifting the Balance* had a positive impact on student motivation and ability to read. Reflecting on these narratives, we hope that sharing these experiences will contribute to a resolution in the reading debate and strengthen reading instruction to inspire students to become successful readers.

References

Burkins, J, and K Yates. n.d. *The Six Shifts: Supporting K–5 Literacy Instruction through Professional Books, Online Courses, Workshops, Literacy Audits, and Consulting*. The Six Shifts. https://thesixshifts.com/.

———. 2021. *Shifting the Balance: 6 Ways to Bring the Science of Reading into the Balanced Literacy Classroom*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishing.

Cabell, SQ, and H J Hwang. 2020. "Building Content Knowledge to Boost Comprehension." *Reading Research Quarterly* 55, no S1: 99–107.

Calkins, L. 2017. *A Guide to the Reading Workshop: Primary Grades*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Castles, A, K Rastle and K Nation. 2020. "Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 21, no 2: 1–37.

Delve, H L, and Limpaecher. 2021. *The Practical Guide to Grounded Theory Research*. Delve. https://delvetool.com/groundedtheory.

Feinberg, A B, and E S Shapiro. 2003. "Accuracy of Teacher Judgements in Predicting Oral Reading Fluency." *School Psychology Quarterly* 18, no 1: 52–65. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1521/scpq.18.1.52.20876.

Fountas, I C, and G S Pinnell. 2009. *When Readers Struggle: Teaching that Works*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

———. 2019. *Fountas & Pinnell Classroom: A Comprehensive Literacy System*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Gatlin-Nash, B, J K Hwang, N E Tani, E Zargar, T S Wood, D Yang, K B Powell and C M Connor 2021. "Using Assessment to Improve the Accuracy of Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Academic Competence." *Elementary School Journal* 121, no 4: 609–34. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/714083.

Gentry, J R, and G Ouellette. 2019. *Brain Words: How the Science of Reading Informs Teaching*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers.

Ginsberg, M. n.d. *Shifting the Balance: The Authors' Story & A Review*. Reading Simplified. https://readingsimplified.com/shifting-the-Balance/.

Goldberg, M. 2022. *Seeing the Good in Balanced Literacy…and Moving On*. Reading Rockets, August 2. https://www.readingrockets.org/blogs/right-read/seeing-good-Balanced-literacy-and-moving.

Goodman, K. 1997. "Putting Theory and Research in the Context of History." *Language Arts* 74, no 8: 595–99.

Hahn, J, and M Hood. 2022. "When the 'Science of Reading' Goes Too Far." *Education Week*, July 29. https:// www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-when-the-science-of-reading-goes-too-far/2022/07.

Hamilton, C, and M Shinn. 2003. "Characteristics of Word Callers: An Investigation of the Accuracy of Teachers' Judgements of Reading Comprehension and Oral Reading Skills." *School Psychology Review* 32, no 2: 228–40. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2003.12086195.

Juhkam, M, P Soodla and M Aro. 2022. "How Accurate Are Teachers and Support Specialists When Judging Students' Literacy Skills? Special Educational Service as an External Factor Influencing Judgements." *Dyslexia: An International Journal of Research and Practice* 28, no 4: 378–96. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/dys.1725

Kittle, P. 2013. *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Moats, L C. 2020. *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers*. 3rd ed. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.

National Reading Panel. 2000. *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*. https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf.

Reading Rockets. n.d. *Glossary*. https://www.readingrockets.org/teaching/glossary.

Routman, R. 2014. *Teaching Reading in the 21st Century: Motivating All Learners*. New Jersye: Pearson Education.

Serravallo, J. 2015. *The Reading Strategies Book: Your Everything Guide to Developing Skilled Readers*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Snowling, M J, C Hulme and K Nation. 2022. *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. New Jersey: Wiley & Sons.

Stollar, S. 2021. *Shifting the Balance?* [Video], April 13. YouTube.

Tobin, B. 2020. *Tipping the Scale on Fountas & Pinnell*. Breaking the Code: Phonics & Reading. June 24. https://www.breakingthecode.com/tipping-the-scale-on-fountas-pinnell/.

AUTHOR BIOS:

Colleen Whidden, *PhD, is the director of teaching and learning at Medicine Hat College. She has taught in the K–12 system, as well as at the postsecondary level in the Education departments at the University of Calgary and Medicine Hat College. She has received the Alberta Colleges and Institutes Faculties Association's (ACIFA) Provincial Instructor Award, the University of Calgary's U Make a Difference service award and the Alberta Choral Federation's Arts Advocacy Award.*

Garrett Fredeen *is a Red Seal journeyman carpenter currently enrolled in the bachelor of education program at Medicine Hat College. He was a research assistant for the Faculty of Education at Medicine Hat College and has practicum and coaching experience in K–12. Garrett has received the Humanities and Social Sciences Book Award and the Ignite Student Scholarship Award, and has been placed on the Medicine Hat College president's honour roll.*

High School Career Planning and Exploration Through a Study of English Language Arts at the Grade 10 Level

Jennifer Smith, Kerry Bernes, Jonathan Roque, Annelise Lyseng and Karissa Horne

Introduction

All too often, and with expressions of growing complacency in middle and secondary grades, students articulate that education has a lack of purpose or meaning to practical life application. Statistical evidence of complacency toward education is markedly apparent when one considers the three-year high school completion and dropout rate in Alberta. Although the rate has improved, from 77.9 per cent in 2016 (Government of Alberta 2018) to 83.2 per cent in 2021 (Government of Alberta 2023), this information does not indicate the reasons why a significant number of students do not complete the three years of high school. Among those that do complete high school in three years, it is also unclear whether they do so with a sense of preparedness to take on an active and considered approach to their careers. In the process of completing high school, students must address numerous, and sometimes competing, concerns around (a) choosing the right occupation to work toward; (b) choosing the right training for the occupational direction they select; (c) life satisfaction and purpose; (d) fear of failure and the implications of career commitment; and (e) the consequences of making a wrong choice (Code et al. 2006).

Educating and preparing students for a few potential careers that they might pursue upon completing their education is an approach that is no longer necessary, adequate or educationally responsible. It is difficult to deny that "the contemporary world of work ... generally favours a more flexible, considerate, self-reflective approach to career commitments. As a consequence, one's vocational identity may become more dynamic over the life course compared to the typical case in the 20th century" (Porfeli and Lee 2012). As teachers of twenty-first century learners seek to increase their effectiveness to help prepare their students for the future, the central idea is to teach students *how* to think rather than *what* to think. This *process over product* approach can be applied beyond academic pursuits to other dimensions of life, such as career paths. Career planning can no longer be the product of a few brief conversations, interactions or activities, where the selection between limited options presented to students might suffice. It is imperative to prepare students for a career in the fast-paced twenty-first century world of work that changes quickly to adapt to the demands of a seemingly volatile job market. Career planning needs to include a process of periodic reflection and information gathering as students begin to understand themselves better throughout their educational experience, during their transition from high school to the outside world and throughout their varied work experience. A relevant and necessary part of high school education must involve time for students to develop a process where they refine their self-reflective abilities through the work that they do. This means that students need to be not only introduced to the idea of career planning but also to the ongoing career planning process, which involves developing the skills of self-reflection, evaluation and confident decision making (Code et al. 2006). Students will find the greatest benefit from instruction when academic pursuits emphasize the maximization of their self-awareness through learning.

Though it is certainly a daunting task, "schools can serve as a centralized hub for the coordination and delivery of career programming" (Perry and Wallace 2012, 33), and teachers have the capacity to aid in this process through nearly every lesson they teach. However, the suggestion for teachers

is not to take on the facilitation of career planning in addition to the expectation of covering existing outcome-based lessons, but rather to use the expertise they bring to their disciplines to combine academics with the instruction of "learning and innovation skills, information, media, and technology skills, and life and career skills" (Perry and Wallace 2012, 35). This would create concrete connections between schoolwork and students' eventual life work. According to Meeder and Pawlowski (2020), engaging in career-related learning can help students connect their learning in the classroom to real-world experiences. In return, such learning will support students in feeling better prepared with the appropriate knowledge, skills and experiences needed to navigate through their life and career after high school. Supporting students in meaningful career planning could be significant enough to enhance the overall experience and applicability of classroom lessons to career and life matters. Taken together, this paper seeks to explore various ways in which teachers can connect learning experiences in a high school English class with the development of self-awareness and the process of intentional, meaningful career planning.

... it was evident that career planning was a critical aspect that was absent from students' educational experiences in southern Alberta.

Background

To provide context for the current research, an overview of how career planning was incorporated into the Alberta curriculum is presented. A comprehensive career needs survey (CCNS) was developed by Magnusson and Bernes (2002) to attain further understanding of students' career needs. The CCNS is a collaborative initiative between the Southern Alberta Centre of Excellence for Career Development at the University of Lethbridge's Faculty of Education, the Chinook Regional Career Transitions for Youth Project and the South-Western Rural Youth Career Development Project. The objective of the survey was to gather students' perceptions of career development and planning needs, in addition to perceived gaps in existing services (Magnusson and Bernes 2002; Witko et al. 2006). The survey encompassed both quantitative and qualitative measures that were distributed by classroom teachers to 54 junior and senior high schools in southern Alberta.

The survey's results revealed that some of the most prominent needs for junior and senior high school students were identifying their interests and abilities, finding their passions, garnering support for their career plans and postsecondary education and gaining financial information (Magnusson and Bernes 2002). Moreover, the surveys suggested that commencing career planning earlier could be more effective in supporting students through career decision making (Witko et al. 2006). In considering the results, it was evident that career planning was a critical aspect that was absent from students' educational experiences in southern Alberta.

Based on the results obtained from the CCNS, a career education pilot project, Career Coaching Across the Curriculum, was created and implemented (Slomp, Gunn and Bernes 2014). Alberta Education and the Canadian Career Development Foundation supported the project by providing funding to train 50 preservice teachers in career education, which would afford them the opportunity to enter schools in Alberta and implement career education across the K–12 curriculum. The pilot project consisted of two components. First, the Career Education course was provided to the preservice teachers over four weekends. The first three weekends focused on the knowledge and skills necessary for integrating career interventions into the regular curriculum, and the fourth weekend allowed preservice teachers to share the lesson plans, unit plans and school-wide interventions they developed with their classmates. Second, after successfully completing the four-weekend Career Education course, students completed a 12-week internship where they could transfer their newly acquired knowledge and skills into elementary, middle or high school settings in southern Alberta. The larger data set has already been published (Slomp, Gunn and Bernes 2014); thus, the current paper aims to emphasize one of the specific classroom implementations from the larger study and explore the research question, "What is the effectiveness of the career planning unit in Grade 10 ELA [English Language Arts]?"

Context of the Teaching Environment

Career Planning intervention was offered to three groups of students in Grade 10 English classes at an urban high school in central Alberta. The school served approximately 1800 students. This intervention specifically employed ELA as a means to implement career planning instruction. This unit was modified and implemented for students operating at the English 10-1 Advanced Placement (10AP), 10-1, 10-2 and 10-4 levels. The groups varied slightly in size, from a class of 38 English 10AP students to a one of 28 10-1 students and a class of 27 students: 26 in 10-2 and 1 in 10-4. Given the large group size, there were a wide range of diverse learning needs. The English 10AP class had one student identified as gifted, and one student identified as coping with anxiety issues. Several other students in the class displayed evidence of anxiety in their approach to learning. The English 10-2 class also had four students who had just completed English Language Learner (ELL) instruction at the end of the previous school year and were still working to build their English communication skills. Moreover, there were nine students in the English 10-2 class with categorically moderate learning disabilities, which translated into difficulty completing work due to challenges with motivation to complete assignments, comprehension of texts, following directions, general organization and written communication.

Cross-curricular Integration

Opportunities for intentional, meaningful career planning integrated well into ELA lessons at the high school level for this Career Planning intervention. The Alberta learning outcomes used in this intervention included those that encouraged exploration, reflection and response. The specific learning outcomes from the Program of Studies for ELA for Grade 10 students (Alberta Education 2015) used in connection with this intervention can be found in Appendix A.

Detailed Description of the Intervention

Due to the ongoing nature of this intervention and its connection to general English instruction throughout the study semester, much of the time was spent solely on Career Planning instruction, involving the exploration of meaning and personal identity as an approach to career planning. Furthermore, each lesson involved themes from the online video, *The Last Lecture* by Dr Randy Pausch (Carnegie Mellon University 2007). Each lesson included a small clip from *The Last Lecture* that was relevant to the lesson's topic. With the aid of the original lecture, viewed via YouTube, students engaged in activities that contributed to the process of becoming aware of their identity and developing a sense of personal value and self-worth. In this lecture, Pausch—drawing full attention to his recent diagnosis of terminal pancreatic cancer—spoke about the most important things he had learned in his life as he examined his accomplishments. While he mentions his professional accomplishments, he emphasizes the personal attributes he possessed or developed that made his life story one that he was proud to share, reminding everyone who listened that "we cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand" (Pausch and Zaslow 2008, 17).

Lesson 1: The Elephant in the Room

As an introductory activity, this lesson's presentation sought to illuminate the importance for adolescents to engage in a process of career planning. Students viewed a segment from the movie *Say Anything*, where Lloyd shared his future career plans with Mr Court in which he was uncertain of what he wanted to do after high school. With the idea of adulthood in mind, students evaluated their progress toward adulthood in various aspects of their lives. Students began the activity by brainstorming and generating a list of attributes they believed would be useful in adulthood and then created a word cloud. From the word cloud, students could clearly see which attributes were more commonly valued, as the most repeated words and phrases were shown in larger text. Students then selected a minimum of five attributes and self-rated their current level of progress toward them. This activity exposed students to the importance of self-reflection and the need to contemplate on one's development and potential to progress.

Lesson 2: Make Me Earn It—Viewing Guide for The Last Lecture

An entire period was dedicated to viewing the entirety of Pausch's *The Last Lecture* (Carnegie Mellon University 2007). To engage thoughtfully with the lecture, students were given questions to consider before and after the viewing. Prior to viewing the lecture, students answered the following questions:

> Do you think it is important to achieve your childhood dreams? Why or why not?
>
> What have you learned from experiences with failure?
>
> How open are you to feedback from others? Do you think feedback is helpful? Why or why not?
>
> What is the most important life lesson you've learned so far?

At the end of Pausch's lecture, students were asked to respond to the following questions:

> If you were asked to give a "last lecture," what would you talk about? What important messages would you want to communicate to others?
>
> Why is it important to work well as a member of a team?
>
> Have you ever encountered a "brick wall"? How did you handle it?
>
> At the end of his lecture, Randy Pausch sums up his beliefs about life. The notion of life, as Randy Pausch describes it, suggests that the shape of our lives is linked to a system of cause and effect—in other words, what you get out of life is connected to what you put into it. Do you agree with the notion of karma that Randy Pausch shares? Why or why not?

Upon completing these questions, the class discussed Pausch's lecture and its connection to the unit. Students were encouraged to share their thoughts and discuss the themes presented and were then asked to connect these themes to potential career paths. To close the activity, students wrote a reflection to catalogue their thoughts about Pausch's *The Last Lecture* and about their thoughts concerning career planning and the self-reflective processes they were beginning to engage in.

Lesson 3: Childhood Dreams

In *The Last Lecture*, Pausch described his childhood and addressed the theme of success and failure with respect to achieving his childhood dreams. To do this, he displayed a series of pictures of himself as a child. Inspired by this, students were asked to bring in pictures of themselves as children. Using their personal pictures as prompts to reflect upon their childhood, students created a small, collage-like poster that included words and pictures that represented their childhood hopes and dreams. In creating a visual representation of their childhood dreams, students took the opportunity to undergo a process of self-reflection by responding to worksheet questions that required them to consider the extent to which their childhood goals had changed over time. They could also examine the challenges they might encounter in achieving their current goals. The following questions were asked:

> Did you find it easy or difficult to document your dreams? Why do you think it was easy or difficult for you to do?
>
> Have you achieved any of your childhood dreams so far? How does it feel to know that you've already achieved those dreams? Does it make achieving your other dreams seem more possible? How so?
>
> Which of your dreams do you think will be the most difficult to achieve? Next to each challenging dream, outline the next few steps or the habit(s) you will develop and use to work toward achieving each challenging dream.

Lesson 4: Brick Walls

Pausch used brick walls to metaphorically represent obstacles, which might help an individual understand how badly they desired to attain what lay on the opposite side of the figurative wall (Carnegie Mellon University 2008). In this activity, students engaged in a process where they identified potential barriers to personal progress toward achieving their dreams. Students identified personal barriers, which they shared through discussions within small groups. To complete their work in this task, they created a visual representation of their personal obstacles by naming them on bricks printed on paper. The picture of the brick

wall contained a blank space where students either wrote or drew a picture of the goals they wanted to achieve (ie, the goals on the "other side").

Lesson 5: Bring Something to the Table

In conjunction with the Brick Walls activity, students identified the skills and attributes they possessed that might support them in overcoming adversity (ie, their "brick wall"). Each student was given a printed image of a conference table. The teacher explained that in most organizations, a special chair was reserved at the head of the conference table for the chairperson of the organization. The special chair represented the student's heart and mind, which they used to make decisions; the other seats represented the individual's skills, talents and characteristics. Students were instructed to write down, next to each chair, what they thought were skills, attributes or characteristics that they possessed that might help them achieve their dreams. Upon completing the conference table activity, students were placed into small groups. Each student shared a story about a time in which they took pride, a time that showed evidence of their personal strengths and how they could work together to achieve something or overcome a personal obstacle. As other group members listened, they wrote down skills, attributes and personality traits that the speaker made apparent through sharing their own story. From the list generated by group members, individual students selected five to ten words that provided evidence of their personal strengths when put in challenging situations. When this activity was completed, each student had the opportunity to learn how others viewed their strengths. Students were also given the opportunity to consider their progress on the Brick Walls and Bring Something to the Table tasks through written reflections in response to reflection questions aimed at having students consider the two most recent tasks and the overall career planning process.

The questions students responded to were as follows:

> What has been the most difficult or challenging part of the career planning process so far? Why do you think this is the case?
>
> What part of the career planning process have you enjoyed the most so far? Why do you think this part has been so enjoyable?
>
> In *The Last Lecture*, Randy Pausch talks about choosing how to live your life to enable your dreams to come true. Discuss at least one thing about yourself and the choices you are making (or have/want to make) that you have gained awareness of so far in this process that you think will help you to work toward some of the goals you have laid or might lay out for your future.

Lesson 6: Who are Your Supporters?

Naturally, the task of taking on new challenges can appear rather daunting. This activity encouraged students not only to increase their awareness of the characteristics they possessed that might help them achieve their dreams, but it also helped them to identify the individuals willing to support them and the kind of support they would receive. Students in English 10-2 and 10-4 were given a sample letter to customize along with questions about the task to aid in the completion of this activity. English 10AP and English 10-1 students prepared letters or emails to accompany the following questions that they sent out to personally selected individuals to gain a clearer understanding of their social support network:

> What do you think are my major interest areas?
>
> What are my strengths?
>
> What do you see as my limitations?
>
> What changes have you noticed over time?
>
> What changes would you anticipate in the future?
>
> What suggestions do you have for my career direction?
>
> In what ways might my career decisions affect you?

This level of feedback for students was intended to aid students in attaining a broader perspective of themselves and their potential to achieve their goals.

Lesson 7: Bedroom Wall

As part of the support and encouragement that Pausch described receiving as a child, he told a story about how his parents permitted him to decorate and paint his walls however he wanted. For this activity, students created a small poster of their imaginary bedroom walls, assuming they were allowed

to decorate it as they saw fit. The teacher explained that the purpose of the activity was to elucidate students' individuality, hopes, dreams and values. The teacher advised students to strongly consider their career interests and future career goals. Upon completing the poster, students prepared a written explanation of the various images on their wall.

Lesson 8: Working Hard ...

Students used an excerpt from the Alberta Government's (2012) document *This is Your Life: A Career and Education Planning Guide* to investigate potential career options based on their interests and personalities. The guide contained a reference to a career website and several self-assessment tools that aided them in using self-knowledge regarding personal aptitude and suitability in relation to possible occupations. The guide also served to further reinforce the idea of finding a career that suited their individuality. Students explored the prescribed website (http://alis.alberta.ca/careerinsite), where they identified three specific careers they might be interested in that would also be amenable to their individuality.

Lesson 9: ... Or Hardly Working?

Up to this point in the unit, students had spent a great deal of effort focused on their past and present selves and what they had learned from their experiences which would help them achieve a fulfilling and meaningful future career. At this stage of the unit, "Hardly working" was defined as a career that might not feel like one that involves tedious and draining work but rather one that was personally meaningful and enjoyable. For this activity, students reflected and wrote about what they would like to be remembered for—not only at the end of their careers but even after death. This reflective exercise was likened to writing one's own epitaph, as it required students to think about potential accomplishments in relation to their "future" career and to consider the life that they would want to lead and be remembered for. Students were advised to provide specific examples of their career accomplishments and achieved life goals.

Lesson 10: Experience is What You Get

To concretize the series of self-exploration activities into a personally meaningful conclusion, students prepared their own versions of *The Last Lecture*. English 10-2 and 10-4 students named the benefits and challenges in the career planning process and composed a paragraph about their experience with the unit, while English 10-1 and English 10AP students prepared a presentation where they used the information and insights they gained throughout the semester-long intervention to offer advice to those who might follow in their footsteps in the career planning process. In this final activity, students provided further evidence of their learning from the unit through their presentations. Throughout the unit, students were encouraged to consider several different factors that influenced their approach to their personal and professional lives, and these factors were included in their presentations: (a) developments in their views since the beginning of the course; (b) shaping or refining of their views because of the course; and (c) narrative detail about the progression of their thinking by the end of the course.

Results

Formative Assessment

Throughout the unit, students wrote and reflected on their participation in each activity in a personal journal that was included in their career planning portfolio, along with their assigned class work. Throughout the course of the unit, teachers conducted formative assessment of the portfolios regularly to check for comprehension and completion. Formative assessment through close observation was also employed to modify the unit as needed.

Summative Assessment

Part 1: Participation and completion

Students completed an evaluation form (Appendix B) of the intervention process. Instructions to complete the form included information about the assistance that evaluation responses would be used for to ensure that the unit was as operative, germane and accessible as possible for all students that might experience this intervention in the future. Due to absences on the day it was administered, the survey was completed by 88 out of 91 students. Of these 88, 78 per cent, on average, reported having completed all the activities listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Completion of Activities

Activity	I didn't do it	I did it
Elephant in the Room (Adult Report Card)	14 (16%)	74 (84%)
Last Lecture Viewing (Guide Questions)	7 (8%)	81 (92%)
Childhood Dreams (Past/Future Visual Representation /Reflection)	8 (9%)	80 (91%)
Brick Walls (Identifying Obstacles)	6 (7%)	82 (93%)
Bring Something to the Table (Pride Story/Table /Reflection)	9 (10%)	79 (90%)
Who are Your Supporters (Feedback Letters)	17 (19%)	71 (81%)
Bedroom Walls (Present Visual Representation and Tour write-up)	19 (22%)	69 (78%)
Working Hard (Career Research)	7 (8%)	81 (92%)
Or Hardly Working (Future-cast Reflection)	9 (10%)	79 (90%)
Experience is What You Get (Career Planning/Life Advice)	17 (19%)	71 (81%)

Part 2: Perceived Helpfulness of Activities

Survey results indicated a generally positive and receptive response to the career planning unit, with 87 per cent of the students responding favourably to the helpfulness of the activities toward the process of career planning as noted in Table 2. Activities that students found most helpful, which were rated as either "Good" or "Great," included responding to the viewing of Randy Pausch's *The Last Lecture* (94 per cent), exploring lifelong goals through the Childhood Dreams activity (93 per cent) and the identification and motivation to overcome obstacles to personal fulfilment and success in the Brick Walls activity (92 per cent). Students who rated the activities as "Not good at all" in terms of helpfulness stated that more time for the unit, or an adjustment to the pacing of activities during the unit, would have been beneficial. Combined with the larger group of students that demonstrated difficulty with activity completion, addressing matters of pacing (speed at which tasks are assigned) and timing (amount of time provided for completion of individual tasks) appeared to be the principal factor that required the most consideration toward refining the implementation of the intervention unit.

Table 2: Perceived Helpfulness of Activities

Activity	Not good at all	Good	Great
Elephant in the Room (Adult Report Card)	17 (19%)	59 (67%)	12 (14%)
Last Lecture Viewing (Guide Questions)	5 (6%)	60 (68%)	23 (26%)
Childhood Dreams (Past/ Future Visual Representation /Reflection)	6 (7%)	39 (44%)	42 (49%)
Brick Walls (Identifying Obstacles)	7 (8%)	39 (44%)	42 (48%)
Bring Something to the Table (Pride Story/ Table/Reflection)	11 (13%)	50 (57%)	27 (30%)
Who are Your Supporters (Feedback Letters)	20 (23%)	30 (34%)	37 (43%)
Bedroom Walls (Present Visual Representation and Tour write-up)	10 (12%)	40 (47%)	36 (41%)
Working Hard (Career Research)	16 (18%)	35 (40%)	37 (42%)
Or Hardly Working (Future-cast Reflection)	11 (13%)	49 (56%)	28 (31%)
Experience is What You Get (Career Planning/Life Advice)	10 (11%)	50 (57%)	28 (32%)

Part 3: Meeting Learning Outcomes

According to the survey results, 57 per cent of responses indicated that students agreed that the unit outcomes had been met (Table 3). Concerning the discovery of individual strengths and attributes, 67 per cent agreed that they had achieved this outcome, and 65 per cent indicated that they had explored career options that promoted their individuality and strengths. Students indicated the most uncertainty regarding the development of their personal ideology of self-fulfilment and success as foundations for their career plans (52 per cent). However, it is possible that the wording of the question and the option to indicate uncertainty was difficult for students to understand.

Table 3: Learning Outcomes Fulfilled as Determined by the Student

	I Don't Agree	I'm Not Sure	I Agree
1. This unit helped me identify factors that influence my personal beliefs and values on self-fulfillment and success	6 (7%)	31 (35%)	51 (58%)
2. This unit helped me discover individual strengths and attributes	9 (10%)	20 (23%)	59 (67%)
3. This unit helped me explore meaningful career options that promote my individuality and strengths	6 (7%)	25 (28%)	57 (65%)
4. This unit helped me develop a personal ideology (ideas that reflect your social needs and aspirations) on self-fulfillment and success as a foundation for career plans	10 (11%)	46 (52%)	32 (37%)
5. This unit helped me evaluate career options according to personal ideology (ideas that reflect your social needs and aspirations and meaning)	10 (11%)	28 (32%)	50 (57%)

Discussion

Perceived Effectiveness of the Unit Plan

The implementation of this career planning unit was intended to help students better understand themselves and their potential toward future career prospects. The generally positive response to the unit's activities speaks to the amenability of Career Education and ELA activities involving (a) writing and visual representation toward the production of texts; (b) the metacognitive task of considering these created texts in conjunction with Randy Pausch's *The Last Lecture*; and (c) responding to them in the self-reflective process that was a dominant feature in this unit. Successful connection between career and ELA activities provided a dual benefit for students. Students who provided negative feedback did not generally elucidate as to why their response to the course was negative, but those that did respond reported that the unit's activities were too time-consuming and warranted more completion time than what was provided. Nearly all these comments provided positive evaluations of the unit's activities (as evidenced by the largely positive response to the helpfulness of each activity) but suggested that learning outcomes would have been more fulfilled if more time was allowed for completion and to fully grasp the content of each activity. For future implementations, the unit should focus on a smaller set of activities with a greater amount of time allotted.

Teachers observed that most of the students were initially reluctant to engage in the unit, as many of them believed that career topics belonged in the Career and Life Management (CALM) class. However, over time, students were noticeably more engaged as they learned more about themselves. For example, several students were reluctant to engage in telling a pride story, as they defined pride in terms of conceitedness, arrogance and moral deviance. However, upon completing the pride story and group sharing exercise, many of these same students expressed that they did not realize that pride had an alternative definition; it could also be defined in terms of self-esteem, purposefulness and dignity.

Teachers noted that students in the 10AP class and, to a lesser extent, those in the 10-1 class expressed both verbally and through written feedback that

they were accustomed to doing schoolwork to obtain a high grade. These grade-oriented students stated that it was the first time that a school subject made them want to engage in the lesson material because gaining self-knowledge became more valuable and rewarding than receiving a high grade. Students who were not as grade-focused (ie, 10-2 students and some of the 10-1 students) were especially opposed to the career unit, as they expected the unit to be a rehashed and "boring" iteration of CALM content. These same students, however, expressed that the career unit's content was superior to CALM content because the unit provided them with "practical strategies," namely, the self-explorative activities. They further noted that the CALM unit provided them with tools (ie, resume building, job searching, etc) whereas the career unit provided them with a purpose for using these tools. Nearly every student across all grade levels generally found the self-reflective process to be difficult, but over time, students stated that this process ultimately became the most rewarding and the most personally impacting.

Nearly every student across all grade levels generally found the self-reflective process to be difficult, but over time, students stated that this process ultimately became the most rewarding and the most personally impacting.

Several students in the 10-2 class sought career coaching outside of class time, where they disclosed to the teacher that they generally believed that the school's teaching staff held them in less esteem because they were less academically inclined. They pointed to the fact that teachers of higher seniority tended to teach AP classes, whereas new teachers and student teachers were placed in 10-2 classes. This hierarchical perception led students to believe that teachers perceived 10-2 students to be less desirable to teach, and therefore less desirable people overall. These students who sought coaching outside of class time expressed their appreciation for the teacher's implementation of the unit because they felt the unit placed value on their unique individualities, rather than on their grades.

Challenges and Strategies

Challenges with the implementation of the unit came with the diversity and size of the group undertaking the activities in the unit as continuous modification of the unit plan was needed to meet the diverse and unique needs of the various students. These modifications usually involved ensuring that the activities were effectively explained and supported toward completion as much as possible for students with diverse exceptionalities, ranging from developing English language skills, to moderate learning disabilities, and even to the more pronounced needs of the English 10-4 students enrolled in the English 10-2 class. Strategies to contend with this challenge included reworking the layout and format of the assignments to suit the needs of English 10-2 students and encouraging them to consider the questions for each activity in a way that the format of responses to those questions were laid out concretely. Where necessary, questions were adjusted to align with the English 10-2 level, which helped to ensure that students could remain focused on the primary intent and goals of the activities. For the 10-4 students, further modifications were made by reducing the size or eliminating the quantity of responses required where necessary and appropriate. For these students in particular, the career planning unit presented an excellent set of opportunities for communicating topics concerning personal learning, goal setting and exploring challenges. Many were able to acknowledge limitations regarding their learning and capabilities in an English setting while considering matters of personal growth and realistic career possibilities as part of the unit in a way that they had reportedly never done before.

Several students had also expressed that more time could have been allocated to exploring careers. Although the unit focused heavily on building self-awareness, only two lessons were wholly dedicated to career exploration (Lessons 8 and 9). For future implementation, more unit lessons should be committed to greater career exploration. It is our opinion that several of the students did

not believe the unit had achieved its objectives because, despite its emphasis on self-knowledge, not enough emphasis was given to linking self-knowledge to actual career paths.

Alternatives

Other considerations for the unit would be to address the unit's pacing or timing, namely, whether the unit was to be taught on a day-to-day basis or as a periodic, semester-long intervention. It is inherent in English instruction that the amount of work in and out of class ebbs and flows as the focus of each activity transitions between exploring and responding to texts. With the unit implemented as a semester-long intervention, the matter of having to interrupt "regular" English instruction for a career planning lesson came into debate. A potential solution to this might be to add more source texts to provide more variety in points of access to the ideas presented largely through *The Last Lecture* and to provide a sense of progress throughout the semester rather than a sense of return to the initial text around which the unit was to be meaningfully based.

Conclusion

The intention of this career planning intervention was to support students in making meaningful connections between their present and future selves, particularly concerning the subject of career planning and, to an equally valuable extent, connections to themselves as individuals whose responsibility it is to ensure they flourish in society. Moreover, the purpose of connecting the career planning intervention with a semester of English enabled students to connect to themselves and others. A connection of this nature not only augmented student awareness of what they could learn from stories told by others, but it also highlighted the significance that their own story could influence others who hear it.

One could argue that career planning intervention is most beneficial when started in the primary grades; however, there is no age where a message of this nature grows obsolete or unnecessary. The answer to the question of what really matters in relation to this career planning intervention is the offering of a point of impetus for adolescent students to engage in their own stories through the work they do in career planning activities. This career planning intervention does not demand a definitive answer to questions surrounding absolute certainty toward specific career paths. What it seeks is student engagement in a process of exploration that will aid them not only in determining what sort of work they would like to undertake in their future careers but also to elucidate upon what they find valuable and important to them in all aspects of their lives.

References

Alberta Education. 2015. *English Language Arts (10-12)*. Government of Alberta. https://education.alberta.ca/english-language-arts-10-12/.

Carnegie Mellon University. 2007. *The Last Lecture: Classroom Edition* [Video], December 20. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo.

Code, M, K Bernes, T Gunn and A Bardick. 2006. "Adolescents' Perceptions of Career Concern: Student Discouragement in Career Development." *Canadian Journal of Counselling* 40, no 3: 160–174. https://www.uleth.ca/dspace/bitstream/handle/10133/1170/Adolescents%E2%80%99%20Perceptions%20of%20Career%20Concern_NATCON.pdf?sequence=1.

Say Anything. 1989. Directed by C Crowe. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Government of Alberta. 2018. *High School Completion Rate of Students Within 3 Years and Within 5 Years of Entering Grade 10*, Alberta. https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/80968b69-c17e-4f26-92c5-eae3b7793ce0/resource/321401a9-85f1-4892-a596-7673157feeb8/download/highschoolcompletionrateonepage-03-28-2018.pdf.

Government of Alberta. 2023. *High School Completion Rate by Post-secondary Service Region*. https://open.alberta.ca/opendata/high-school-completion-rate-by-post-secondary-service-region.

Magnusson, K C, and K B Bernes. 2002. "Comprehensive Career Needs Survey: An Overview." *Alberta Counsellor* 27: 12–15.

Meeder, H, and B *Pawlowski. 2020. Preparing Our Students for the Real World: The Education Shift Our Children and Future Demand*. National Center for College and Career Transitions, Columbia. https://cica.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Preparing-Our-Students-for-the-Real-World-021720.pdf.

Pausch, R, and J Zaslow. 2008. *The Last Lecture*. New York: Hyperion.

Perry, J C, and E W Wallace. 2012. "What Schools Are

Doing Around Career Development: Implications for Policy and Practice." *New Directions for Youth Development* 2012, no 134: 33–44. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20013.

Porfeli, E, and B Lee. 2012. "Career Development During Childhood and Adolescence." *New Directions for Youth Development* 2012, no 134: 11–22.

Slomp, M W, T M Gunn and K B Bernes. 2014. "Training Pre-service Teachers in Career Education: Developing Foundational Perceptions, Knowledge, and Skills." *The Canadian Journal of Career Development/Revue canadienne de development de carrier* 13, no 2: 18–34. http://ceric.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Training-Pre-Service-Teachers-in-Career-Education.pdf.

The Government of Alberta. 2012. *This is Your Life: A Career Education and Planning Guide*. https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/33ab00ee-b364-4cac-84fc-a544b78e8c48/resource/88e07ced-28a9-472a-840d-4853e37e91c9/download/tiyl-students-web-version-optimized-final.pdf.

Witko, K D, K B Bernes, K C Magnusson and A D Bardick. 2006. "Senior High Students' Career Plans for the Future: Outcomes of the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey in Southern Alberta, Canada." *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance* 6, no 2: 77–94. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-006-9103-3.

Appendix A

English Language Arts Curriculum Outcomes

1.1.1 Form tentative understandings, interpretations, and positions

a. generate and experiment with strategies that contribute to forming tentative understandings, interpretations and positions [for example, posing questions, suspending prejudgement as appropriate, recognizing that initial interpretations and positions may be inaccurate and incomplete, and recognizing that texts may be inaccurate, misleading or ambiguous]

b. form tentative understandings, interpretations, and positions on ideas and issues communicated in literature and other texts by expressing own explorations and considering others' explorations

1.1.2 Experiment with language, image and structure

a. experiment with language, image, and structure to create different effects in particular situations and for particular purposes and audiences [for example, present the same information to two different audiences, and make appropriate changes to the content to suit the audiences]

b. experiment with a variety of strategies, activities, and resources to explore ideas, observations, opinions, experiences, and emotions [for example, stream-of-consciousness writing, free verse poetry, exploratory talk, and improvisation]

1.2.1 Consider new perspectives

a. describe personal responses to new perspectives, appraise whether such responses contribute to or inhibit understanding, and identify influences that have contributed to such responses

b. identify own ideas, perspectives and interpretations and evaluate them for depth of explanation, evidence or support; and consider the ideas, perspectives and interpretations of others to broaden own understandings when exploring and responding to texts

2.1.1 Discern and analyze context

a. identify a variety of different kinds of texts, audiences and purposes for creating texts [for example, purposes could include to inform, persuade, entertain or inspire; the purpose of a print advertisement is to sell a product]

d. identify the impact that personal context—experience, prior knowledge—has on constructing meaning from a text

2.3.1 Connect self, text, culture and milieu

a. identify and consider personal moral and ethical perspectives, as well as cultural perspectives, when studying literature and other texts; and reflect on and monitor how perspectives change as a result of interpretation and discussion

b. respond personally and analytically to ideas developed in literature and other texts

c. compare choices and motives of characters and people portrayed in texts with choices and motives of self and others

3.1.1 Focus on purpose and presentation form

a. reflect on and describe strategies to determine

the depth and breadth of inquiry or research and to identify the purpose, audience and potential forms of presentation [for example, define parameters of inquiry or research, analyze available resources, create a timeline to guide inquiry or research, and understand purpose and audience]

b. describe the purpose of inquiry or research and the scope of the inquiry or research topic; identify the target audience; and identify the potential form for the presentation of inquiry or research findings, when applicable [such as a narrative, report, diary entry or biography]

c. refine the purpose of inquiry or research by limiting or expanding the topic as appropriate

3.1.2 Plan inquiry or research, and identify information needs and sources

a. reflect on and describe strategies for developing an inquiry or research plan that will foster understanding, select and monitor appropriate strategies, and modify strategies as needed to plan inquiry or research effectively [for example, use a research journal to keep and record reflections on the research process, clarify thinking, revisit initial perceptions and ask questions that lead to new research]

b. develop an appropriate inquiry or research plan that will address the topic and satisfy contextual requirements—purpose, audience and situation—and requirements of presentation form

c. determine the breadth and depth of prior knowledge, and formulate questions to determine information needs and to guide the collection of required information

d. identify information sources intended to fill gaps between prior knowledge and required information

e. identify and select potential strategies and technologies for gathering, generating and recording information [for example, outlining, webbing, taking notes in point form, recording sources accurately during information gathering, writing direct quotations correctly and bookmarking Internet sites]

4.2.1 Enhance thought and understanding and support and detail (writing)

a. review the controlling idea or desired unifying effect of a text in progress for clarity and focus [for example, in a rehearsal, mock-up or draft], and modify the controlling idea or desired unifying effect as appropriate to meet the intended purpose

b. review the accuracy, specificity and precision of details, events, images, facts or other data intended to support a controlling idea or to develop a unifying effect; and add to details, events, images, facts or other data as needed to provide sufficient support or development

c. detect and correct logical fallacies

d. review own critical/analytical response to literature for plausibility, appropriateness of interpretations, and precision, completeness, and relevance of evidence; and revise interpretations and evidence, as necessary

5.1.3 Recognize accomplishments and events

a. use language and image to honour own and others' accomplishments [for example, celebrate together when classmates have accomplished a particular task or produced, published, or presented a particular text; or celebrate the completion of a portfolio with family and friends by holding a "portfolio launch"]

b. identify formal and informal ways in which language and image are used appropriately to honour people and to celebrate events [for example, eulogy, toast, and public service announcements]

5.2.1 Cooperate with others, and contribute to group processes

a. set appropriate personal goals for participation in a group; respect, be open to, and be supportive of the thoughts, opinions, and contributions of others in a group; and share personal knowledge, expertise and perspectives with others, as appropriate.

The wide variety of outcomes listed above supported semester-long career planning implementation and integration.

Throughout the semester, English instruction was connected to career planning as much and as meaningfully as possible to take advantage of every opportunity to enhance the career planning experience.

Appendix B

Unit Evaluation Form

Thank you for participating in this unit plan! I would like to know if it was helpful and how it could be made better.

Part 1: Please let me know if you did the activities.

Activity	Not good at all	Good	Great
Elephant in the Room (Adult Report Card Activity)	☐	☐	☐
Last Lecture Viewing (Guide Questions)	☐	☐	☐
Childhood Dreams (Past/Future Visual Representation and Reflection)	☐	☐	☐
Brick Walls (Identifying Obstacles)	☐	☐	☐
Bring Something to the Table (Sharing Pride Story and Filling Out Table Template and Reflection)	☐	☐	☐
Who are Your Supporters? (Feedback Letters)	☐	☐	☐
Bedroom Walls (Present Visual Representation and Tour writeup)	☐	☐	☐
Working Hard (Career Research)	☐	☐	☐
Or Hardly Working (Futurecast Reflection)	☐	☐	☐
Experience is What you Get (Career Planning/Life Advice from Experience)	☐	☐	☐

Part 2: Please let me know if you thought the activity was helpful by circling whether you thought it was "not good at all," "good" or "great."

Activity	Not good at all	Good	Great
Elephant in the Room (Adult Report Card Activity)	☐	☐	☐
Last Lecture Viewing (Guide Questions)	☐	☐	☐
Childhood Dreams (Past/Future Visual Representation and Reflection)	☐	☐	☐
Brick Walls (Identifying Obstacles)	☐	☐	☐
Bring Something to the Table (Sharing Pride Story and Filling Out Table Template and Reflection)	☐	☐	☐
Who are Your Supporters? (Feedback Letters)	☐	☐	☐

Bedroom Walls (Present Visual Representation and Tour writeup)	☐	☐	☐
Working Hard (Career Research)	☐	☐	☐
Or Hardly Working (Futurecast Reflection)	☐	☐	☐
Experience is What you Get (Career Planning/Life Advice from Experience)	☐	☐	☐

What did you like about this unit plan?

How could this unit plan be made better?

Part 3: Please tell me how much you agree with the following statements by putting a checkmark in the box that best tells me how you feel:

Activity	I Don't Agree	I'm Not Sure	I Agree
This unit helped me identify factors that influence my personal beliefs and values on self-fulfillment and success	☐	☐	☐
This unit helped me discover individual strengths and attributes	☐	☐	☐
This unit helped me explore meaningful career options that promote my individuality and strengths	☐	☐	☐
This unit helped me develop a personal ideology on self-fulfillment and success as a foundation for career plans	☐	☐	☐
This unit helped me evaluate career options according to personal ideology and meaning	☐	☐	☐

Thank you very much for your help!

AUTHOR BIOS:

Jennifer Smith *is a graduate of the bachelor of education program at the University of Lethbridge.*

Kerry Bernes, *PhD, is a full professor of educational and counselling psychology in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge. He graduated from the University of Calgary with a bachelor of education, master of science and doctor of philosophy.*

Jonathan Roque *is a registered psychologist who currently resides in Lethbridge, Alberta, where he operates as a generalist in private practice. He also provides treatment and assessment for individuals involved in family violence within the department of Justice Services at Alberta Health Services.*

Annelise Lyseng *is a registered psychologist in Edmonton, Alberta. She works with university students, and her practice interests include neurodivergence, trauma, anxiety, perfectionism and life transitions. Annelise is currently researching postsecondary counsellor experiences, with an emphasis on advocacy and building community.*

Karissa Horne *is a PhD student in clinical and counselling psychology at the University of Toronto. She also holds a master of education in counselling psychology from the University of Lethbridge and a bachelor of education from Memorial University of Newfoundland.*

Call for Submissions

The English Language Arts Journal is a peer-reviewed journal that is published by the English Language Arts Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association. The goal of the *English Language Arts Journal* is to disseminate information about current educational research, practices, programs and resources that are of interest to English language arts teachers. This publication also serves to enable teachers to become more aware of new thinking in academia and issues in education and to gain knowledge, skills and understanding in the area of English language arts.

The English Language Arts Journal accepts the following:

- Review papers (that review a topic of interest or summarize recent developments in a topic of interest)
- Academic/theoretical articles
- Book and materials reviews
- Teaching approaches and ideas
- Teacher creative writing
- And other manuscripts of interest to English language arts teachers

If you have an unpublished piece that fits the goals of this journal, please consider sending it to the incoming editors, Teri Hartman and Morgan Schaufele, for consideration at editorelajournal@gmail.com. We accept submissions throughout the year, therefore timelines for publication may vary.

Important Information and Submission Guidelines:

- Articles are to be a maximum of 8000 words, excluding references; choose your tables and images wisely and ensure that any images you include clarify the content.
- Articles go through a double, blind, peer review process, so expect feedback and revisions. It is also possible that your article will not be recommended for publication.
- The Alberta Teachers' Association may have additional feedback that you may be asked to incorporate.
- Keep in mind publication timelines take approximately four months from beginning to end.
- Please ensure that your content is tailored for the audience of educators and education scholars in Alberta.
- With the exception of creative writing and book and materials reviews, all submissions require an abstract (please limit to five sentences).
- Include a contributor biography after the title of your article and before the abstract.
- Feel free to communicate with the editor about any questions you may have.
- A caption and photo credit should accompany each photograph.
- The contributor is responsible for obtaining releases for use of photographs and written parental permission for works by students under 18 years of age.
- The Copyright Transfer Agreement should be completed and attached to the manuscript.

CELEBRATING WORDS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Celebrating Words was conceived of as being a judgement-free space where the brilliance, eloquence, intelligence and creativity of our students could be showcased. The pieces need never be "perfect"—if such a thing even exists—as it is the thoughts and efforts of the students and the willingness of their teachers to, in a way, put their ideas and practices on display that are important and are at the heart of this publication.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

If you have student writing that you would like to share, submit it to *Celebrating Words* at editorelajournal@gmail.com, along with a brief explanation of the assignment. As a thank you for your hard work as a teacher and the initiative that you are showing in celebrating student work, you will receive a $100 gift card to go toward your classroom.

An Ever-Approaching Line

Kolby Orriss

I was 15 when I learned of his prognosis.

I was 16 when he died.

Zooooom, the cars rushed past me again and again and again, stopping in the pits for a brief second, and then back they went until the sign of a checkered flag. We would eat candy and laugh and place bets on which car would cross the line first—like it could not come fast enough.

I loved it here; we were a family.

My friends and I would all hang out, laughing, and meet every weekend to watch our parents and friends race, in the dark cloudy nights with over looming shadows or in the scorching hot heat of the desert sun. It was like a sanctuary, nobody ever missed a weekend, until his attendance started to falter. At first, I was not sure what he was doing, maybe a party, other friends, or he had homework—but it was all hospitals, doctors and tears.

He told me a week later about his brain cancer—10 months—he had been given 10 months to live. My friend, my brother, a light would be gone, and I could do nothing. My mind started racing about all the possibilities of how I could help, what I could do, but ultimately nothing; nothing would be able to save him from the suffering and inevitable pain to come. There were no drugs or treatments or options—the cancer was too great, too quick, too strong. He tried, we tried, every option provided, but everything failed. They said it was too advanced to stop it, but I still think they could have tried harder.

The following weeks I saw him get worse and worse and worse: the slurring of words, the tear-crusted eyes, and the inability to move from place to place. The once talkative, joyful and energetic person I had known, stuck in the shadows of his disease. I could see him try and smile, make it seem like he was fine, but I knew.

We all knew.

The visits to the track had stopped. I tried to visit him from time to time, but the doctors and hospitals and tears kept me away. However, when I popped by, I could see that sparkle from his eyes start to fade away, like the sparkle had been replaced by a shadow.

I tried. I tried so hard to smile and be a pitstop in his journey, a place where he could refuel and feel full again. I tried, but his broken smile broke me. It's hard to see the people we love suffer in an unconquerable battle as the finish line approaches all too soon. It is a feeling I wish upon no one. To feel this numbing pain in my chest, I have not winced nor cried aloud, but it pains me. The days go by and by and by, life zooming past, unable to grab the clutch to shift to a slower gear.

Unable to slow down because the checkered flag was coming and soon it would be behind us.

I struggled to keep it together; it felt like my life was crumbling down around me, and yet he remained unafraid. Unafraid of the uncertainty of who he is and what will find him when he's gone, but settled in the here and now, controlling life the best he could. So, we continued on—trying to bring a sense of normality to anything but a normal life.

I brought him to the track; I wanted him to experience it one last time—to know how loved and missed he will be; but I think, selfishly, it was for me. To feel the way I had back then. To feel a sense of peace like I would not be losing my best friend in the next coming days. To feel a sense of normality.

So we sat there and watched pre-running, making jokes and laughing hard. As the races began, the roar of the engines began to drown out conversations, but I could see that sparkle in his eyes return—one that had been dimmed for so long. The races ran all through the night, and the lights began to pale as the night began to age.

We drove home in the darkness. I talked, and he listened and added things when he could muster up the strength. I laughed and joked and smiled so big—trying to forget all the hospitals, doctors and tears.

I dropped him off at home and helped him make his way inside and when his parents had smiled and nodded at me, I knew it was my time to leave.

I placed my hand on his shoulder, "Thank you for a great night," I said.

I gave him a squeeze on the shoulder and made my way out, not sure when I would see him again—but I had the feeling of a checkered flag closing in.

Fate is a funny thing, the best of people get the worst of outcomes. He never deserved this, and I would take his place in a heartbeat; but maybe, this was meant to be my own lesson. A lesson on compassion and love and friendship. However, nobody prepares you for the change from hospitals, doctors and tears to being alone, uneasy and living with a piece of yourself missing. Fate is a funny thing, and all we can do is live with it.

Master of My Fate

Lyssa Pili

I am a victim of circumstance. My parents are divorced, or rather, split. I was born out of wedlock to a mom who already had two kids from a previous marriage and a dad who didn't really care about that, or anything really. My mother was easily depressed, probably a trait inherited from her own mother; and my dad was easily angry, probably because of the fact that he and his own family were never close.

My parents frequently tell me that I got the best of their looks: my father's teeth and smile, his nice thick hair; my mom's face, her waist and her eyes. Yet, they also tell me that I got their worst personality traits: I have my mother's constant need for reassurance, her uncontrollable hot and cold mindset that can't be shut off and her anxiety; I also have my dad's quick flashes of anger, his stubbornness, his shallowness and his phony personality, which he uses to suck up to his superiors. I was a victim of genetics, destined to have pits in my stomach whenever I had to talk to new people, destined to have an emptiness in my heart that would never be filled, destined to tiptoe the fine line between anger and sadness.

My dad is disappointed that I never got his extroversion; my mom's disappointed I never got her hard-working personality. My dad used his extroversion and confidence to worm his way up to a marketing manager position, while my mom used her hard-working nature to rocket us from dirt poor to a comfortable life. My life in comfort should've been enough to make me forget about my fate of a miserable life in poverty, following in my parents' footsteps as I had every step of the way since then. But I didn't.

My father hates when I get like this. I become a hollow shell of a person, with an empty and dead-eyed stare that he says reminds him too much of my mother. I become too numb to speak or do anything, simply letting the motions of life pass me by.

"You have to let this pass," he'll say, "drink some water. Get some exercise. You need to pass your classes."

These are my dad's words of encouragement. He always wanted me to try hard in school, persevere through it, and become successful so I wouldn't have to struggle like he and my mom did. He often talks about how he was just as smart as I am, but he became lazy and unmotivated in Grade 11. He wanted to go to law school. He ended up in drama. Can burnout be attributed to genetics as well?

School days passed by because I didn't have my father's confidence to talk to others, and I couldn't ever work through tough times like my mom did. I could probably get through my personal angsty rut if I had just tried. I could do anything. But I never did.

It wasn't until my mom and stepdad got married that I truly felt moved. No, not in the sense that I was so happy I was motivated to get up and try and find my own happiness; rather, I felt my world shatter when, for the first time, I saw my mom truly struggle. Apparently, it's quite expensive to get married. I had never once thought about money in that sense. I was a frivolous spender, to put it bluntly; yet, seeing my mom juggling the pressure of paying for our vacations, wedding, phone bills and car payments had torn my heart in ways I never knew it could be hurt in before.

How was I going to keep living like this? Was I going to keep freeloading off of my parents forever? Was I just planning on keeping a shitty job and continuing living through the motions like this? How could I see how hard my parents had worked to give me the life I have and show no gratitude? Was I just going to let my kids see and inherit my personality, which I loathe, and give up like I did? Thoughts like this rushed through my head when I would see my mom cry. She was working so hard to make up for the childhood she had, and I was doing nothing. I couldn't inherit her hard work because it was never something that came naturally; she had persevered through her own hard life to make my life good.

I had to grin and bear it. I had to work so I could pick up the slack from my long-lived depression. I couldn't cry about my life knowing my mom had it so much harder. I would no longer bow my head in submission to my faulty personality and mind. I would look at it straight on and accept it. Yes, maybe I'm not as good in this class as I used to be, but I will just have to put my best effort in to make up for my passionless past.

I was once afraid of working hard, but now I know I must. There is horror in knowing what looms ahead of me, but there is peace in knowing that I did my best.

I could not control who my parents were. I could not control what traits I may have inherited or picked up on. But I can control how I let these pitfalls affect me. Do I let it consume me? Or do I grit my teeth and trudge along? I will no longer be afraid of my future, for I am the one who controls my fate. I simply *have* to overcome this fear. I *can* do anything.

My parents worked hard to give me the life I almost gave up on, blaming it on the gift of faulty genetics. I may not have gotten my father's extroverted personality, but I got his quality of humour and knowing what to say to others. I may not have gotten my mother's gift of perseverance, but I got her ability to see the good in life and in people, even when I'm so hard on myself. I am not a victim of circumstance, I am the epitome of rising above it.

Chasing Perfection

Kael Schmidt

I wasn't good enough.

It rang through my head like the persistent tick of a metronome, constant, unwavering and unforgiving. I wasn't good enough, there was always someone more experienced, more determined, more capable, someone significantly better than me in the one thing I yearned to excel in. I wasn't good enough; the shadow lingered, waiting to engulf me and swallow me the moment I decided to rest for a moment.

Perfection is argued by some to be unachievable; however, for a period of my adolescence I strived for it through sport. Basketball became the evident focus of my life shortly after I discovered it. It was art. The rhythmic dribbling, the shoes gripping wood floors, the swish of the net, all of it was poetry in motion.

I was undoubtedly obsessed and would rather be practicing than anywhere else. Nights were spent shooting around until it was too dark to determine where the rim was, and days were spent longing to do it once more. However, once game days arrived, the result was always the same: benched. There it was, the same shadow lingering and stalking me, knowing I couldn't avoid it. I thirsted for progress and improvement, like a stray dog hungers for scraps; I had to keep moving forward to avoid the shadow. The shadow loomed over me; I knew I had to be better, I owed it to myself. So, I practiced substantially more frequently, which consequently pushed people around me away. I resented them; they did not understand my desire for perfection and only inhibited my journey. I concurred that isolation was better—I grew and developed exponentially while independent and began to enjoy my solitude. Not only did I grow significantly physically, I also developed psychologically. Although the glistening orange rays of the sun cast that persisting shadow upon me, I grew in confidence. In my time alone, I had learned to love myself as much as I loved the game and had evidently improved. When I did make mistakes, I did not feel an overwhelming sensation that I was unsatisfactory because I understood I was closer to perfection than ever before. Each mistake was only another step forward, inching toward my goal constantly. There was no better place to be than on a basketball court, with a basketball. My time alone was undoubtedly beneficial and was going to reflect on my next season. I had worked too hard and too consistently to not dominate my competition every chance I got. This was going to be my season.

Tryouts went as quick as they came, and I was a designated starter on the team, which created a feeling of unwavering satisfaction. This was reflected in my performance during the season opening, where I led the team in scoring. Although we lost, I was still exuberant with my game. I felt, in the spotlight, too bright and successful to perceive the shadow that once haunted me; yet, as the season continued, I could sense my emotions beginning to transform. Practice became a chore, and games seemed like a waste of time. At every missed shot, I criticized and demoralized myself as I believed I was above that. By chasing perfection, I had only strayed further from it because I had lost passion for the game. The blissful ignorance I enjoyed when I began developed into blaring criticisms and critiques of myself and others. There was no worse place to be than the basketball court: I did not resent anything more than basketball, except myself.

The sound of every missed shot repeatedly banged in my head as it did against the backboard, which angered and upset me. I continued to go to practices, but I evidently had no one. In chasing perfection, I had only sent the individuals around me away, leaving myself alone. I genuinely had nobody, no one to understand the immense pain and dissatisfaction I felt constantly from the thing I once loved. I had only one person to blame: myself. I resented the choices I had made because in the pursuit of perfection, I had lost the purpose of the sport: friendship, teamwork and, most importantly, joy. I had lost the people around me, the sport I once loved and, most importantly, myself. The shadow that had followed me for years had finally caught up, surrounding me in darkness.

Maybe, I just wasn't good enough.

Publishing Under the

Personal Information Protection Act

Under the *Personal Information Protection Act* (*PIPA*) of Alberta, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) requires consent to publish personal information about an individual. Personal information is defined as anything that identifies an individual in the context of the collection: for example, a photograph and/or captions, an audio or video file, and artwork.

School boards sometimes obtain blanket consent to publish students' and/or teachers' personal information under two new acts brought into force on June 13, 2025: the *Access to Information Act* (*ATIA*) and the *Protection of Privacy Act* (*POPA*). However *PIPA*, *ATIA* and *POPA* are not interchangeable. They fulfill different legislative goals. *PIPA* is the private sector act that governs the Association's collection, use and disclosure of personal information.

If you can use the image or information to identify a person in context (for example, a specific school or a specific event), then it is personal information and you need consent to collect, use or disclose (publish) it.

Minors cannot provide consent and must have a parent or guardian sign a consent form. Consent forms must be provided to the Creative and Publishing Services editorial staff at Barnett House together with the personal information to be published.

Refer all questions regarding the ATA's collection, use and disclosure of personal information to the ATA privacy officer.

Notify the ATA privacy officer immediately of any incident that involves the loss of or unauthorized use or disclosure of personal information, by calling Barnett House at 780-447-9400 or 1-800-232-7208.

Maggie Shane, the ATA's privacy officer, is your resource for privacy compliance support:

780-447-9429 (direct)
780-699-9311 (cell, available any time)

Consent for Collection, Use and Disclosure of Personal Information

Name (Please print): _____

☐ I am giving consent for myself.

☐ I am giving consent for my child/children or ward(s), identified below:

Name: _____

By signing below, I am consenting to The Alberta Teachers' Association collecting, using and disclosing personal information identifying me or my child/children or ward(s) in print and/or online publications and on websites available to the public, including social media. By way of example, personal information may include, but is not limited to, name, photographs, audio/video recordings, artwork, writings or quotations.

I understand that copies of digital publications may come to be housed on servers outside Canada.

I understand that I may vary or withdraw this consent at any time. I understand that the Association's privacy officer is available to answer any questions I may have regarding the collection, use and disclosure of these records. The privacy officer can be reached at 780-447-9429 or 1-800-232-7208.

Signed: _____

Name (Please print): _____ Today's Date: _____

The Alberta Teachers' Association

For more information on the ATA's privacy policy, visit **www.teachers.ab.ca**.

OP-DP-64 2025 08

ISSN 2563-4844 (Print)
ISSN 2563-4852 (Digital)
Barnett House
11010 142 Street NW
Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1