

# Understanding Policy for Newcomer Canadians with Emerging Print Literacy in Ontario Schools

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*Abstract:* Canada continues to be a nation of immigration where newcomer children arrive with a wide range of schooling and literacy backgrounds. This article explores the discourses of two Ontario Ministry of Education documents pertaining to students who are new to Canada and may have emerging print literacy in any language: “*Supporting English Language Learners with Limited Prior Schooling – A practical guide for Ontario educators Grades 3 – 12*” (2008) and “*Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12*” (2007). Through an analysis that incorporates multiliteracies and cultural capital, the documents were analyzed for how they framed the students, how they encouraged the incorporation of students’ language repertoire, and how they discuss racism. The themes that arose from this analysis included discourses of adherence to national languages, use of students’ home languages as educational supports in the classroom, omission of any discussion of race, and Canada as the saving nation.

*Keywords:* Language Policy, Refugees, Discourses, Print Literacy, Plurilingual, Caribbean Students

## Introduction

What does it mean to enter a new country and have to learn how to read and write for the first time in a context that is foreign to one’s own experiences? Within the last number of years, there has been a greater influx of refugee students into Canadian schools (Brewer, 2016). Some of these students may have extensive experiences with formal schooling whereas other may have emerging print literacy practices in any language in that the students are learning to read and write for the first time. On the other hand, English speaking newcomers from the Caribbean with emerging print literacy are also present in schools (Linley, 2009; Nero & Ahmad, 2014; Stewart-Reid, 2013; Winer, 2012). All these students have a right to be educated in a way that respects the individual’s previous language and literacy experiences and future learning.

Much research has already looked into the policy that governs the experiences of students in publically funded schools who are from language-minoritized communities (Flores & Chaparro, 2018; Johnson, 2009) and some research has looked at policy for refugee students. For example, in the area of refugee policy in Canada, Brewer (2016), using an asset-based approach, has developed an outline for including refugees in Canadian educational policy, where she examines best practices and challenges. She proposes themes such as distinguishing refugees from immigrants, promoting academic success, recognizing identity issues and power imbalance, as well as considerations for the individual level. Another large-scale international study in the UK (Rutter, 2006) analyzed 43 local education authorities’ policy documents and refugee support teacher interviews, found that 76% of the literature on refugees involved trauma. Matthews (2008) used a critical approach to policy analysis for refugees in Australia as well as examined how there is a dominance of use of psychological approaches and a reliance on community support, arguing instead for good teaching practice and whole school approaches. However, less is known about policy for newcomers with emerging print literacy. My research addresses this gap and adds a new perspective to this literature, focusing on the analysis of policy for newcomers with emerging print literacy and adds to earlier research on language and refugee policy. Understanding the policy that governs the education of newcomers with emerging print literacy is imperative, especially as the number of refugee and immigrant students in Canadian schools continues to increase.

As a teacher for over ten years working with newcomers in elementary schools, I have worked closely with a range of linguistically diverse students. Some students have had extensive formal schooling and arrive with print literacy practices in more than one language, whereas others arrived in Canada with beyond the primary years English-speaking proficiency and emerging print literacy practices. In my experience as a teacher, many of these latter newcomers were racialized students from the Caribbean. In Ahmed’s (2002) terms, “racialization involves a process of investing skin colour with meaning, such that ‘black’ and ‘white’ come to function, not as descriptions of skin colour, but as racial identities” (p. 10). This paper is concerned with the policy governing the education of newcomer students in Ontario schools with emerging print literacy regardless of the language they speak. The purpose of this paper is to understand how the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) leads teachers in understanding such students by examining the discourses present in official publications including policies and guidelines. In order to better understand the beliefs, attitudes and ideologies that are dominating policy that governs students’ experiences in schools, this article aims to examine the discourses in two OME documents. These provincial

documents, which govern the local Ontario context, outline the regulations, procedures, and guidelines for schools and teachers working with this group of newcomer students: *Supporting English Language Learners with Limited Prior Schooling – A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators, Grades 3 – 12* (i.e., the guidelines; OME, 2008) and *Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (i.e., the policy; OME, 2007).

Within the field of qualitative research, my study takes a critical point of view that incorporates Bourdieusian ideas of cultural capital and multiliteracies for my theoretical framework. I will generate an explanation with conditions out of my data that explains how the OME documents construct the reality of teaching students with emerging print literacy (Creswell, 2009). I will look beyond the surface in order to understand the discourses influencing and guiding the data. This paper aims to answer the following question: What role do discourses on literacy and diversity play in shaping policy for newcomers with emerging print literacy?

## Theoretical Foundations

Pervasive ideologies on language situate plurilingual students, who speak their home language as well as have emerging skills in English or French, within a hierarchy of official languages (García, Kleifgen, & Falachi, 2008; Taylor, Bernhard, Garg, & Cummins, 2008). To better understand this hierarchy, my article combines the work of Bourdieu on cultural capital with the New London Group's work on multiliteracies as its theoretical framework. Bourdieu (1986) writes that cultural capital can be understood as an embodied state where capital is linked to the body. Capital becomes "an integral part of the person" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 18). Cultural capital as symbolic capital then gets confused with competence. Examining how language becomes the embodiment of capital, Bourdieu (2001) tells us that dominant or official languages suppress the languages of the less powerful, marginalizing their cultures and experiences. Moreover, the demarcation of the official language of the nation increases the cultural capital of the speakers of that language thereby marginalizing the use of all other languages. Within Bourdieu's (2001) notion of cultural capital, the education system becomes a powerful site for the production and reproduction of official discourses. Looking at the development of language in its historical context, with the growth of education, came the growth of official languages and formal modes of speaking and the devaluation of different varieties of speaking. Education performed the role of placing special value on the legitimate use of language. This led to a devaluation of different ways of speaking, which continues in schools today. Consequently, if students do not speak the official language, their cultural capital, their language, is not recognized or used in schools. Kubato and Lin (2009) write that "A theory that is rarely used in analyzing issues of race in second language education is Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field" (p. 11). In this way, this paper recognizes that race is part of second language education and incorporates race into its analysis through Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as embodiment.

The New London Group (1996) created the term multiliteracies to refer to the growing complexity of globalized societies where a number of cultures and languages as well as different text forms and technologies need to be considered when creating an effective literacy program. Multiliteracies is a form of critical literacy that asks teachers to incorporate the cultural and linguistic contexts in which their students live. With multiliteracies, authentic texts are analyzed and understood as meaning makers influenced by world and local discourses. Literacy must reflect the multilingual knowledge that students bring to school. Language learning needs to be understood within social and cultural contexts. Multiliteracies asks us to expand our understanding of traditional literacy to include other forms of communication. Literacy is not just the understanding of text but how that text is presented, constructed, and supported through visuals. Literacy happens in the home, in the workplace, and in cultural and religious practices. It is not just the formal, official language of the school. In general, after examining the New London Group's writings on multiliteracies, Rowsell, Kosnik, and Beck (2008) found that across the body of their writings were many types of literacy variations, including home and local literacies, school-based literacy, informal and vernacular language as well as national, regional, and foreign languages. All types of communication, not just formal writing, are seen as literacies, reaffirming that a student who does not know how to read and write can still be seen as literate. This theoretical framework is used to engage with the policy documents and teachers' discourses as a way of recognizing how their experiences with language and literacy are understood.

## Methodology

Since becoming a public school teacher, I have been curious about the policy and research surrounding the implementation of programming for newcomers who are learning to read and write for the first time. The research presented in this paper employs a qualitative methodology in that it aims to study social and cultural constructions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Specifically, I examine discourses that are present in two government documents using critical discourse analysis. First, the *Supporting English Language Learners with Limited Prior Schooling – A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators, Grades 3 – 12* (OME, 2008) examines typical profiles of newcomers with emerging print literacy, ways to assess these students, appropriate pedagogical approaches, different program delivery models, and ways to support students in transitioning to mainstream classes and secondary programs. This document was chosen for analysis because it was specifically designed to guide teachers in implementing programming for newcomers with emerging print literacy. The next document was chosen for this paper because it outlines the policy for school boards, schools, and teachers working with this group of newcomers. The policy document *English Language Learners ESL and ELD Programs and Services – Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (OME, 2007) outlines definitions and goals for a range of programs as well as a variety of components of the policy and recommended services including developing a school-board-wide plan, reception and orientation, initial assessments, placement, programming, graduation requirements, assessment, evaluation and reporting, involvement in large scale assessment, discontinuation of specialized support, allocation of resources, and teacher qualifications and professional development.

Critical discourse analysis is a methodology that aims to understand the ways that truths are influenced by discourses, such as particular ways of thinking, acting, and speaking. Mills (2004) examines the notions of ideology, discourse, and truth with particular emphasis on the work of Foucault. She writes that power is not simply held by one group or person. Discourse aims to examine how subjects negotiate with power and engage in the construction of their own roles in society. Looking at both Roland Barth's and Michel Foucault's works, Mills (2004) examines how discourses in fact narrow one's vision and work to exclude knowledge or other realities. Discourses can create narratives which can in turn become seen as truths or realities within a specific culture or time and place. These narratives then become seen as natural or common sense. Even though discourses are not necessarily constructed by an individual or group, they often serve to privilege one group over another. Finally, Voithofer and Foley (2007) write that discourses can then work to shape how students and teachers are understood through standards and policies.

Poststructuralism has had an enormous impact on our current understanding of discourse. Within poststructuralists' understanding of discourse, truth and knowledge are always contextual. Researchers such as MacLure (2003) find that discourses "can be thought of . . . as practices for producing meaning, forming subjects and regulating conduct within particular societies and institutions" (p. 175). Power is changeable. It is not held by one group or person. MacLure (2003) takes this even further by stating that power is not always bad, but can, at times, give people agency and can enable them to create change. Like Mills (2004), MacLure finds that discourses can exclude certain ways of thinking and talking. Social order is then created by the "forgetting" of this exclusion. For the purposes of this article, I focus on the discourses that institutions use to define truth and how this definition of truth contributes to ideas, choices and definitions, as understood by Voithofer and Foley (2007). In this way, I will critically examine how the OME documents frame the truth and how this influences what is included or excluded.

The goal of this critical discourse analysis is to incorporate my theoretical considerations for cultural capital and multiliteracies to critique the documents with the following questions: In what ways are the students framed? How do the documents encourage staff to incorporate students' entire language repertoire and prior experiences? How do the documents address racism? A number of themes arose from my analysis of these OME documents, the most prevalent being inclusion of students' languages, omission of race, English varieties, and Canada as a saving nation. The following section will explain these in more detail.

## Findings

The findings from this analysis provide an understanding of OME policy and guidelines for newcomer students with emerging print literacy and how these documents endeavor to create equitable educational experiences.

## Framing an Understanding of the Learners

The OME has created two distinct programs for what they term English language learners (ELLs) and lays out a range of criteria for the inclusion of students in English as a Second Language (ESL) programming and English Literacy Development (ELD) programming (designed for students with emerging print literacy). The policy document outlines two major categories of ELLs: Canadian-born and newcomers from other Countries (OME, 2007, pp. 9-10). The newcomer ELLs include international Visa students; students whose families immigrated to Canada as part of a voluntarily, planned process; and those families whose children arrive as a result of war or other crises in their homeland. Newcomers with print literacy, as noted in the policy documents, can either be voluntary migrants or fleeing war or other crises. In other words, newcomers with emerging print literacy come from highly varied experiences and backgrounds. By highlighting the range of experiences and backgrounds of the students, the OME promotes a multiliteracies discourse in that the students' backgrounds and prior experiences are recognized and taken into consideration when structuring programming for newcomers and all plurilingual students.

Both the ESL and ELD programs outlined by the OME require that a student speak a language that is different than the language of instruction in Ontario schools. Specifically, the definition of the program (ELD) that supports newcomers with emerging print literacy, as found in the guidelines, includes both students whose "first language is other than English or is a variety of English significantly different from that used for instruction in Ontario schools," stating that "students in these programs ... have had limited opportunities to develop language and literacy skills in any language" (OME, 2008, p. 7). I draw attention to this because, first, there is the assumption that if students speak an English that is similar to Ontario's language of instruction than they will have fluent print literacy. Literacy and language may be deeply interconnected but speaking a Creole language is not indicative of a student's experience with print literacy. This privileging of an Ontario school version of English plays into the *vernacular as a problem* discourse outlined by Nero and Ahmad (2014). They find that the students' reading and writing as well as their speaking are often seen as a problem when the student speaks a vernacular or variety of English that is different from the national language. Motha (2014) also draws attention to how language creates hierarchies that privilege certain cultures over others and creates hierarchies of language and language varieties. Whether or not a newcomer knows a version of English that is reflective of our national language should not determine whether or not they are fluent in print literacy. These discourses shape how the students' cultural capital, language specifically, is understood as contributing to choices schools make for a group of newcomer English speakers who are predominantly racialized.

The practical guide to *Supporting ELLs with Limited Prior Schooling* document delves more deeply into understanding who newcomers with emerging print literacy are. It creates profiles for many different types of potential students, describing in detail their prior experiences. There are no typical profiles, as the group of students it addresses is highly diverse. The following is an example of a student who speaks a variety of English:

Nicole, 13, was born in St. George's, Grenada. When she was 6, she moved to a small rural community to live with her grandparents. There, she attended the village school at first, but regularly stayed at home to be with her grandmother, who was in poor health. She did not attend school at all after the age of ten. . . . Now, 13 Nicole has come to join her dad and her new blended family. . . . Nicole speaks the variety of English common in Grenada, and her oral skills are strong. She has a good basic vocabulary base on which to draw during discussions. She understands information that is read to her, however, her independent reading is limited. . . . Nicole was placed in the congregated ELD class at her home school. (OME, 2008, p. 45)

Through the use of these profiles, the document promotes a more holistic view of students where the difficulties they may have experienced in the past are acknowledged and taken into consideration when programming, supporting, and assessing newcomers with emerging print literacy. Cummins et al. (2005) write about prior knowledge stating that it is not only a matter of previous school knowledge, but also "the totality of the experiences that have shaped the learner's identity and cognitive functioning" (p. 38). Everything that makes up the past experiences of a student needs to be valued by the school including out-of-school spaces. The use of the profiles and the discussion of the students' prior experiences are important tools in framing how teachers view and work with students promoting a multiliteracies approach to teaching.

With a multiliteracies approach to understanding literacy, the OME may consider finding a way to further recognize students' Englishes as assets to schools. Winer's (2012) research has found that students from the Caribbean often resent being seen as non-English speakers and being placed in ESL programs. On the other hand, research with Caribbean students in Canada has already found that students with lower reading levels are more likely to drop-out (Anisef, Brown, Phythian, Sweet, & Walters, 2010). Building on Anisef et al.'s research, my concern is that without recognizing that the students may need pedagogical approaches that address their unique experiences, they may be over-identified as Special Education or drop-out of school. With these competing ideas, as a teacher, I have found that it becomes a challenge to educate students with pedagogical approaches and program modifications that may require a label of ELL while at the same time following Winer's (2012) research this label may cause resentment from English speaking students. Building more ideas and strategies that are specific to English speakers, addressing racism, and removing the ELL label would support the broadening of the discourses found in the documents.

### **Building Bridges Through Language**

The inclusion of the students' languages and prior experiences is a central theme to the OME documents. The guidelines (OME, 2008) begins with a quotation by Eugene Garcia: "we must start with their culture ... for they are rich assets. As teachers, we enter their world in order to aid them and to build bridges between two cultures" (p. 5). The knowledge and experiences of the newcomer with emerging print literacy not only needs to be valued but also must contribute to the learning of the class. Cummins et al. (2005) find that knowledge is not just information or skills attained through schooling. Hence, literacy becomes a social and political act that is learned through our daily activities and experiences. They believe literacy is how we choose and learn to understand the world in which we live. In these ways by beginning with this quotation there is a recognition of students' cultural capital and the inclusion of the students' entire language repertoire. However, neither of the documents say much about the student's race. Kubato and Lin (2009) critique second-language research as not having delved into race. They write that race and language are a part of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. Following a Bourdieusian notion of cultural capital as embodiment, the discourses in these documents are narrowed to those found in second language research where race is ignored.

The use of students' entire language repertoire in the classroom is a pervasive theme throughout both the policy document and the guide to *Supporting ELLs with Limited Prior Schooling*. For example, the guidelines document (OME, 2008) states "Students whose language and culture are valued gain confidence in their abilities to succeed in learning" (p. 12) and then later lists "opportunities to maintain and use first language as a bridge to new learning" (p. 13) as a broad-based strategy. This aligns with the work of Naidoo (2009) who found students' experiences to be an important asset in the *Top of the Class* program for refugees in Australia. Another suggestion is that students' entire language repertoire can be used in activities such as "a dual-language book on the computer" (OME, 2008, p. 27). As a new teacher coming from a background in teaching English as a foreign language in international contexts where an English-only philosophy was often promoted, the OME's leadership on the incorporation of all of students' languages in the classroom would have aided me in becoming a better teacher for plurilingual learners in my early years as an educator. The use of students' home languages is reinforced by existing literature that finds that students' literacy skills outside of school need to become an integral part of students' literacy experiences in schools (Rowell et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2008). In these ways, the OME policy documents reflect a discourse of inclusion of students' entire repertoire promoting a way of teaching that values students' linguistic capital through a multiliteracies approach.

Despite this multiliteracies approach suggested in the guidelines and policy documents, the responsibility of developing home language usage falls on the family. In Ontario, the main languages of instruction in schools continue to be English and French, with other home languages being used as a strategy to support English or French language learning, not as languages to be developed themselves (OME, 2007). Freeman and Freeman (2002) have found that it is ideal for students to first attain literacy in their home language before learning English. Despite this, Dachyshyn (2008) writes that Canadian schools offer little support for the retention of home languages and cultures. Students' home languages are positioned as secondary to Canada's official languages. For example, access to bilingual schools in many students' home languages is not mentioned in either the policy or guidelines despite empirical evidence to its benefits (Cummins, 2014). Even though discourses are not necessarily constructed by an individual or group, they often serve to privilege one group over another (Mills, 2004). Here we can see Bourdieu's (2001) notion of how the official language reproduces hegemony: the student who does not speak English or French

as their first language must conform to Canada's official language policy and does not have the same access to resources in their home language, devaluing their embodied cultural capital.

### Canada as the Saving Nation

One group of students that is often seen as traumatized are those labeled as refugees. The Canadian government defines the term refugee as "people who have fled their countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution. They are not able to return home. They have seen or experienced many horrors" (Government of Canada, 2017, para. 1). However, *refugee* is a bureaucratic term created to explain why a person has moved to a new country and not a comment on who a person. Rutter (2006) tells us that "The hegemonic construction of the refugee child assumes homogeneity, yet the refugee children that I met came from many different countries and had very different pre-migration and post-migration experiences" (p. 5). Refugee students are a diverse group of people with varying academic aspirations and needs (Shakya et al., 2010). Kovinthan (2016) found in her own personal reflective practice as a teacher that there is a lack of understanding of who refugees are and negative attitudes towards refugees held by educators in general, stating that a "nuanced perspective on diversity and multiculturalism" (p. 152) is needed. The policy document (OME, 2007) uses the label of limited or inconsistent access to schooling to describe

children who have arrived in Canada as a result of a war or other crisis in their home country, and who may have left their homeland under conditions of extreme urgency. These children have often suffered traumatic experiences, and may also be separated from family members. They may have been in transit for a number of years, or may not have had access to formal education in their home country or while in transit. (p. 9)

Without a nuanced perspective on students, this idea of trauma is then seen as a fact associated with a student with emerging print literacy. Such discourses ignore other aspects of how students embody their cultural capital, impacting how they are understood and the choices schools make.

Another discourse present in the OME guidelines has to do with helping others. When analyzing the discourses present in the participants in a study on student diversity in Canada, Connelly (2008) writes that "often educators' language around naming difference in these interviews falls into a language of 'helping others,' or the binary opposition of 'us and them' articulated in static term" (pp. 168 – 169). Moreover, Kovinthan (2016) found that well-meaning teachers often take a surface level approach in helping war-affected youth without getting to know them, which further pushes the students to assimilate into Canadian culture. In the guidelines for supporting students in ELD programs this helping discourse is quite prevalent. Students are characterized as having "unresolved asylum claims, financial hardships, limited facility with English, outstanding health issues" (p. 8), describing "the isolation and the newness of their lives in Ontario present[ing] daily challenges. . . . They require many supports to rebuild their lives" (OME, 2008, p. 8). While it is important for teachers to know about the difficulties their students may be experiencing, this way of speaking reflects "us" versus "them" discourses discussed by Connelly in that the us—Canadian society, schools, and teachers—must help them—the foreign student—to find safety, adjustment, and, ultimately, success. My concern in this paper centers on a question: Is it possible for us to work with children and teach in a way that is equitable and responsive to their learning needs without having to feel that we are saving them? This binary opposition presents a discourse that contributes to a narrowed understanding of the embodiment of refugee students' cultural capital.

Moreover, in the OME (2008) guidelines words such as "better," "peaceful," and "hopeful" (p. 9) are used to describe Canada; whereas, the home country could include "conflict, unrest, and oppression" (p. 17). In this way the guidelines document "preserves" (Wodkak, 2016, p. 71) the national narrative of Canada as the saving nation. However, it is not surprising that the documents include this discourse because even within the literature on refugees, there is a pre-occupation with trauma (Matthews, 2008). Although this research is important within the field of psychology (Agic, Mackenzie, & Antwi, 2016) within education this over focus on trauma adds to the discourse of the refugee as the "other," who is a problem, as opposed to looking at systemic issues of exclusion: "Preoccupations with therapeutic interventions locate issues at an individual level and overlook broader dimensions of inequality and disadvantage" (Matthews, 2008, p. 32). One of these inequalities is racism, which is virtually ignored by a policy and set of guidelines designed for predominantly racialized children. This is despite the fact that some refugee students describe experiencing racism (Kaprielian-Churchill & Churchill, 1994; Yau & Toronto Board of Education, 1995), often feel misunderstood by their school administrators and that they are not dealt with fairly (Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, & Newmaster, 2012). This helping of students and construction of Canada as better and

peaceful reflects underlying discourses around a lack of appreciation of the cultural capital the students can bring to the school.

## Conclusions

What does it mean to be constructed as a student who does not know English, is illiterate and traumatized? These are some of the central themes in the OME documents for newcomers in Ontario schools with emerging print literacy. This work has attempted to understand the underlying discourses at play in two OME documents: *Supporting English Language Learners with Limited Prior Schooling – A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators Grades 3 – 12* (OME, 2008) and *Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (OME, 2007). The policy draws attention to the highly diverse backgrounds and educational programming requirements for newcomers and plurilingual students. Current research in second language education (Kubato & Lin, 2009; Motha, 2014) would suggest that the connection between race and language needs to be addressed by the OME. This is true with English speaking students from the Caribbean, in particular, whose languages have a history of being devalued (Nero & Ahmad, 2014). The documents, as well as the extensive research on the experiences of multilingual students in English speaking classrooms, ask that students' home languages become an important part of their schooling experiences. Although these strategies may create a more inclusive environment, they do not reflect the further development of students' languages beyond English and French. Multiliteracies is an approach to literacy instruction that asks that all of students' literacy practices be included in the classroom. Without programming that develops students' home language print literacy, this cannot be achieved. Finally, the guidelines document reproduction of the helping people discourse creates a binary of us versus them, which is not helpful in guiding teachers to create more equitable classrooms that foster a sense of belonging and recognize students' culture. Power is not simply held by one group or person, but is an interaction between people (Mills, 2004). Through this analysis, we can see that students' cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2001) is both valued by the OME documents but also continues to be marginalized by powerful discourses on race, official languages, and helping others.

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