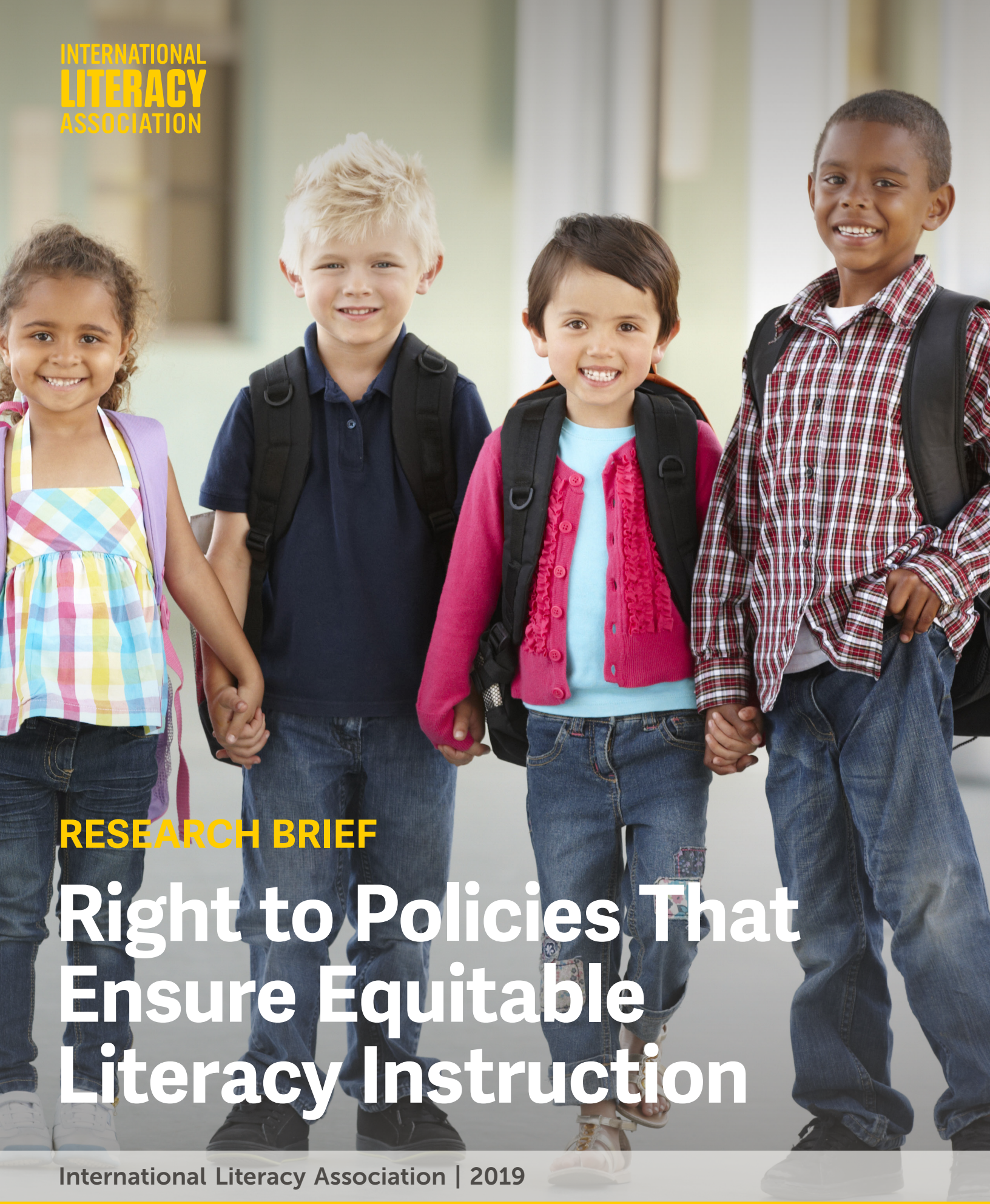
INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION



RESEARCH BRIEF

Right to Policies That Ensure Equitable Literacy Instruction

International Literacy Association | 2019

Children have the right to policies that ensure equitable literacy instruction: Nonacademic barriers to education, such as those that come in the form of poverty, physical health, mental health, and lack of social-emotional competencies, impede a child's ability to learn. Extra financial and educational supports must be provided to the children and families needing it the most, and it is the responsibility of those who develop and enact policy to address these needs. The same can be said for the needs of teachers, who are leaving the profession at an alarming rate because of poor working conditions and lack of ongoing and sustained professional development. In addition to policies that promote retention of teachers, more effort must be made in terms of recruitment, especially where underrepresented teachers of color are concerned. A more diverse workforce yields significant educational benefits, including but not limited to the quality of both teaching and learning. Policymakers should recognize the professionalism and autonomy of teachers to implement curriculum in well-resourced classrooms. Every child, everywhere, benefits from policies that safeguard not only their welfare but also their educational potential.

—Children's Rights to Excellent Literacy Instruction

Policies are typically regarded as the principles, priorities, rules, and/or guidelines that are issued by an organization to achieve, make progress toward, or rally others around certain goals.

Policies may have the following characteristics:

- *Association with government agencies within countries*. South Africa, for example, has a Language in Education Policy as do many other countries where multilingualism is widespread. However, there are many policies advanced by local or international entities.

- *Legal status*. Many policies have a level of legal status that requires adherence to a policy. For example, in the United States, there are requirements by states to follow the state curriculum in teaching and to comply with national laws on civil rights.

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- *Association with resources*. Policies, in many contexts, are associated with the provision of resources in support of implementation. For example, in Canada, international aid is tied to the promotion of girls' education. UNESCO's efforts to promote education for all is associated with resources to achieve the goals of the initiative.

- *Vision*. Policies are advanced in support of a vision for what could be. Sometimes this vision is explicit. Sometimes this vision is expressed and constituent with the features of the

policy. Sometimes the expressed vision is at odds with the features of the policy. The principles put forward by the International Literacy Association in the Children's Rights to Read offer an excellent example of a policy with a clear vision.

Cautions and Consequences

Although policies are typically grounded in good intentions, there are issues that should be attended to in the formation of policies around literacy generally and children's rights to read in particular:

- *Stakes*. As stakes rise around policies, the actions taken can take the path of compliance and not thoughtful adaptation. Stakes can be negative as in the consequences for noncompliance and can be positive as in the awarding of financial support. As stakes rise, following Campbell's Law, the likelihood for corrupting the policy intentions can take hold (Campbell, 1979).

- *Constraints*. Policies can be so explicit that they take away from teachers' professional responsibility to be responsive in their teaching. Policies must create spaces for teachers and other educators to adapt to the contexts for teaching.

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- *Certainty*. Enacting policies around a particular vision or body of research does not make something true. Literacy teaching is complex and requires thoughtful deliberation in particular contexts. Policies should encourage dialogue and research and not try to settle disputes.

- *Assessment*. Assessments have many roles in teaching and education more broadly. Considering that assessments can indirectly create policy is important. International assessments, such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), are shaping policy formation and not designed to assess progress toward goals that have been adopted as policy within an organization.

- *Contradictions*. Literacy policies come from many directions. Seeing policies being promoted that are actually sending mixed messages for what is important to pursue is not unusual.

- *Financial interests*. Money is power and policies that are seemingly about good literacy instruction may be shaped by financial interests. Educational publishers, authors, researchers, and nongovernmental organizations can profit from policies. This is a reality. In examining policies, however, we should be aware of the potential influences that financial interests can have in shaping a vision.

Current Challenges and Opportunities

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Immigration

In the most recent round of international PISA tests, Canada was one of the best performing countries, appearing in the top 10 for mathematics, science, and reading. Top performing countries are often cohesive, compact societies with each part of the education system integrated into an overarching national strategy. Canada, in contrast, offers an education system that is even more decentralized than in the U.S., and it has one of the highest rates of immigration of any country in the world (a third of young adults in Canada are from families where both parents are from another country). Despite this, immigrant children have scored as high as their native peers within three years of arriving, far better than most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations (Center on International Education Benchmarking, n.d.).

According to OECD, this is made possible by the fact that Canada's "big uniting theme is equity." Despite the different policies in individual provinces, there is a common commitment to an equal chance in school with each provincial ministry of education recognizing the importance of maintaining high standards and best practices and using one another as benchmarks when formulating major policy decisions and initiatives.

The focus on equity is delivered in a variety of ways such as expanding early childhood education and care, building a strong base in literacy, and increasing support for at-risk students. Schools, for example, receive additional per-student allocations for a series of demographic indicators of risk (low-income, recent immigrants, low parent education, or single parent status), and decentralization means local governments have full autonomy when making decisions related to resource management. Another distinguishing feature is that Canada's teachers are well paid by international standards, and because of lengthening the training and the practicum period and cutting the slots available, high quality has been achieved and maintained.

Gender Equity

Gender, in particular attention to equity and access in girls' education, has been a major international focus. The global focus on gender equality and empowerment has been explicitly stated in every major framework since 1990 (Education for All Goals, Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals). The primary means of measurement of progress on gender parity in education has been assessed through a comparison of whether there are equal numbers of girls and boys in a population enrolled. Significant progress has been made on this measure.

However, the data on the improvement of the quality of girls' education are far less compelling when access to the curriculum and achievement is considered. Scholars argue that policy initiatives limited to increasing access only have not gone far enough to ensure access to high-quality teaching and learning. These policies have fallen short on addressing the institutionalized sexism that unfolds in the context of schooling. What does it mean to have access to school when there are limits to girls' access to a rich curriculum? The Beyond Access project, a joint policy venture between Oxfam and the Institute of Education, University of London, has developed a gender empowerment measure in education as well as a scorecard that can be used not just as an indicator of "input and output from the educational system, but of women and girls flourishing in and through education" (Unterhalter, 2005, p. 113). Although such efforts suggest a promising path, the success in creating equity in access for girls remains a very real challenge.

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Language Diversity

Language diversity is one of the most contentious areas of work for national governments in shaping educational policy. Language can be a unifying force or it can be divisive. Language in education policies can create or limit access for children to texts and instruction.

For several years, the U.S. has been more focused on a narrow, Eurocentric notion in relation to language policies that have been centered on monolingualism (Wiley & Garcia, 2016). The discourse surrounding monolingualism has positioned multilingualism as a problem rather than a linguistic right (Ruiz, 1984).

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When emergent bilinguals are denied access to multilingualism, the sociopolitical, historical, and sociocultural contexts in which language learning is situated is silenced (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018; Moll, 1992), contributing to the cycle of linguistic oppression that has been prevalent in U.S. public school systems (Wiley & Garcia, 2016). However, several scholars have debunked this notion of "language as a problem" as it maintains linguistic homogeneity and denies students the rights to their native languages, which attempts to erase the visibility of multilingualism in classroom contexts (Pacheco, Morales, & Hamilton, 2019; Wiley & Garcia, 2016).

The Seal of Biliteracy is a language policy (Heineke, Davin, & Davila, 2019) that highlights multilingualism and acknowledges high school students who show proficiency in more than one language by placing a seal on high school diplomas or transcripts (Colomer & Chang-Bacon, 2019; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018). As of October 2019, the Seal of Biliteracy has been adopted by 37 states and the District of Colombia (Seal of Biliteracy, https://sealofbiliteracy.org/steps/). This language policy holds promise toward a national conversation in the U.S. on increased efforts of perceiving multilingualism as an asset in recognizing various benefits that multilingualism affords (Colomer & Chang-Bacon, 2019), in particular when thinking about future employment and higher education, challenging prior deficit discourse on multilingualism that operated to promote monolingual approaches to literacy and achievement with English-only policies (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018). Additionally, the Seal of Biliteracy draws on characteristics previously mentioned, such as a clear vision to provide more equitable spaces for literacy

instruction that addresses the linguistic needs and builds on the language repertoires of all students.

Although the Seal of Biliteracy is not a federally mandated language policy in the U.S., it has been adopted at the state level by several state agencies as a result of advocacy for biliteracy by educators and language advocates (Heineke, Davin, & Bedford, 2018). However, the implementation of the Seal of Biliteracy varies in scope depending on the supporting state department of education or school districts, including assessments, language proficiency requirements, or GPA requirements via world language coursework (Heineke et al., 2018).

Despite the Seal of Biliteracy encouraging multilingualism in academic spaces, scholars have cautioned against issues of equity and access (Palmer, Cervantes-Soon, Dorner, & Heiman, 2019) in regard to disproportionately benefiting white, English-dominant students in rewarding elite bilingualism in "boutique programs" such as dual language bilingual education programs (Flores & García, 2017) and holding language-minoritized students to a higher standard when considering proficiency levels being worthy of the award (Colomer & Chang-Bacon, 2019; Heineke et al., 2019). The Seal of Biliteracy is an initiative in the direction of providing *all* students with the rights to read that builds upon their linguistic repertoires, but we must caution against doing so at the expense of our minoritized populations with the idea of bilingualism as a commodification for those whose language already holds power in the dominant society (Valdés, 1997).

Making the Road by Walking

Declarations such as the Children's Rights to Read are born out of frustration with the status quo. These declarations offer a vision that requires us to act toward our best selves in the context of uncertainty and even resistance. The conversations between Miles Horton and Paolo Freire captured in *We Make the Road by Walking* remind us that the struggles for significant educational change will be difficult and will take time as we encounter all manners of obstacles along the way. Access and engagement with literacy and education stand at the very top of our goals for equity in a reenvisioned world. Our only option is to take small steps forward using and reshaping policies as we grow in our understanding of policies as tools for disrupting the present and opening to possible futures.

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This research brief expands on the fourth of four tenets that compose the International Literacy Association's *Children's Rights to Excellent Literacy Instruction* position statement: rightstoread.org/statement

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This research brief is available in PDF form for free download through the International Literacy Association's website: literacyworldwide.org/statements and rightstoread.org/statement.

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 146 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy,* and *Reading Research Quarterly,* which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.

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