

Pulled In All Directions Kindergarten Educator Challenges for Teaching Reading in Play-Based Programs

Yvonne Messenger

Volume 26, Number 3, 2024

Special Issue: Literacy Teachers Navigating Turbulent Times in
Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1114599ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29726>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada

ISSN

1496-0974 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Messenger, Y. (2024). Pulled In All Directions: Kindergarten Educator
Challenges for Teaching Reading in Play-Based Programs. *Language and
Literacy / Langue et littérature*, 26(3), 123–136.
<https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29726>

Article abstract

Kindergarten educators are experiencing tensions with pedagogical approaches for early literacy learning (Forgie et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2018). They feel pressured to abandon play-based approaches in favour of direct instruction due to changes in provincial curriculum and school board policies (OHRC, 2022). This paper explores themes and responses by participants in a study with kindergarten educators during the first half of the 2023-24 school year. Challenges expressed included changing messages from school boards, a lack of clarity regarding direction, and the introduction of prescriptive programs. Suggestions of ways educators can build knowledge and agency through collaborative conversations are shared.

© Yvonne Messenger, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

***Pulled In All Directions:
Kindergarten Educator Challenges for Teaching Reading in Play-Based
Programs***

YVONNE MESSENGER
Brock University

Abstract

Kindergarten educators are experiencing tensions with pedagogical approaches for early literacy learning (Forgie et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2018). They feel pressured to abandon play-based approaches in favour of direct instruction due to changes in provincial curriculum and school board policies (OHRC, 2022). This paper explores themes and responses by participants in a study with kindergarten educators during the first half of the 2023-24 school year. Challenges expressed included changing messages from school boards, a lack of clarity regarding direction, and the introduction of prescriptive programs. Suggestions of ways educators can build knowledge and agency through collaborative conversations are shared.

Keywords: play-based learning, beginning reading instruction, kindergarten, educator self-efficacy

Kindergarten educators are experiencing tensions arising from competing pedagogical approaches for early literacy learning (Forgie et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2018). Educators feel pressured to abandon play-based approaches in favour of direct instruction due to changes in provincial curriculum, government, and school board policies (OHRC, 2022). Play-based approaches, such as those introduced in the *Kindergarten Program* (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2016) required that educators rethink their instructional practices and pedagogy, moving to a “child-centred, developmentally appropriate, integrated program of learning” (OME, 2016, 1.1) that embodies learning through play. At the time, many educators felt they needed to abandon direct whole- and small-group instruction to embrace learning through play and inquiry. (Messenger & Gallagher, 2024; Ontario Human Rights Commission [OHRC], 2022; Pyle et al., 2018). Challenges include balancing direct instruction with more child-directed open-ended play opportunities and uncertainty about how to leverage play for literacy learning (Messenger & Gallagher, 2024; Pyle et al., 2018).

As a certified teacher, I taught kindergarten when play-based approaches were introduced in my province. With my students, I embraced learning through play and inquiry and sought to effectively integrate literacy instruction. When I then transitioned to a consultant in a public school board, responsible for early years learning and language programs, I supported educators to incorporate literacy learning within play-based classrooms. I observed and shared the challenges faced in balancing play-based methods with more traditional approaches. Together with the educators, we considered effective

ways to ensure all children learned essential skills (e.g., the alphabetic principle) through responsive instruction in authentic moments.

In my current role as a researcher, I have engaged more broadly with educators who have expressed differing levels of confidence in their ability to integrate foundational literacy skills into authentic play- and inquiry-based teaching approaches in their classrooms (Messenger & Gallagher, 2024). This current research aims to bring my experience and these perspectives together to better understand how educators are navigating a newly complex context where they may be hearing conflicting messages and seeking to respond to evolving expectations in teaching literacy.

There has recently been a resurgence of the *reading wars* (Castles et al., 2018), the debate between educators and researchers as to the best way to teach young children to read. This *war* has tended to pit two groups against each other: those who advocate that the best way to teach reading is through *code-based* instruction relying on direct, systematic, and explicit phonics instruction (Ehri, 2020), and, on the other side, those who advocate for *meaning-based* instruction that is grounded in a responsive and contextualized approach meant to build on what students know (Wyse & Hacking, 2024).

The current iteration of the reading instruction debate has been influenced by journalists (Hanford, 2019), dyslexia advocates (International Dyslexia Association, 2018), and academics (Moats, 2020) calling for practitioners to use the *science of reading* (SOR) to determine best practices for reading education. SOR has been defined by the International Literacy Association as “a corpus of objective investigation and accumulation of reliable evidence about how humans learn to read and how reading should be taught” (ILA, 2020). The SOR narrative includes a narrow definition of what counts as reading, a push for systematic and explicit direct instruction in phonological awareness and phonics, and a call for educators of young children to be trained in the *science of reading* (Hanford, 2019; Moats, 2020). This renewed focus on the teaching of phonics in a systematic, direct, and explicit manner has added to the tensions already being felt by kindergarten educators grappling with literacy learning through play-based approaches. Educators are feeling pulled in all directions, and are unsure of how best to proceed, due to policy (OHRC, 2022) and curriculum changes.

The *reading wars* and SOR narrative can be seen in the *Right to Read: Public Inquiry into Human Rights Issues Affecting Students with Reading Disabilities* (OHRC, 2022). This report has already influenced policy across Canada, with consequences for literacy programming. School boards, schools, and teachers must now navigate these changes with some urgency. The *Right to Read* inquiry report (OHRC, 2022) critiques the current *early reading instruction approaches* for what is perceived as a lack of direct, explicit foundational reading skill instruction (Cummins, 2022; OHRC, 2022). The critique of the current *Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) includes a concern that the program is influenced by sociocultural theory (OHRC, 2022), which is seen as unscientific by SOR advocates such as Moats (2020), Hanford (2019), and the IDA (2018).

The *Right to Read Inquiry Report* (OHRC, 2022) recommendations, and recent announcements that the *Kindergarten Program* (2016) will be revised “to emphasize back-to-basics learning by introducing mandatory learning through clear and direct instruction in reading, writing, and math for kindergarten students” (OME, 2024) is adding to the tensions felt by kindergarten educators. The program changes represent yet another shift for both students and teachers, away from play-based learning and to explicit instruction

for beginning reading – to the potential exclusion of play-based learning approaches. While kindergarten programs across Canada differ in design, the recent *Right to Read* report (OHRC, 2022) is impacting not just Ontario’s kindergarten programs, but also provinces and territories across Canada (Blanch, 2023; Roessingh, 2021). Amid the current climate, educators feel pulled in all directions.

This paper articulates perspectives expressed by kindergarten educators regarding tensions arising from competing perspectives on beginning reading instruction in the fall of 2023 and winter of 2024. The study utilizes a design-based research methodology, specifically the first core phase of analysis and exploration (McKenney & Reeves, 2021). The following section will briefly describe theoretical perspectives and related literature guiding this study.

Theoretical Perspectives

Sociocultural theory understands that learning and literacy development are grounded in the social practices and cultural contexts of the learners (Davidson, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory aligns well with design-based research in education, as the researcher is positioned as a collaborator and facilitator with the participants. The context for this research, within school settings and educator teams, focuses on the social construction of learning.

Socially constructed learning, which can be seen as inherent in play-based approaches, is reflected in the position statement of the *Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada* [LLRC] (2023), which positions children as active learners, who “succeed when they are actively engaged within a responsive and inclusive literacy learning environment” (LLRC, 2023). Play-based approaches reflect a broad understanding of literacy that incorporates “the multiple ways in which people make meaning and use language for a range of purposes” (LLRC, 2023). Practices that reflect this broad understanding of literacy can be seen, for example, in the description of how educators respond to “the many *languages* children use to communicate” (OME, 2016, p.73) and an acknowledgement that thinking about literacy “in the broadest possible way is therefore critical to helping children develop their ability to understand and communicate” (OME, 2016, p. 64). Children are expected to “demonstrate literacy behaviours that enable beginning readers to make sense of a variety of texts” (OME, 2016, OE9). Educators are encouraged to challenge, respond to, and extend the learning as they observe their students in play (OME, 2016).

Balanced/comprehensive literacy approaches, grounded in sociocultural theory and social constructivist approaches (Vygotsky, 1978), should be, according to the OHRC, replaced by what they label as *structured literacy*, given that “*structured literacy* is the most effective way to teach early reading” (OHRC, 2022, p.24). The *Right to Read Inquiry Report* criticizes sociocultural learning theories, on which the current Ontario kindergarten program is based, suggesting that teachers do not have access to current research and do not use effective approaches to teaching reading. This report calls for revisions to the *Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) to include “systematic and direct instruction in foundational word-reading skills” (OHRC, 2022, p. 223).

Related Literature

Teacher Self-Efficacy for Literacy Instruction

Teacher self-efficacy is defined as the belief in one's ability to guide students to success (Bandura, 1978). Teachers with high self-efficacy tend to believe that they can do what is needed to improve student achievement, while those with low self-efficacy believe that other factors are more impactful on student achievement than the actions of the educator (Hattie, 2012). Teacher self-efficacy has been shown to be an important component for improving student learning (Bandura, 1997; Hattie, 2012). In a synthesis of research on self-efficacy, Zee and Koomen (2016) noted evidence of positive links among student academic achievement, teacher quality, and teacher well-being. They also described that experienced teachers with higher self-efficacy tended to better cope with the daily challenges of their students, provide more diverse instructional strategies, and were able to differentiate their instruction to meet student needs. Self-efficacy could affect how educators manage and respond to challenges and turbulence in the educational environment.

Play and Literacy Learning

Research that focuses on teacher instructional practices and literacy learning in kindergarten classrooms (Pyle et al., 2018) has sought to explore the tension educators feel between developmentally appropriate approaches and the perceived academic demands being placed on them. Kindergarten teachers have indicated they are struggling with the play-based curriculum and with how to embed literacy learning into play (Forgie et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2018).

Play-based kindergarten programs, such as the framework used in Ontario, require educators to rethink their instructional practices and the pedagogies used in their classrooms to be “child-centred, developmentally appropriate, integrated program[s] of learning” (1.1, OME, 2016) that embody learning through play. The value of play in learning for young children has been recognized for many years (Peterson & Friedrich, 2022; Roskos & Christie, 2007), as it is through play that children make sense of their world (Clinton, 2013).

While there are different types of play conceptualized in the literature, guided play seems to provide optimal opportunities for the building of academic skills due to the amount of educator scaffolding present (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Play encourages oral language use, builds vocabulary, promotes early reading and writing behaviours, and introduces text and other literacy-related resources into the classroom environment (e.g., Peterson & Friedrich, 2022). Rowe and colleagues (2024) note that providing opportunities for children to compose and write their own messages with adult scaffolding is important for building literacy skills such as the alphabetic principle. When children are allowed to participate in a variety of writing opportunities, it not only builds their literacy skills but also their agency (Dyson, 2020) – something that is often not present in more scripted programs. We are also reminded (Klein et al., 2023; Wyse & Hacking, 2024) of the affordances offered when oral language, writing, and reading are connected, not only for children who struggle with reading and writing, but for all young learners. Portier and colleagues (2019) outline play-literacy connections and call for research that examines ways that educators can “emphasize academics while maximizing play.” (p.18)

This study utilizes research literature related to play-based learning and literacy as the lens through which to consider participant responses. The following section will describe the design of the research study.

Methodology

This study utilized the first core phase (*analysis and exploration*) of design-based research (DBR) (McKenney & Reeves, 2021). DBR provides a framework to engage in translation science (Ivey, 2020) and allows for a shift from educational research being merely a move from theory to practice, to a model that “emphasizes the interconnections between research and practice rather than the gap between them” (Snow, 2015, p. 460). DBR positions participants as collaborators with the researcher (Jacobsen, 2014) and is situated within complex and authentic learning environments such as classrooms. During the first core phase, researchers collaborate with participants through fieldwork, and related literature is reviewed to better understand the issues related to the area of study (McKenney & Reeves, 2021). Then, the interview responses inform and guide the design of the second phase (*design and collaboration*).

A modest sample of 10 kindergarten educator participants (designated early childhood educators [DECE n=3]; Ontario certified teachers [OCT n=7]) from two schools within a large, suburban public-school board participated in semi-structured interviews that explored their perceptions and experiences of teaching reading in play-based kindergarten classrooms. The questions promoted recall of types of learning opportunities available in the classroom, what the educators found challenging, and their perceptions on the changes being introduced in their school board.

Participants

The participants work in a large, suburban public Ontario school board, where kindergartens are staffed by a team of educators consisting of one designated early childhood educator (DECE) and one certified teacher (OCT) as per *Full Day Early Learning Statute Law Amendment Act 264.1* (Government of Ontario, 2010). The school board is comprised of a diverse student population, including new immigrants and multilingual learners. Educators who participated in the interviews were recruited through purposeful sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). School sites with more than two kindergarten classrooms were identified and administrative support was requested. Once school sites were identified, the kindergarten educators were invited to participate via email. Educators gave their active consent. Four participants were experienced Ontario certified teachers in permanent positions, three participants were Ontario certified teachers in long-term occasional contracts, and three participants were designated early childhood educators with prior experience in kindergarten. All participants identified as female, and two of the ten participants were from underrepresented groups.

Data collection

Data sources include responses to 5 of 20 questions in semi-structured interviews conducted at two points of the year. The first interviews took place between July and

September 2023 (T1). The questions were thematically informed by concepts evident in literature and included the following questions relevant to this paper:

1. What are you finding challenging as you teach your students to read and write in a play-based program?
2. Consider the following settings (i.e., direct instruction, guided play, free play) that might be part of your students' learning day. Is there one type that you feel is more challenging than the others for teaching reading and writing?
3. What is your next step for professional learning?

The second interviews took place in the winter of 2024 (T2). In the time between interviews there were several changes to the expectations for beginning reading instruction for the educators in this school board. The following questions relevant to this study were as follows:

1. Can you comment on your level of confidence for teaching your students to read?
2. Since we spoke in the fall, there have been changes for kindergarten educators. Please share your thoughts about the changes you are noticing/have experienced, if any.

Interviews were conducted over the university Microsoft (MS) Teams platform. Interviews were recorded digitally within MS Teams and an automatic transcription was created. Transcriptions were member checked (Bakker, 2019). Identifying information was anonymized in the transcriptions and all educators were given pseudonyms. All recordings were viewed by the researcher to check the auto-transcribed documentation.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were inductively coded (Charmaz, 2014) using five colours to represent dominant ideas and concepts. These were then clustered into codes (Saldana, 2016). The researcher and an assistant then used focused coding (van den Hoonaard, 2019) to find specific quotes related to each of the dominant ideas. Three themes emerged in response to the search for challenges and tensions currently experienced by educators. These themes will be elucidated to offer descriptions of what perceived tensions kindergarten educators are currently navigating related to approaches for literacy learning in their play-based programs.

Observations

Through semi-structured interviews, educators shared observations about their literacy instructional practices and how they have been influenced by the following: changing messages from school board leaders, a lack of clarity regarding direction, and the imposed introduction of mandated prescriptive literacy programs.

What is happening to play-based learning? Changing messages from school board leaders

During initial interviews (T1), educators shared that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, most messaging from school board leaders was focused on play-based learning – how to enrich learning environments for children, and ways to embed literacy learning opportunities only as they emerged through play. This approach included

the view of the learner as active and encouraged educators to create responsive literacy learning environments, like those recommended by the LLRC Position Statement (2023). Inherent in this approach was an understanding of the uniqueness of each child and the adoption of a “comprehensive approach to the teaching of literacy and learning in the classroom” (LLRC, 2023). A common message at this time was, “Why this learning for this child at this time” (Author recollection), which embodied the intent of the *Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) and a sociocultural approach to language and literacy instruction. It also illustrates alignment with literature that has elucidated how play supports reading development (Rand & Morrow, 2021; Skene et al., 2022).

Participants commented that they have noticed a shift in professional learning opportunities over the past two years to a focus on phonological awareness and phonics instruction, and the assessment of discrete literacy skills for kindergarten educators. One participant, Beatriz, commented, “The pendulum was swinging more towards play-based learning and no worksheets, no pen to paper. But now I feel it’s swinging back” (July, 2023). Charlene echoed Beatriz’s observation, noting, “The pendulum is now swinging back from a full play environment to more of a push towards having small group instruction” (July, 2023). Erica mentioned she felt that “...especially with the *Right to Read Report* and the *Science of Reading* is a push to really influence us to make sure that reading and writing is at the forefront of everything we do” (September 2023). Ingrid, a new teacher, reflecting at the beginning of the 2023-24 school year said, “We’re having circle three times a day, we’re having direct instruction three times a day” (September 2023). This shift away from sociocultural perspectives on language and literacy learning to transmission focused approaches aligns with recent messaging from new policy and curriculum documents (OME, 2022a, 2022b, 2023, 2024) advocating for direct, systematic, and explicit instruction in literacy and a focus on discrete, code-focused skills.

Educators commented on how they are being encouraged to use instructional approaches, such as direct instruction, that only a few years prior were discouraged. At the beginning of the project, they were quite enthusiastic in exploring how more intentional learning opportunities might benefit the diverse students in their classes.

Some educators were positive and welcomed this shift to more intentional and direct instruction, such as Jasmine, who felt quite strongly that free play was not helpful for building literacy skills in her students. She commented, “I think that once you give them the literacy tools they need, it can extend their play, so play gives them a place to practice those skills you’re teaching them with direct instruction” (September 2023). Hannah also noted that she found that during the period with COVID-19 restrictions on classroom practices she found that her students progressed when they had some direct and explicit instruction. She added, “The way I see play-based learning is more of reinforcing” (September 2023). Both educators seem to echo the perspective of participants in a study by Pyle & Daniels (2016) that described how some participants in their study viewed play and learning as separate constructs.

While all participants were open and willing to explore ways to bring more direct instruction into their classrooms, it is clear by their comments that they perceived that they were being asked to abandon play-based learning for at least some parts of their program, including how they taught beginning readers.

Wait! What?: Lack of clarity regarding direction

Since the release of the OHRC *Right to Read* report (OHRC, 2022), there has been a shift in what is expected related to early reading instruction. One policy (OME, 2022c) stated curriculum revisions would “modernize the way reading is taught and assessed in schools, with a focus on phonics” (p.2) and that curriculum would be revised to include approaches that “emphasize direct, explicit and systematic instruction.” (p.2) This memo also indicated that the Ontario Ministry of Education would be removing what was deemed “unscientific discovery and inquiry-based learning, including the three-cueing system.” (p.2)

While this messaging seems clear, the way it has been received by front-line educators has resulted in confusion. Educators have been left, to some extent, to wonder how they must change instructional practices. The participants in this study expressed how this lack of clarity was impacting their daily experience. Diya noted, “There have been a lot of changes, almost every year. I’ve been using *Literacy Place* (Scholastic, 2006) for years and we were told to move away from it. I didn’t really get a reason. We were told to move away from both *Literacy Place* and *LLI* [Leveled Literacy Intervention]” (Fountas and Pinnell, 2009) (September 2023). The resources mentioned, *Literacy Place* and *LLI*, are both grounded in a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction and are perhaps concerning to some due to a perceived link to what the Ontario Ministry of Education called, “unscientific discovery and inquiry-based learning, including the three-cueing system” (OME, 2022c, p.2).

Jasmine, who expressed her support of a shift to more direct instruction, also felt a lack of clarity. “Last year, [school board personnel] were looking at the University of Florida phonics manual (Ventris Learning, 2022) and so they were encouraging us to buy it...now they told me no, no, no. We’re not going that way” (September 2023). Another participant, Erica, commented on the shifting ground she felt they were on; “We were just informed by our principal two days ago that we’re no longer using the resource we were introduced to just last year,” (September 2023). The timing of these changes was challenging as they were occurring after the school year had begun. This lack of clarity left the educators feeling unsure of what to do. Participants were trying to make changes in their practice to align more with the new policy direction, such as that communicated by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2022b, 2022c), but school board communication was lagging and did not provide the clarity these educators felt they needed.

When am I supposed to learn how to use this?: Introduction of a mandated, prescriptive program

As participants shared their thoughts concerning the lack of clarity in direction, they heard they were going to be expected to implement a scripted program every day for 30 minutes in their kindergarten classes. Ingrid shared (September 2023) that she had heard that the school board had ordered classroom kits (Wilson, 2022). She said, “We haven’t been trained on them yet, so we can’t use them” (Sept. 2023). Knowing that a new program was on the horizon, but being told not to use it until training had been received was unsettling for the participants. Between May 2023 and March 2024 the educators in this project had been encouraged to use three different types of programs to introduce direct, explicit, and systematic instruction into their programs. During the 2023 school year, they began using a teacher professional resource (Mesmer, 2019) which had been recommended

to them by school board personnel. Some had also been told to use a scripted phonics program (Ventris Learning, 2022) and had begun to use this resource with their students. Fewer than 6 months later, the same educators were told they must use a scripted program (Wilson, 2022), with the expectation that the program would be used for 30 minutes a day with all students through a whole group lesson. These types of programs require adherence to both the script and all components of the lessons. They assume all students need the same amount and type of instruction and, therefore, do not allow educators to respond to individual student needs. Programs such as this one have been noted to limit educator agency (Dyson, 2020). This lack of educator agency could potentially reduce the self-efficacy and confidence levels of educators, and impact their well-being, as noted by Zee and Koomen (2016).

Interestingly, the school board adoption of a scripted program for kindergarten classes seemed to be at odds even with the OME messaging in the *Effective Early Reading Instruction* (2022b) guide, which states,

The educator team provides various materials to spark further curiosity and create a supportive environment for using language throughout the learning areas in the classroom. The educator team also provides explicit instruction when it is most likely to move a child, or a group of children forward in their learning. The team considers the level of support a child or a group of children requires and then finds an appropriate context in which to deliver the support (p.12).

The OME seems to be advocating for explicit instruction in a responsive way that acknowledges that students are not all ready for the same learning at the same time, whereas the scripted program adopted by the school board is meant to be taught to the entire class, at the same time, with the same lesson for 30 minutes each day.

The introduction of the scripted program pushed some of the participants past their comfort level, with some expressing frustration and feeling overwhelmed. The program had been delivered to their school but only one person had been given any professional learning associated with it, and all were now expected to be using the program. Hannah, an experienced educator, commented, “With all the new initiatives in literacy it should be a priority to train staff appropriately” (September 2023). Even Jasmine, who had indicated her support for more direct instruction, commented, “I like to follow something. Not saying that I want a script or anything like that, but I like some sort of guidance and I found it in the Mesmer (2019) book” (September 2023). Jasmine was not thrilled with the introduction of yet another program – yet another new resource, accompanied by the expectation that she would quickly stop using the resource with which she had just started feeling confident. Overall, the tensions expressed by these educators align with findings previously elucidated in literature about the challenges of teaching reading through play (Pyle et al., 2018), and the need for explicit literacy instruction for early literacy learners (Ehri, 2020; Gehsmann & Mesmer, 2023). Educators were frustrated with these tensions and felt they were being pulled in all directions. They are feeling torn between what was previously recommended for teaching reading (i.e., a comprehensive, responsive, contextual approach that fits well in the play-based learning context) and new messaging that recommends strict adherence to a script – an approach that they perceive requires all students be taught the same information at the same time in the same way.

Recommendations: Navigating tensions through collaboration

Kindergarten classrooms are busy and complex environments. Educators often find it challenging to allocate time to meet and learn together during the myriad responsibilities and tasks for which they are responsible (Learning Forward, 2021). Prioritizing time to collaborate with one another may provide educators with the type of support that will help them to successfully navigate the current challenges while also building their professional knowledge and self-efficacy. School leaders are encouraged to build in time on a regular basis for educator grade teams and/or school staff to meet. Across the country there are districts providing or arranging for grade teams to have a consistent planning time together so that they can meet regularly (Rudderham, 2024). These times are valuable for building knowledge together and offer opportunities to build consistency for the practices that occur across classrooms.

Educators might consider supporting each other by sharing new instructional approaches they are trying out in their classrooms. One potential example of an instructional approach educators might implement would be to bring the direct foundational literacy skill instruction that is being mandated together with student-led, play-based learning opportunities where children write in authentic ways about their experiences during play. This type of writing opportunity might provide students with a variety of ways to make meaning, to compose their own messages, and apply the phonics skills they are learning. These writing experiences also offer educators the chance to try out procedures encouraged by current research (Klein et al., 2023; Rowe et al., 2024). Professional conversations focused on new learning and success in the classroom build both self-efficacy and professional knowledge, providing educators with opportunities to refine their instructional practices. Educators are encouraged to advocate for this type of shared planning time with their administrators, and school leaders are encouraged to support their educators by providing this type of time to connect.

In addition to encouraging educators to advocate for regular time to connect, the opportunity for educators to collaborate with a university researcher affords unique potential. Educator teams can collaborate with researchers, who have access to literature and opportunities often inaccessible to school board staff. These types of collaborative partnerships, like those envisioned through DBR research contexts, provide opportunities for educators to ask questions, and to seek clarification for issues that are important to them. Collaborative opportunities do tend to be challenging to arrange, as the organizations responsible for giving approval can have complex processes in place and school boards might be concerned with ensuring their educators are following curricular guidance. Providing an easier path for research approval would offer rich learning for both educators and researchers.

The tensions for kindergarten educators across the country are multifaceted. Educators are navigating changes in curriculum and policy direction from provincial ministries of education. They are responding to criticism related to the evidence supporting literacy learning through play-based learning in favour of direct, explicit instruction. In a time when public kindergarten educators are welcoming children born during the pandemic, with their own unique strengths and needs, it is essential that the pedagogical practices draw on a broad understanding of literacy that incorporates “the multiple ways in which people make meaning and use language for a range of purposes” (LLRC, 2023).

Conversely, scripted programs are being introduced and mandated with the expectation that all children receive the same type and amount of direct instruction regardless of their needs. Opportunities to “foster collaboration” between educators and university researchers (LLRC, 2023) can provide a way forward in this challenging time.

References

- Bakker, A. (2019). *Design Research in Education: A Practical Guide for Early Career Researchers*. Routledge.
- Bandura, A. (1978). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Advances in Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 1(4), 139–161. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0146-6402\(78\)90002-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0146-6402(78)90002-4).
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W. W. Freeman.
- Blanch, V. (2023). *New literacy program based on years of research, new French program 'a political experiment'*. Retrieved from CBC News: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/dominic-cardy-literacy-reading-gene-ouellette-mount-allison-new-brunswick-1.6732875>
- Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars : Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19(1), 5–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100618772271>
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage.
- Clinton, J. (2013). The power of positive adult child relationships: Connection is the key. *Think, feel, act: Lessons from research about young children*. Ontario Ministry of Education. <https://files.ontario.ca/edu-think-feel-act-lessons-from-research-about-young-children-en-2021-01-29.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W., & Guetterman, T. C. (2019). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Pearson.
- Cummins, J. (2022). Ontario Human Rights Commission Right to Read Report: Sincere, passionate, flawed. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 16(1), 85-92. <https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v16i1.7279>.
- Davidson, K. (2010). The integration of cognitive and sociocultural theories of literacy development: Why? How? *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 56(3), 246-256. <https://doi.org/10.11575/ajer.v56i3.55409>
- Dyson, A. H. (2020). “This isn’t my real writing”: The fate of children’s agency in too-tight curricula. *Theory into Practice*, 59(2), 119–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1702390>
- Ehri, L. C. (2020). The science of learning to read words: A case for systematic phonics instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55(S1), S45–S60. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.334>
- Forgie, J. C., Hu, J., & Boccalon, M. (2022). Pre-service and in-service early childhood educators' self-efficacy and knowledge for early literacy. *Cogent Education*, 9, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2151246>
- Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2009). *Leveled Literacy Intervention*. Heinemann.
- Gehsmann, K. M., & Mesmer, H. A. (2023). The alphabetic principle and concept of word in text: Two priorities for learners in the emergent stage of literacy

- development. *The Reading Teacher*, 77(2), 156–166.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2225>
- Government of Ontario. (2010). *Full Day Early Learning Statute Law Amendment Act, 2010*.
<https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/s10010#:~:text=Section%2016%20of%20the%20Bill,of%20junior%20kindergarten%20and%20kindergarten>.
- Hanford, E. (2019). *At a loss for words: How a flawed idea is teaching millions of kids to be poor readers*. Retrieved from APR reports:
<https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/08/22/whats-wrong-how-schools-teach-reading>
- Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers. Maximizing impact on learning*. Routledge.
- International Dyslexia Association. (2018). *Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading*. <https://dyslexiaida.org/knowledge-and-practices/>
- International Literacy Association. (2020). *The science of reading: Supports, critiques, and questions: An executive summary of the Reading Research Quarterly special issue*. <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/resource-documents/rrq-sor-executive-summary.pdf>
- Ivey, G. (2020). Design-based research in literacy. In M. H. Mallette, & N. K. Duke, *Literacy research methodologies (Third edition)*. Guilford Publications.
- Jacobsen, M. (2014). Design-based research. *Education Canada*, 54(5), 22-24.
- Klein, A.F., Rogers-Zegarra, N., Kugler, J. (2023). Connected from the start : Oral language, reading, and writing. *The Journal of Reading Recovery*. 23 (1).
- Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (2023). Position statement.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gA8vZciRPIaIhmWzZPPnpae9RQ3WLGs9/view?usp=sharing>
- Learning Forward. (2021). Make time for professional learning. *The Learning Professional*. 42(5), 78-80. <https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/tool-make-time-for-professional-learning.pdf>
- McKenney, S., & Reeves, T. (2021). Graduate students writing design-based research dissertations. In Philippakos, Z. A., Howell, E., & Pellegrino, A. (Eds.). *Design-based research in education: Theory and applications*. (pp.272-295). Guilford.
- Mesmer, H. A. (2019). *Letter lessons and first words: Phonics foundations that work*. Heinemann.
- Messenger, Y., & Gallagher, T.L. (2024). "My most tricky pickle!" Balancing reading instruction in play-based kindergarten: Educator self-efficacy beliefs and pedagogical content knowledge needs. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 18 (1), 39-56. <https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v18i1.8056>
- Moats, L. C. (2020). *Teaching reading is rocket science, 2020: What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do*. <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/moats.pdf>
- Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2022). *Right to Read: Public Inquiry into Human Rights Issues Affecting Students with Reading Disabilities*. Retrieved from Ontario Human Rights Commission: <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/right-to-read-inquiry-report>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2016). *Kindergarten Program*. Ontario Ministry of Education. <https://www.ontario.ca/document/kindergarten-program-2016>

- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2022a). *Kindergarten*. Retrieved from Ministry of Education: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/kindergarten>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2022b). *Effective early reading instruction: A guide for teachers*. Retrieved June 2022, from Ontario Curriculum and Resources: <https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/guide-effective-early-reading>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2022c). *Right to Read Ministry of Education Response*. Retrieved from Ontario Human Rights Commission: <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/sites/default/files/Right%20to%20Read%20Min%20of%20Ed%20%20Response%20ENG.pdf>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2023). Ontario Language Curriculum. King's Printer for Ontario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2024). *Ontario unveils a back-to-basics kindergarten curriculum*. Retrieved from Ontario Ministry of Education website: <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1004097/ontario-unveils-a-back-to-basics-kindergarten-curriculum>
- Peterson, S. S., & Friedrich, N. (2022). *The role of place and play in young children's language and literacy*. University of Toronto Press. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.brocku.ca/10.3138/9781487529239>
- Portier, C., Friedrich, N., & Peterson, S. S. (2019). Play(ful) pedagogical practices for creative collaborative literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 73(1), 17-27. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1795>.
- Pyle, A., & Danniels, E. (2016). A continuum of play-based learning: The role of the teacher in play-based pedagogy and the fear of hijacking play. *Early Education and Development*, 23, 274-289. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1220771>
- Pyle, A., Poliszczuk, D., & Danniels, E. (2018). The challenges of promoting literacy integration within a play-based learning kindergarten program: Teacher perspectives and implementation. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 32(2), 219-233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2017.1416006> .
- Rand, M. K., & Morrow, L. M. (2021). The contribution of play experiences in early literacy: Expanding the science of reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 56(S1), S239–S248. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.383>.
- Roessingh, H. (2021). *New Alberta curriculum would overload young learners when what they need is balance* . Retrieved from UCalgary News: <https://ucalgary.ca/news/new-alberta-curriculum-would-overload-young-learners-when-what-they-need-balance>
- Roskos, K., & Christie, J. F. (2007). *Play and Literacy in Early Childhood: Research from Multiple Perspectives*, 2nd ed. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rowe, D. W., Piestrzynski, L., Hadd, A. R., & Reiter, J. W. (2024). Writing as a path to the alphabetic principle: How preschoolers learn that their own writing represents speech. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 59(1), 32–56. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.526>
- Rudderham, H. (2024). *Province adds an hour to school day for young students*. CBC. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/extra-school-day-hour-next-fall-1.7154960#:~:text=%22Adding%20an%20extra%20hour%20of,D%C3%A9salliers%20said%20in%20the%20email>
- Saldana, J., (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage.

- Scholastic. (2006). Literacy Place. Scholastic.
- Skene, K., O'Farrelly, C. M., Byrne, E. M., Kirby, N., Stevens, E. C., & Ramchandani, P. G. (2022). Can guidance during play enhance children's learning and development in educational contexts? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Development, 93*(4), 1162-1180. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13730>.
- Snow, C. E. (2015). Rigor and realism: Doing educational science in the real world. *Educational Researcher, 44*(9), 460-466. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X15619166>
- Van den Hoonaard, D. (2019). *Qualitative research in action: A Canadian primer*. Oxford University Press.
- Ventris Learning. (2022). UFLi Foundations. Ventris Learning. <https://ufli.education.ufl.edu/foundations/>
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wilson. (2022). Wilson Foundations. Wilson.
- Wyse, D., & Hacking, C. (2024). Decoding, reading and writing: the double helix theory of teaching. *Literacy, 1-11*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12367>
- Zee, M., & Koomen, H. M. (2016). Teacher self-efficacy and its effects on classroom processes, student academic adjustment, and teacher well-being: A synthesis of 40 years of research. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(4), 981-1013. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315626801>

Author Biography

Yvonne Messenger is a Lecturer in the Department of Educational Studies, at Brock University, where she is currently doctoral candidate. Yvonne comes to this role after 30 years of experience as a classroom teacher, a reading interventionist, a literacy coach, and a consultant in public education in Ontario and Nova Scotia. Yvonne's research is focused on supporting kindergarten educators as they seek to refine their instructional practices for teaching reading and writing in play-based kindergarten programs. Yvonne has mentored experienced and pre-service teachers as an AQ instructor, a supervisor at the Brock Learning Lab, and through informal mentorship opportunities with educators across Ontario.