

Position Statement: Literacy Practices in British Columbia's Education System

December 1, 2023

(Revised December 17, 2023)

In keeping with the professional standards of our discipline as described by the National Association of School Psychologists¹ and the requirements of the Code of Conduct of the College of Psychologists of British Columbia,² the British Columbia Association of School Psychologists (BC Association of School Psychologists) supports scientific understandings of development and learning. This includes empirically validated knowledge and models of literacy development, as well as educational practices based on these underpinnings.³ Such understandings, knowledge, models and practices are critical for the prevention, accurate diagnosis and treatment of Specific Learning Disorders (SLD; including dyslexia),⁴ which many school psychologists are concerned with in their practice. Indeed, difficulties with literacy (i.e. reading and writing) are most prevalent among individuals with SLD and such difficulties are often the primary reason students are referred for psychoeducational assessments and learning support services.⁵ Given that the prevention, accurate diagnosis and treatment of SLD hinges on students' opportunities to learn through effective instruction,^{4,5} the BC Association of School Psychologists holds the position that educational practices in British Columbia should align with findings from the large body of multi-disciplinary research about literacy and learning that is scientifically sound and empirically supported.⁶

Drawing on this extensive body of research, which has accumulated over several decades, the BC Association of School Psychologists supports a cohesive structured literacy approach to ensure that all aspects of literacy are developed at the foundational level, including important components of language comprehension and word recognition.⁷ Structured literacy, and the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) model that is required to implement it most effectively, is rooted in scientific knowledge and evidence, and it is effective for students who are developing foundational literacy skills, including those who are neuro-diverse.^{8,9} Structured literacy should be differentiated and tailored to meet individual students' needs, allowing those who have mastered aspects of reading, writing and language to move on, while providing effective instruction at varying levels of intensity for those who need it. When delivered in an MTSS framework, with appropriate screening, progress monitoring and diagnostic assessment to guide instruction, students receive what they need, when they need it, addressing the 2012 Supreme Court of Canada's unanimous landmark decision that identified learning to read as a basic and essential human right.¹⁰

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1. National Association of School Psychologists (2020), Professional Standards <https://www.nasponline.org/standards-and-certification/nasp-2020-professional-standards-adopted>
 2. College of Psychologists of BC (2014), Code of Conduct <https://www.collegeofpsychologists.bc.ca/docs/10.CPBCCodeofConduct.pdf>
 3. Castles, et al (2018), Ending the Reading Wars <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1529100618772271>
 4. Fletcher, J & Miciak, J. (2020), The Critical Role of Instructional Response for Identifying Dyslexia and Other Learning Disabilities <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7560958/>
 5. American Psychiatric Association (2021), What is Specific Learning Disorder <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/specific-learning-disorder/what-is-specific-learning-disorder#:~:text=An%20estimated%20five%20to%2015, struggle%20with%20a%20learning%20disability.&text=An%20estimated%2080%25%20of%20those, affecting%2020%25%20of%20the%20population>
 6. Moats, L. (2020), Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/moats.pdf>
 7. Scarborough, H (2001), Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (Dis)Abilities: Evidence, Theory, and Practice <https://johnbald.typepad.com/files/handbookearlylit.pdf>
 8. St. Martin, K., et al (2020), Intensifying Literacy Instruction: Essential Practices https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/Intensifying_Literacy_Instruction_Essential_Practices.pdf
 9. Spear-Swerling, L (2018), Structured Literacy and Typical Literacy Practices: Understanding Differences to Create Instructional Opportunities <https://www.corelearn.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/structured-literacy-and-typical-literacy-practices.pdf>
 10. Ontario Human Rights Commission (2022), Right to Read Inquiry Report <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/right-to-read-inquiry-report>

A structured literacy approach to teach foundational skills, especially when implemented through MTSS, can also be culturally responsive and effective with students who have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.^{11, 12} Furthermore, it can, and should, be implemented along with the cultural knowledge, values and perspectives of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis students to help address the systemic barriers and racism that persist through the legacy of colonialism and the residential school system.^{13, 14, 15} School psychologists have an obligation to work toward the Calls to Action stemming from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report and supporting equitable educational practices, such as culturally responsive and science-informed literacy approaches, is one way we can move toward this.¹⁶

Conversely, the BC Association of School Psychologists does not support the use or promotion of scientifically disproven models and understandings of literacy development, or the instructional and assessment practices based on them. These include literacy practices that are rooted in whole language theory, such as three-cuing systems to support word recognition and the use of predictable or levelled texts that require novices to practice oral and/or silent reading with grapheme-phoneme (i.e. letter-sound) correspondences that they have not been-explicitly taught.^{9, 17} It also includes the use of classroom and school-wide assessments that do not inform effective instruction and those which are psychometrically unsound (e.g. Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System).¹⁸

In conclusion, the BC Association of School Psychologists recognizes that scientific research related to literacy (i.e. reading, writing and language) is ongoing, and our individual and collective knowledge and practice will vary and continue to evolve as new evidence and information unfolds. With this in mind, this position statement may be revised periodically. We support and encourage our members to develop and maintain their knowledge and use of effective practices, tools and resources that are based on current scientific understandings of literacy development. The BC Association of School Psychologists also encourages its members to share their knowledge of effective, scientifically-sound literacy practices, which includes knowledge of assessment and instruction within an MTSS framework, with others who hold various position in BC's educational system at the school, district and government levels (e.g. participation in policy and curriculum development, professional development and post-secondary pre-service teacher education and appropriate graduate programs). It is through collaborative capacity building and the sharing of knowledge that we can work toward effectively addressing the significant personal and societal consequences that stem from low literacy.¹⁹

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On behalf of the Executive Committee of the British Columbia Association of School Psychologists

11. Cardenas-Hagan, E. (2020). Literacy Foundations for English Learners. Paul H Brookes Publishing Co, Inc.

12. The Reading League Florida (2022) Structured Literacy: An Evidence-Based Approach for English Learners with Dr. Elsa Cardenas-Hagan <https://youtu.be/ybQvX0sTIB8?si=Ob9jXL3Exmx9crlA>

13. Yukon First Nation School Board (2023), First Nation School Board Literacy Strategy 2023-24,

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/629ee33aa097881ba5d44355/t/651e56a254f3bb35ce42cfc8/1696487075198/2324LiteracyStrategy.pdf>

14. Yukon Department of Education (2023), A culturally responsive Yukon literacy strategy and plan: Growing student success For Yukon Education-operated schools <https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/edu/edu-yukon-education-literacy-strategy-2023.pdf>

15. Dyslexia Canada (2023), Spotlight Webinar Series: Barriers, Myths and Successes <https://youtu.be/Dj2R3JDsOHQ?si=3a79Hoc8Wmi23DLi>

16. Canadian Psychological Association & The Psychology Foundation of Canada (2018), Psychology's Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Report https://cpa.ca/docs/File/Task_Forces/TRC%20Task%20Force%20Report_FINAL.pdf

17. Petscher Y., et al. (2020) [How the Science of Reading Informs 21st-Century Education - PMC \(nih.gov\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7111111/)

18. Burns, M. (2023), F & P BAS and LLI Research <https://youtu.be/3LLfMk9eK4?si=8AN1kjlPS644KbJK>

19. Foundations Learning & Skills Saskatchewan. (2021), <https://www.foundationslearning.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/LiteracyFactSheet2021.pdf>