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Children's Inalienable Literacy Education Rights and the Science of Reading

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ABSTRACT

The widely ratified 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) enumerated essential human rights for children, with emphasis on supporting children's humanity and dignity. Schools play a vital role in upholding these rights, and the literacy classroom is a key domain where children should experience and exercise them. However, little scholarship has systematically explored what the CRC means for literacy education. This paper considers how 20th and 21st century literacy education has often fallen short of honoring children's CRC rights and how the currently prevalent science of reading paradigm, although it strongly emphasizes one right (the right to read), offers insufficient guidance to ensure that literacy education is fully rights-affirming. We then discuss 15 literacy education rights drawn directly from CRC rights that, taken together, form a rights-affirming literacy education (RALE) framework. These include provision of support for *literacy development; development of the whole child; rest, leisure, and play; social interaction; family involvement; language and linguistic identity; cultural understanding and connection; imagination and creativity; humanity and citizenship; access to knowledge; freedom of thought and expression; protection from censorship and harmful content; voice and influence; a safe and respectful learning environment;* and *freedom from discrimination.* We discuss potential challenges to realizing RALE and provide an example of how a rights-affirming approach, Philosophy for Children, opens space for fulfilling literacy education rights. We argue that practice, policy, and research in literacy education must become deliberately rights-affirming if it is to honor the CRC's promises to children.

> *I've worked in the field of human rights my whole adult life. I've never seen a more worrying moment.*
>
> (O'Flaherty, Human Rights Commissioner, Council of Europe, in Jochecova 2025)

In the decades following the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948), some expressed optimism that the arc of the moral universe was bending toward justice, in Martin Luther King Jr.'s words (Bettinger-López 2018; Smith 2018). The past few years, however, have tested that optimism. A World Justice Project (2023) report found that human rights declined in 77% of countries relative to 2016. Even longstanding democracies are at risk: some leaders in traditionally centrist countries are rejecting rights norms in ways unprecedented in modern times (Jochecova 2025). For example, the USA is now on a Civicus watchlist of countries experiencing rapid decline in freedoms (Betts 2025). Children are particularly vulnerable: democratic backsliding erodes their political rights (Kahn-Nisser 2025), and a recent Kids Rights Index (Kidsrights 2025) describes a "global children's rights crisis."

Governments worldwide share the blame: many could be doing more to enforce domestic and international accountability. Arguably, however, governments are unlikely to prioritize

human rights absent a citizenry that holds them to account. Also, although large majorities of people across the globe continue to affirm the importance of human rights (Bricker 2024), fissures have come into stark relief. On the political right, some question the legitimacy of human rights (Cliquennois et al. 2024; Quennerstedt 2022). Meanwhile, from the Global South, there are calls for "open rejection of the Western human rights framework" (Guesmi 2023, para. 17) because of perceived ineffectiveness and duplicitousness.

A citizenry prepared to defend human rights—and to thoughtfully critique shortcomings of circulating discourses that highlight them—depends in part upon education that prepares it to recognize and experience human rights, beginning in childhood. Indeed, "children who have the most exposure to the practice of democratic ideals in their classrooms and schools [e.g., discussion opportunities] are the most likely to hold positive human rights attitudes" (Torney-Purta et al. 2008, 876–7). As of now, however, few education systems effectively foster children's awareness of rights (Robinson et al. 2020; Quennerstedt 2022). In Canada, for example, a survey of adolescents found that 44% did not know they had rights (Fraser 2020).

Quennerstedt (2022) suggests that human rights education has had a limited impact because most rights scholarship focuses on legal and sociological questions, not curricular or pedagogical ones. Thus, scholarly recognition that children should be treated as rights holders is frequently misaligned with outcomes mandated by standards and curricula.

One challenge in forging closer alignment is that human rights do not sit inside a discrete content area. Although schools should provide *education about rights* (e.g., Tenenbaum et al. 2022), the UN (United Nations General Assembly 2011) specifies that schools also facilitate *education through rights*, that is, teaching in ways that respect children's (and teachers') rights; as well as *education for rights*, that is, empowering children to exercise rights and uphold others' rights. Conceived thus, rights matter across the school day, not just when they are the topical focus of, say, social studies instruction.

Literacy education, then, shares responsibility for nurturing a rights-conscious citizenry by providing education through and for rights—in addition to being one potential arena for education about rights. Indeed, a key question for our times is whether the literacy education paradigm that has gained the most traction over the past decade, the science of reading (SoR), provides sufficient guidance toward rights-affirming aims.

Within this paper, we first provide an overview of human rights: what they are, their history, and contemporary critiques. We then examine how literacy education since the early 20th century has often failed to support children's rights, noting that although SoR may offer support for the crucial right to learn to read, it provides little direct guidance toward supporting other equally crucial children's rights. We then work from the children's rights guaranteed by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) (UNICEF 1989) to propose a different paradigm, one that enables literacy education *through* and *for* children's rights, calling it *rights-affirming literacy education* (*RALE*). Together, 15 CRC-derived literacy education rights form a framework for advancing systemic change—able to inform not only literacy policies and curricula but also teaching that upholds every child's right to learn with dignity and humanity.

1 | Child Rights in Context

1.1 | Dignity, Human Rights, and Child Rights

Although plumbing various arguments that justify human rights (e.g., Edeji 2025; Frantz et al. 2025) is beyond the scope of this paper, many center on protection of human dignity, a worthy goal, albeit difficult to delineate. van der Rijt (2017) argues that humans not only have *inherent* dignity, which cannot be taken away (and therefore needs no protection); humans also are due *contingent* dignity, which depends on the degree of agency and decision-making power people can exercise in their lives. If one takes away possibilities for agency, decision-making power, or basic quality of life, humans cannot flourish and are stripped of this kind of dignity. Human rights must be defended to assure every person's contingent dignity to which they are entitled by virtue of their inherent dignity.

Children, too, should be assured of human rights. Indeed, because of pervasive *childism*, in part because of assumptions that children lack maturity/judgment, children face prejudices much like other groups who have historically been denied rights (Young-Bruehl 2012). As Bardy (2000) notes, there are three fundamental types of children's rights:

1. Provision: Access to resources and services;
2. Protection: Being shielded from harms; and
3. Participation: Being able to have a say, to do things, and have freedoms.

Taken together, assurances of needed provision, protection, and participation constitute child rights. Indeed, the CRC does not represent a rights smorgasbord from which one is free to pick and choose. As Goodman and Cook (2019) argue, "conferring a right is a big deal, for it is associated with at least three hefty conditions: obligations of fulfillment, recognition of their trump status, and independence of consequences" (p. 72). In the context of children's rights, *obligations of fulfillment* mean communities must create conditions for the right to be upheld. Closely related, *recognition of trump status* means the right must not be superseded by other rules and procedures, even ones seemingly in the child's interest. Finally, *independence of consequences* means that, even when providing the right has negative consequences, it must not be sacrificed. Otherwise, it is not being treated as a right.

1.2 | Human Rights Frameworks Across Time

The Magna Carta (1215), the US Constitution (1787), the US Bill of Rights (1791), and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), were among the first prominent documents that established rights protection frameworks (Australian Human Rights Commission 2012). Subsequent political and social movements (e.g., women's suffrage) yielded

recognition of rights for specific populations within individual countries (Shaeffer 2020). In the aftermath of World War II, a nascent UN put forward the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which advanced a universal discourse surrounding rights to temper state power and supported the creation of mechanisms aimed at reducing violence and suffering (Gassama 2012). Given the horrific abuses of the Holocaust, there was consensus, at least on paper, that "never again" should apply worldwide. Other international rights documents followed, notably including the Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959), which, although nonbinding legally, recognized children as requiring special protections (Edeji 2025).

The CRC itself was codified after a decade of discussion and preparation (Committee on the Rights of the Child n.d.). Unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, it was established to protect children's dignity and well-being, both in the present and for their future. Four principles to support interpretation underpinned its 54 articles, including: (a) non-discrimination (Article 2); (b) best interests of the child (Article 3); (c) the right to life, survival and development (Article 6); and (d) an agentive view of the child (Article 12). Although some enumerated rights overlapped with those assured by the UDHR, some (e.g., right to play, Article 31) were substantively different. Binding under international law (Lundy and Martínez Sainz 2018), the CRC became the most-affirmed international treaty in existence (United Nations 2025). Opponents worried that granting children rights, especially autonomy-related rights, could threaten adult rights (David 2002). Although CRC legal provisions do not support this interpretation, it was a major reason the USA became the only nation refusing ultimately to ratify (Kilbourne 1998; United Nations 2025).

1.3 | Critiques of Human Rights Frameworks

In some ways, the UDHR and CRC have been forward-thinking and aspirational, as much today as in 1948 or 1989. Yet, scholars note that rights language is often used tokenistically and applied selectively, serving state interests and neoliberal individualist socialization rather than offering genuine protection (Colley 2021; Gassama 2012; Raby 2012). The frameworks have also been criticized for embedding Western assumptions about ethics and childhood, and for creating compliance regimes that marginalize local epistemologies and material histories (Melton 2008; Merry 2006; Mutua 2002). The critiques are worth examining.

1.3.1 | Do Rights Failures Require Giving Up on Global Human Rights?

There is little doubt that protection of human rights remains at best inconsistent, often in ways that benefit the more powerful (Gassama 2012). It is important, however, to recognize that rights have also provided real leverage for positive change in people's lives, including children's lives (Lonne et al. 2026). Moreover, human rights failures point to gaps in understanding, commitment, and enforcement, rather than reflecting the merits of rights themselves. Although RALE cannot fix all systemic failures, it offers a concrete way of translating promises of protection, provision, and participation into settings where literacy education takes place.

1.3.2 | Are Human Rights Western and Individualistic?

Some who position themselves against the universality of human rights argue that powerful Western liberal discourses created human rights mythologies to serve their own interests (Gassama 2012). Although these critiques have some merit, other scholars have noted that attention to human rights appears prominently in a variety of traditions worldwide; that the crafting of the UDHR was deeply influenced by Lebanese, Chinese, Chilean, and Indian participants; and that, across the 20th century, less powerful nations meaningfully shaped what came to be known as human rights (Duryea 2022; Sen 2000).

Yet, as Duryea (2022) argues, it is problematic to either dismiss or embrace rights frameworks solely because of their origin stories, or even on a textualist basis, exclusively considering the words they contain. Rather, claims about universality must treat them as living documents, accounting for related social practices in varied local contexts. Duryea's analysis of how rights have been used variously by different actors in Arab states, from Morocco to Palestine, provides evidence "supporting the claim that human rights can be universal, not because rights exist outside of politics or have diverse origins, but because they were constantly reinvented to support a range of different, sometimes contradictory, political goals" (p. 95).

Other evidence suggests that human rights are widely embraced, with one survey indicating that large majorities in all 30 surveyed countries see them as universal, and that the highest levels of agreement (86% or above) were in Latin American countries as well as in Turkey, Indonesia, and South Korea (Bricker 2024). An analysis of internet data found that individuals in the Global South were *more* likely to conduct searches related to human rights than those in the Global North, suggesting a keen interest (Dancy and Fariss 2024). A study of Malaysian and US children's views on specific children's rights also found little basis for the idea that some rights are more "western"; although there was some cultural variation in how children perceived rights, children in both contexts valued autonomy rights, for example (Cherney and Shing 2008).

Education plays an important role in mediating not only whether children experience their rights at all, but also whether they experience them in ways that are locally grounded and historically responsive. Rights can and should be taught and experienced in ways that connect with culture and that question taken-for-granted power structures. As Raby (2012) argues, children's rights are "not inherently subjugating, neo-liberal, middle class or western" (p. 82)—if children have opportunities to adopt collectivist, socially conscious, and/or counter-hegemonic orientations as they embrace and exercise those rights.

In this paper, we take a social practice view on rights in education, considering how the enactment of children's rights can support children in being/becoming empowered rightsholders within literacy classroom contexts globally. We focus on the CRC because of its worldwide support, its documented ability to

catalyze concrete change, and its possibilities as a living document. Adopting a social practice view enables us to use RALE to deliberately integrate CRC insights with those of emancipatory literacy education paradigms, such as critical literacy, translanguaging, and culturally relevant instruction.

That said, we acknowledge the CRC's imperfections, not only because of the neoliberal impulses of some of the crafters but also because of its age and its goal of international consensus. There are internal tensions and gaps, such as no explicit protections for sexual orientation and little concern for economic justice (Byrne and Lundy 2019; Gassama 2012; Quennerstedt et al. 2018). We see these as serious limitations, but not as flaws requiring that children's rights themselves be scrapped. Article 41 indicates that CRC standards should be considered a minimum bar, and later international documents, such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, have elevated additional rights, including collective rights, that are not well-represented in the CRC (Jones and Manion 2023). The international community should continue to wrestle with what humans are owed (Bonacquisti et al. 2018; Theilen 2021), potentially leading to more nuanced recognition of children's dignity across time.

However, openness to refining what constitutes human rights does not mean that new rights can simply be added at whim or suggestion. Keen interest in rights-centric discourses for gaining ethical and legal traction has spawned a proliferation of posited human rights, even including "parents' rights" mantras adopted by extremist groups (Carless 2023). We oppose the adoption of rights without close scrutiny and rigorous discussion. If rights become so elasticized that new rights categories can be glommed onto existing ones uncritically, then rights discourse is flattened: if anything can be a right for anybody, then nothing is a meaningful human right anymore (Clément 2017). International dialogue and consensus-building are imperfect processes, to be sure, but still the best tools available for developing global human rights frameworks that are appropriately expansive, sufficiently vetted, and widely accepted. For this reason, we limit our analysis to only those literacy education rights that can be tied to the deeply considered CRC document, despite its limitations.

2 | Literacy Education and Children's Rights

2.1 | The CRC'S Relevance for Literacy Education

There have been several historical movements toward universal literacy education, such as Charlemagne's push for education of the laity in the 8th century and a post-Reformation emphasis on the need for all to be able to directly read the Bible for themselves among Protestants in Prussia (Becker and Woessmann 2010; Hildebrandt 1965). Yet, with few exceptions, explicitly rights-based language was seldom used in connection with such efforts before the 20th century, when formal human rights frameworks took root. In 1962, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) argued for "the right of any individual not just to read but to read whatever he or she [*sic*] wants to read" (in Fink 2014, para. 3), and US education commissioner Allen proclaimed a "right to read for all" in 1969 (International Literacy Association 2018, 3). By the 21st century, rights languaging had exploded in literacy policy discussions.

Yet, little scholarship bridges classroom literacy with the full CRC rights corpus, which goes well beyond a "right to read." A recent thesis examines the legal basis for positing a right to read from the CRC (Mendes 2024), and several papers highlight children's media literacy rights, individual CRC rights, and techniques for teaching *about* CRC rights respectively (Cannon et al. 2022; Green 2022; Jones and Manion 2023; Kucharczyk and Hanna 2020). We were unable to locate much other scholarship on what the CRC means for literacy education.

We find this gap important to rectify, since skeptics may be unlikely to recognize children as rightsholders in literacy classrooms if those rights are not ones that have been internationally agreed upon (this may be a limitation of literacy rights frameworks such as those proposed by the International Literacy Association [ILA] (2018, 2019)). In point of fact, many aspects of the CRC are relevant to literacy education as we understand it. Table 1 indicates several education-connected CRC rights (identified using methods we outline below; see methods). We present them in the abbreviated language from the children's version of the CRC (UNICEF n.d.) in the interest of space. Although this list is not exhaustive, it illuminates several interrelated CRC priorities salient to literacy learning that can be summed up as follows: *all children require equal opportunity to learn literacy as uniquely wired, agentive people, rooted in the cultural and linguistic tradition(s) to which they belong, requiring opportunities for creativity and for engaging with others; for play, skills and access to knowledge; and for developing thoughts of their own to communicate and have heard*.

Because all these rights have trump status, education must be provided in accordance with protecting them all, or it cannot be considered rights-affirming. Although some rights, such as the right to culture (Article 30), may have opportunities for fulfillment outside school, assuming this will happen for all

TABLE 1 | Examples of CRC rights relevant to literacy learning.

Article	Article language
2	All children have all these rights, no matter who they are.
13	Children have the right to share freely with others what they learn, think, and feel.
14	Children can choose their own thoughts [and] opinions.
15	They can meet with others.
16	Every child has the right to privacy.
17	Children have the right to get information.
28	Every child has the right to an education.
29	Children's education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents, and abilities.
30	Children have the right to use their own language [and] culture.
31	Every child has the right to rest, relax, play and to take part in cultural and creative activities.

children is precarious. Moreover, in that example, a child's cultural identity may be undermined by the school environment in rights-denying ways even if supported at home. The surest way to equitably guarantee fulfillment of rights is to deliberately uphold all applicable rights in school, and by extension also during literacy instruction. The only circumstance under which literacy education could be relieved of its obligation to fulfill a CRC right is if that right either has no usual relationship with literacy learning (e.g., Article 38, Protection in War), or if it is consistently and adequately fulfilled at another time (e.g., during social studies instruction)—which cannot be taken for granted across contexts.

2.2 | Narrow and Expansive Views in 20th/21st Century Literacy Instruction

There has long been tension within the field between narrower views of the purpose of literacy education, which generally pay scant attention to many of these rights, and broader views that can better accommodate them. Thorndike's (1914) introduction of educational measurement to quantify reading comprehension helped provide legitimacy to a narrow focus on literacy proficiency, an emphasis that has continued to the present, often implicitly tied to a neoliberal, market-driven vision of education's purpose (Donald 2019).

Yet, selected research within literacy education has also been attentive to the whole child and to multiple facets of their experiences with literacy. By the late 20th century, a range of research had documented how education could facilitate agentic literacies where students express their own ideas and participate in cultural, creative, and social experiences in the literacy classroom (Dyson 1993; Ladson-Billings 1995; Leland and Harste 1994; Moll and Whitmore 1993; Nystrand 1997). Formal rights languaging was not typically used to describe such experiences, but these approaches resonated with the children's rights being set out by the CRC around the same time. Indeed, literacy scholarship over the past few decades has continued to strengthen the research base for approaches in line with broader CRC rights (Fránquiz et al. 2019; Freebody 2007; Lowe et al. 2021; Machado 2017). For example, Ladson-Billings's culturally relevant pedagogy and education debt framework, together with Muhammad's historically responsive literacy, offer classroom practices that center identity, intellectualism, and criticality, aligning rights with material justice and culturally sustaining education (Ladson-Billings 2006; Muhammad 2020). Although such approaches are not a panacea, and may have their own rights contradictions, limitations, even failures, they have opened space for attention to varied children's rights.

However, a persistent drumbeat emphasizing reading skills has long beaten in rhetorical opposition to such approaches, as if agentic, culturally attuned literacies and reading proficiency were impossible to align (Pearson 2001). (In reality, such pedagogies can also have positive effects on traditional literacy achievement measures; see Cavanaugh et al. 2017; López 2016.) Amidst a polarized push to purge classrooms of anything considered "whole language" or, later, "balanced literacy," insights from studies exploring aspects of literacy beyond achievement metrics were generally excluded from influential turn-of-the-century educational policies and reports such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and the Rose Report (Rose 2006)—and from the skills-heavy, often scripted curricula popularized in the wake of such documents (Altwerger et al. 2004; Aukerman and Chambers Schuldt 2017; Wohlwend 2008).

In the current SoR era, too many children continue to learn literacy in classes where children's rights are undermined. For example, Kostogriz (2011) explicitly identified an ethical tension between the perceived imperative for Indigenous students in Australia to receive mainstream, often narrow literacy interventions and their rights to culturally and linguistically responsive education. Dyson (2020) documented how a highly structured classroom restricted children's agency during writing, pushing it underground or into out-of-school spaces; this suppression not only curtailed children's right to freely express themselves but also stifled their creative potential. Similarly, Morita-Mullaney et al. (2023) found that emergent bilingual children had few opportunities to dialogue about ideas or do writing beyond either copying or producing a few lines of text on a narrow teacher prompt; there were no options to talk or write creatively. Campbell's (2021) study of early childhood teachers illustrated how extreme emphasis on phonics and phonemic awareness almost entirely displaced time for shared reading, constraining children's opportunities to enjoy quality literature and gain information from text. In short, CRC rights during literacy education (beyond reading attainment) appear stuck where the right to read was for many centuries: as ideas that some deeply value, but *sans* formal recognition as rights that highlight their trump status and inherent obligations of fulfillment.

2.3 | Narrow Educational Approaches and Their Impact on Rights

Although children may not articulate how such policies affect them in conventional rights-based language, they often experience it deeply when their human rights are denied. Erickson and Thompson's (2018) study of primary-grade children in prescriptive pull-out reading programs found that they expressed various rights-related reasons for vehemently disliking the programs, from missing out on reading interactions with friends (contravening aspects of Articles 13 and 15) to being unable to read texts they found interesting (contravening aspects of Articles 17 and 29). The children were so distressed that they actively resisted, using techniques such as frequent bathroom breaks as avoidance maneuvers. Spencer (2011) found, similarly, that children took matters into their own hands when the scripted, "scientifically based" reading program in their classroom restricted opportunities for play or choice (contravening Article 31): children surreptitiously played with one another and read self-selected books quite literally under the table instead of focusing on the scripted lesson. In both these studies, adult obligations to help children exercise many of their rights were not upheld.

Teachers who wish to incorporate rights-affirming pedagogies often must act covertly, enacting fugitive pedagogy (Givens 2021): although appearing to comply with narrow institutional mandates, they subvert constraints to foster literacy practices they identify as emancipatory. For example, Braden et al. (2025)

documented how three focal teachers pushed back against their district's scripted curriculum, secretly integrating flexible and culturally relevant practices such as multilingual readalouds, literacy centers, high-interest texts, and writing workshops that centered students' voices; their students performed better on end-of-year literacy measures than students in the focal teacher's class who faithfully followed the 50-min scripted lessons.

This study echoes over 30 previous studies documenting teachers who demonstrate principled resistance to narrow literacy mandates, driven by a commitment to provide students with education that is student-centered, engaging, culturally relevant, and centered in social relationships (Huddleston et al. 2024). Such resistance is not without cost; some teachers have been fired for honoring this commitment or have chosen to leave teaching rather than be forced to undermine it (Huddleston et al. 2024). In short, restrictive curricular controls mandating narrow approaches have frequently made rights-affirming literacy teaching more difficult and have arguably violated teachers' human rights as well.

2.4 | The Aim of SoR: Proficiency

Given that narrow approaches long predate the rise of the SoR movement, it is unfair to place all fault on SoR for the current rights situation within literacy instruction. However, given that SoR is central to so much contemporary literacy policy worldwide, and that SoR mandates and curricula are cited by some teachers as highly constraining factors, limiting how they are able to teach (Gabriel and Dennis 2025; Cox and Johns-O'Leary 2024), it is important to consider whether narrow, rights-denying literacy approaches are happening *despite* SoR or at least in part *because* of its focus. At issue is not whether some forms of SoR-aligned instruction can be organized in ways that uphold CRC rights. Rather, the question is whether SoR explicitly honors literacy-related CRC rights with trump status and robustly supports their obligations of fulfillment, regardless of consequences. In other words, do the central aims of SoR further those of the CRC? To be clear, any discussion of the *aims* of education is necessarily centered on ethical concerns, not empirical ones (cf. Aukerman and Birch 2025).

Although the term *science of reading* has been used variously, patterns in how it is applied provide indications of a predominant aim across practitioner, policy, and scholarly circles: reading proficiency, following the Thorndike (1914) tradition. The centrality of this aim transparently appears within material written for practitioner audiences. McLean et al.'s (2026) review of SoR literature found that many practitioner articles emphasize a narrow view that centers on discrete components of reading, particularly those highlighted in the Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer 1986), the *National Reading Panel Report* (National Reading Panel 2000), and/or Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough 2001). These components are positioned as indispensable mechanisms through which children become good readers.

The reading proficiency aim also dominates SoR advocacy and policy, often couched in rights-based language. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2022) released a *Right to Read* inquiry framed in SoR terms. In Australia, the Reading Pledge emphasizes that "there is no education without literacy," voicing concern that "thousands of children each year are being denied this basic right" (Five from Five and Learning Difficulties Australia 2024, 4). The *Science of Reading Defining Guide* released by the US-based Reading League (2022) describes literacy "as a fundamental human right that empowers individuals in a society" (p. 3), and Connecticut's 2023 reading law is even called the Right to Read Act (Harkay 2024).

Finally, the reading proficiency aim also permeates academic SoR scholarship. McLean et al. (2026) found that articles discussing SoR for a research audience typically referenced a narrow view of SoR, suggesting that SoR in common parlance is most frequently associated with narrow approaches centered on reading proficiency. Taken together, a full 91% of the 121 researcher- and practitioner-directed articles they analyzed alluded to narrow SoR views, although not all scholars endorsed them. Indeed, some scholarly literature pushed back on narrow conceptions of SoR. For example, some scholars emphasized additional dimensions of literacy development (e.g., background knowledge) or alternative frameworks, such as the Active View of Reading (Duke and Cartwright 2021), that posit a more nuanced set of factors contributing to skilled reading. All in all, scholarly SoR literature is more likely to embrace a multifaceted view of literacy development, although equity concerns remain underexamined (Elzy-Palmer et al. 2025).

However, although some SoR literature does attend to multiple literacy dimensions, SoR scholarship seldom decisively moves beyond the aforementioned goal: ensuring that all children learn to read (and, in selected scholarship, to write) well. For example, when Parsons and Erickson (2024) argued for greater attention to motivation within SoR, they situated this imperative within a reading proficiency argument: "Mandating restrictive reading instruction that disregards the expansive research on reading motivation is doomed to fail to accomplish the goal of teaching all students to be effective readers" (p. 35). Even for scholars critical of narrow conceptualizations of literacy, SoR appears difficult to divorce from proficiency framing. SoR discourses, though they diverge from one another, frequently continue to coalesce around reading proficiency.

2.5 | Reading Proficiency and CRC Rights

How, then, does the SoR's aim of reading proficiency connect with CRC rights? Because literacy is a key dimension of education (Mendes 2024), the proficiency aim would fall within CRC's "right to education" (Article 28). Indeed, although evidence is mixed and sometimes oversold (Aukerman 2022), some SoR-based reforms have shown positive effects on reading achievement (Novicoff and Dee 2025). By framing reading as a right and underscoring the role of research in securing it, SoR has contributed to affirming a key children's right—especially for those with literacy-related disabilities.

That said, this alignment alone does not constitute rights-affirming education. The right to read is just one dimension of the right to education, which is just one CRC-identified right. As pivotal as

literacy proficiency is, unless children's other rights are also protected, instruction falls short, as the above overview of narrow literacy approaches over the past century indicates. This is the rub, when it comes to SoR: it is ethically silent on upholding other CRC rights. This silence does not preclude honoring children's full range of rights within SoR-based education, but because SoR's focus is often singular, particularly in its narrow but widely used iterations, it provides little active encouragement to do so.

In fact, doing so might be seen as counterproductive. SoR conversations have often drawn on neoliberal discourse around results-driven curricula (Mejias 2017). By such logic, if an instructional approach that yields superior reading outcomes were to simultaneously undermine another CRC right, it would still be preferred. From a rights-affirming perspective, however, such education must be described as rights-denying (albeit perhaps unintentionally).

SoR has even been used as an ideological cudgel by groups who do not appear to believe in children's broader rights at all. There are documented ties between neoconservative groups and SoR advocacy (Aydarova 2024; Hodge et al. 2025), and the US Department of Education's 2025 grant priorities highlighted SoR alongside statements that denigrated "socio-emotional learning" and "focusing on diversity"—approaches that may contribute to upholding CRC rights. Similarly, under the banner of "parents' rights," the extremist Moms for Liberty group has vocally advocated for a back-to-basics approach centering on SoR. At the same time, it has sought to amplify anti-Muslim sentiment and censor books about Ruby Bridges and Martin Luther King Jr. (Altschuler 2023; Schwartz 2023)—actions that contravene, among others, CRC rights to culture and knowledge. Many SoR-inspired researchers and advocates would no doubt be appalled by these rights-denying platforms, but the fact that there has not been an articulated SoR-grounded counterargument indicates that SoR is at best ethically vacuous when it comes to protecting children's full range of rights.

2.6 | Toward a Rights-Affirming Literacy Framework

If literacy education is to become meaningfully centered on all CRC rights, SoR will not suffice as the prevailing paradigm. However, as described above, potentially powerful pedagogical approaches that implicitly support children's rights have lacked momentum in contemporary policy conversations, perhaps hampered by their focus on literacy instruction and children's experiences rather than on the rights per se. To establish a platform for explicitly linking pedagogy/curriculum and rights, we offer a rights framework premised on the ideas that children have literacy education (LE) rights that directly follow from their CRC rights, and that LE rights should shape literacy learning from the ground up. The rights themselves are not newly posited ones; rather, they are directly grounded in CRC rights already recognized by the UN. Nor is rights-affirming literacy education (RALE) necessarily associated with novel literacy pedagogies or approaches. Rather, RALE's contribution lies in integrating existing literacy and rights scholarship to make explicit what CRC rights can and should look like during literacy instruction.

It is important to be clear that, for the purposes of this paper, we focus on what it means to uphold rights where literacy education is accessible. In the Global South and in areas of war and instability, many children face significant barriers to accessing formal education (Diaz-Rios et al. 2025; Wofford and Tibi 2018). Where such barriers exist, access to education is a prerequisite to children experiencing their rights within education in school. However, because access alone is insufficient to support children's rights (Tomaševski 2001), a critical next step is ensuring that instruction upholds children's rights. The subsequent analysis answers the question: What rights-affirming literacy education are children assured under the CRC?

3 | Method

To determine LE rights, we relied on document analysis (Bowen 2009). The first phase involved two coders separately reading the CRC and identifying passages with direct salience for literacy education. To determine salience, we began with UNESCO's definition of literacy, given our interest in a UN document:

> Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.
>
> (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2025)

We took this definition to indicate that literacy *education* involves not only understanding/composing text, but also engaging with and critiquing textual ideas, as well as communicating orally around such ideas (i.e., oracy; see Doherty 2023).

Our coding team was comprised of literacy researchers who had previously also worked as teachers, enabling them to draw on classroom-based experience as well as their knowledge of scholarship. We asked, of the preamble and each CRC article, whether it implicitly or explicitly referenced rights relevant to provision, protection, and/or participation, *typically involving texts, discussion of textual ideas, and/or instruction, such as could be offered in literacy classrooms*. This step enabled us to identify which CRC rights should influence how literacy instruction is conceptualized and enacted, as well as what is taught. Initially, two coders independently categorized each CRC article as *very*, *somewhat*, or *not* relevant; or as a governing structure (i.e., a right that does not have direct bearing on instruction, but that establishes rights parameters; for example, Article 1 defines who is considered a child). After coding independently, the coders created a synthesized coded document, resolving differences through discussion.

All 23 articles (along with the preamble) that were coded as very or somewhat relevant moved to the next phase of analysis. In Phase 2, we examined what relevant language in these articles means for literacy education, and we grouped related ideas together. This phase was deliberately generative in focus as we worked to extrapolate into the literacy domain. Although a less traditional form of analysis, our approach is in keeping with other analyses (e.g., Cannon et al. 2022) that take CRC language,

written for broad applicability, and apply it in a specific area. In some cases, related ideas appeared in various CRC articles; when we judged these to index a single rights-related idea, these were integrated into one LE right (e.g., eight separate references to culture were integrated into one LE right to culturally relevant literacy instruction). Through this process, we identified 15 LE rights.

Below, we elaborate on each one, explaining its relationship to CRC rights and rights scholarship, as well as offering examples drawn from research on how literacy education could uphold it. These overviews are for conceptual clarity; length constraints preclude comprehensive reviews of scholarship on each topic. We also acknowledge that there may be scholarly disagreement on which empirical approaches are most fruitful in supporting a given right; it is beyond our scope here to arbitrate such differences. Our objective is to outline a framework for protecting CRC rights in literacy classrooms, enabling educators to be better prepared to honor children's rights.

4 | Children's Literacy Education Rights

1. Children have the right to literacy education that, across time, enables them to read, write, discuss, use, and critique texts for themselves in ways that enable participation in their world.

The right to develop valued ways of reading, writing, and otherwise engaging in literate activity is never explicitly stated in the CRC, but rights scholarship has made a strong case that the CRC confers literacy rights (Lea Bishop 2015; Mendes 2024). It is implicit within "the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity," as well as in the call for eliminating "illiteracy throughout the world" (Article 28). These statements suggest that children should learn literacy that enables full participation in society, also ensuring their right to survival (Article 6), given literacy's social and economic importance in nearly all societies. The right to education equally applies to those with disabilities (Article 23), including those whose disabilities present additional challenges as literacy is learned.

Literacy is nearly always conceptualized to include composition, which typically requires both transcription skills (e.g., spelling) and attention to audience, purpose, genre, design, and so on (Graham et al. 2024); as well as textual meaning-making, which in most settings is facilitated by both fluent decoding and comprehension. However, literacy is more, as we have argued elsewhere: UNESCO, the ILA, and a robust body of literacy scholarship have coalesced around an understanding of literacy as "a varied set of purposeful, multidimensional text-related practices involving communication, understanding, composition, imagination, empathy, and criticality—practices that are simultaneously active, social, cultural, and tied to identity" (Authors 2025, 7). This definition is relevant across different contexts, and the UN emphasizes variety in what literacy looks like:

> Since the principal goal of education is to achieve the full development of the individual, literacy education has to be functional and culturally sensitive, because if it is not, it will not give the learner the tools to develop within his or her [sic] society.
>
> (UNESCO 2013, 22)

In other words, children should develop the kinds of literacy that matter for their cultural contexts (Esposito et al. 2015).

Literacy development may be facilitated by instruction that includes the five domains (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) emphasized in the *National Reading Panel Report* (National Reading Panel 2000). (The NRP focuses on English-language reading, but some conclusions may apply in other languages.) It may also be facilitated, for example, by culturally responsive teaching (Cantrell et al. 2022; López 2016), dialogue around text (Murphy et al. 2009), strategy instruction (Graham et al. 2024), building oral language (Reed and Lee 2020; Roth et al. 2002), background knowledge development (Hattan and Lupo 2020; Smith et al. 2021), soliciting critical literacies (Behrman 2006; Luke 2025), and fostering motivation (Nevo and Vaknin-Nusbaum 2019; Rettig and Schiefele 2023; Wigfield et al. 2016). Because literacy itself has multiple dimensions, the research-based practices that support it will also be varied.

2. Children have the right to literacy education that fosters their development as whole and unique people, celebrating strengths and allowing literate identities to flourish.

Article 29, dedicated to the aims of education, emphasizes as its first point, "The education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential." Strikingly, *personality* and *talents* are mentioned first, before mental "abilities." Thus, education should not mean only the development of academic abilities; it must center on the development of whole, unique people. To nurture children's individuality, literacy education must see the child, not just skills to be mastered. A child with a talent for humor or fascination with dinosaurs should have those aspects nurtured, not because it will necessarily make the child better prepared to participate in society, but because these parts of who the child is should be allowed to flourish (Durán and Lopez 2023).

Literacy education plays an important role in supporting existing passions and can facilitate the discovery of new ones. Personality and talent are often identified, mediated, and expressed through literate activities (Reedy and Reedy 2024). For example, even young children have their own text preferences and ways of talking about books (Boraks et al. 1997; Santori 2008); writing can express a unique style as well as identity (Compton-Lilly 2006; Maguire and Graves 2001; Spence et al. 2022); and exploration of popular culture can help children express who they are (Cannon et al. 2022).

Literate identities are one salient aspect of children's personalities in school. By literate identities, we mean "the ways that people construct themselves as readers, writers, and users of language across contexts and time" (Wagner 2021, 1). Because such identities are shaped by classroom experiences (Wortham 2005), upholding children's rights means providing instruction in support of literate identities (Aukerman and Chambers Schuldt 2021).

Research indicates that dialogic discussion valuing divergent responses can nurture children's identities as readers (Aukerman and Chambers Schuldt 2015); that honoring contributions from students with fragile literate identities can help build more robust ones (Wagner 2021), and that integrating multimodal forms of expression can foster new authoring identities (Vasudevan et al. 2010). Conversely, restricting learning to acquisition of skills and information truncates opportunities for developing identities (Moje and Luke 2009). In short, nurturing children's personalities depends on making space for the child to develop as a whole human being, including their literate sense of self.

3. Children have the right to literacy education that preserves their right to be children by providing for adequate rest, leisure, and play within and alongside literate activity.

Article 31 guarantees "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child." Preserving each aspect of this right (rest, leisure, and play) has implications for literacy instruction. However, schools often function at odds with this right, and even kindergarten-aged children are keenly aware that traditional learning activities are "work," clearly distinguishable from "play" (Calderone 2013).

Providing sufficient rest opportunities depends on organizing the school day to ensure children have downtime, not just worktime. Breaks during literacy instruction could take a range of forms, such as recess, physical activity, free play, or rest time (Broad et al. 2023; Countryman and Gabriel 2014). Ensuring rest also requires that demands not exceed what is reasonable given children's age, development, and individual needs. For example, educators should not assign so much homework that it infringes on children's need for rest and leisure (Fuligni and Hardway 2006).

Children not only require breaks from literacy activities; they also should have opportunities for literacy to be a break, with literacy experiences themselves being restorative. Reading, writing, and related activities are not simply life skills and vocational resources, but also important leisure activities (Green 2022; Schüller et al. 2017). Literacy education should nurture children's relationship with literacy to ensure that they can draw upon it, now and in the future, to exercise their leisure rights. Educators should facilitate joyful literacy, including activities likely to be experienced as meaningful and pleasurable (e.g., readalouds, making memes, digital puppetry) (Hartman et al. 2021; Vlach et al. 2023; Wohlwend 2015).

In terms of play, education scholars typically focus on its instrumental qualities (how it supports other goals) and/or its autotelic ones (its intrinsic importance) (Lester and Russell 2008). Davey and Lundy (2011) propose that a rights-affirming approach must straddle both "by acknowledging that play is both a right in itself as well as an important means of achieving other rights (such as health, development and education)" (p. 4).

Extensive research highlights play's contribution to language development, emergent literacy abilities, and decoding-related skills (Rand and Morrow 2021; Teale et al. 2020; Weisberg et al. 2013). That said, children's right to play also should be protected as an end in itself (Wohlwend 2023). Even adolescents should have this right upheld; older children still need play (Conklin 2014). Unfortunately, play has often been neglected as a right (Davey and Lundy 2011). Time for play even in early childhood classrooms is decreasing, likely because of pressure to incorporate more academics (Bassok et al. 2016; Pyle and Danniels 2017), despite research suggesting that formal literacy instruction with young children may be counterproductive academically over time (Suggate 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic undercut children's play access because of lockdowns, virtual schooling, and restrictions. Educational policy in the aftermath focuses on "lost learning," but schools should be equally serious about providing play, particularly for those for whom the most play was lost (Rogers 2022). Decisions made about literacy instruction should safeguard children's right to play within and outside literacy learning.

4. *Children have the right to literacy education that offers meaningful social interaction, including opportunities to connect with peers of their choice.*

Article 32 describes children's right to be protected "from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's social development." Given that school is, from a child's perspective, a form of work (Calderone 2013), this right also applies in school. Article 15 also guarantees children's social well-being, highlighting "the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly." When considered in adult contexts, these freedoms are often associated with forming unions and protesting. Although this interpretation does apply for children, the UN specifies that informal social relationships also fall under this right:

> Article 15 rights apply to children in the context of their engagement in political and social activities with others, including political demonstrations, and associations such youth groups, sports clubs, child-led groups, political parties, and working children's organisations and movements, as well as informal association and assembly through family, friendships, and social networks, on and offline.
>
> (Lansdown 2022b, 86)

Thus, children are owed both social activity in general and spending time with friends specifically.

Because school is often a primary place for meeting other children, schools should protect children's right to connect (Carter and Nutbrown 2016). Children require opportunities to engage with others through literacy activities such as collaborative projects, buddy reading, and peer discussions (Boyle and Charles 2011; Flint 2010; Philippakos and MacArthur 2016; van der Veen et al. 2017), in addition to chances for social connection at recess (London et al. 2025).

Literacy education should also support children's right to form connections with peers they self-select as friends, for example, via chances to choose with whom they work. Children highly value this right. Explained as the right "to be able to be with

friends you have chosen" (p. 229), the right to freedom of association was among the top five CRC rights that children identified as important within school settings (Irving 2001).

5. *Children have the right to literacy education that involves and collaborates with parents/guardians to ensure that children can exercise their rights.*

Article 18 specifies that parents/guardians "have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern." It further requires that states "render appropriate assistance" to parents/guardians so they can support children's best interests. Within literacy education, parents can be included as facilitators of learning activities and can be encouraged and supported to become advocates, as they may have important insights into whether their child's rights are being met (Chaney 2014; McCarthy Foubert 2023; Schoorman et al. 2019).

Research-based examples of literacy education that involves parents as partners often highlight programs that support parents in integrating literacy-supportive practices at home (Kim and Riley 2021; Silva-Chelles et al. 2025). Schools have also worked to better understand student strengths through parents, adopting an asset-based view in which the funds of knowledge of both parents and children are treated as resources (Compton-Lilly 2006; Moll 2019; Noguerón-Liu 2020; Volman and t'Gilde 2021).

The right of family involvement is not unqualified and hinges on the child, not on the parent/guardian per se. The CRC makes clear that "best interests of the child" (Article 18) are not parent-dictated; rather, they depend on having the child's full range of rights upheld. For example, parents could not validly withhold education, even if they thought this was in the child's best interest. Articles 5 and 14 both indicate that "the evolving capacities of the child" also must be kept in mind: children's views must always be considered alongside parental preferences and may sometimes override them.

6. Children have the right to literacy education that enables them to use and respect their native languages and the dominant language.

Article 30, supported by provisions in Article 29, makes clear that every child has the right "to use his or her [sic] own language." As Szoszkiewicz (2017) argues,

> As children spend a significant amount of time at school, ensuring they can use the language of their choice is particularly important for achieving full development of their personality with respect for the right to identity (individual dimension) and for sustaining the survival of the linguistic minority (collective dimension).
>
> (p. 115)

Children's right to their own language is one aspect of their linguistic human rights; they also have the right to learn the dominant language of the country/region where they live. Although not explicitly stated, this right is implied by the requirement that children have opportunities to develop their mental abilities to their "fullest potential" (Article 29); children may have limited opportunities to meet their potential without strong command of the primary linguistic medium of communication (Berman and Cheng 2001; Loh and Tam 2016).

Literacy instruction must preserve children's linguistic rights across languages by incorporating research-based language/literacy learning approaches (August and Shanahan 2006), as well as by enabling native language and dialect abilities, including rhetorical features (Arteagoitia and Yen 2020; Breland 2025). Although the CRC stops short of guaranteeing bilingual education (Tomasevski 2004), such programs, particularly those providing long-term native-language instruction, can support multilingualism (Collier and Thomas 2017). Vocabulary development (Kelley et al. 2010) is important for all children, including monolingual students; children should also have opportunities to expand their oral repertoires and pursue varied communication purposes (Huang et al. 2022; Paatsch et al. 2019).

Encouraging translanguaging, which integrates children's linguistic repertoires across languages, supports linguistic rights (Eller and Nieto 2021; Martínez 2010; Rajagopal 2025). Other examples of linguistic supports include amplifying the diversity of audiences children address (Breland 2025); bookmaking in native/heritage languages (Hsin et al. 2025); incorporating native-language storytelling to and by children (Daly and Barbour 2021); engaging children in collaborative, creative translation of literature (Jiménez et al. 2015); and offering texts in languages matching the linguistic backgrounds of children (Chaudri and Torres 2022).

7. Children have the right to literacy education that develops familiarity, understanding, and respect for their cultures and cultural identities.

Article 29 specifies that education should foster respect for a child's "cultural identity, language, and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she [sic] may originate." The right to culture is also separately enumerated for disabled children (Article 23) and children from minority groups (Article 30).

Culture is at the heart of literacy. All texts reflect culture, and people's ways of speaking, reading, and writing are cultural as well (Brooks and Browne 2012; Nash et al. 2025). Thus, this right should be furthered via literacy education that "support(s) young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence"—what Paris (2012, 95) terms culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Classroom texts should not function simply as vehicles for comprehension or as displays of compositional proficiency; they should also deepen understanding of cultures (Reedy and Reedy 2024). Children should encounter texts that can serve as mirrors of their own experiences as well as windows into the experiences of others (R. S. Bishop 1990). Children whose cultural

forms of storytelling, composition, and textual interpretation differ from those of their teachers should have their contributions valued, even as they are invited to gain familiarity with additional forms of communication (Aukerman 2007; Dyson and Smitherman 2009).

Going beyond shallow multicultural education (e.g., focusing only on traditional foods) is indispensable. For example, successful programs in Indigenous communities in Canada have involved extensive consultation to determine aspects of culture and literacy that community members want included (Timmons et al. 2008). Integrating Indigenous ways of knowing through teaching children heritage forms of storytelling is one promising model (McKeough et al. 2008).

8. *Children have the right to literacy education that provides opportunities to imagine, compose, and design through creative participation in literacy activities.*

The CRC links children's cultural life to participation in creative arts, guaranteeing "the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life" and the provision of opportunity for artistic activity (Article 31). According to literacy scholars Albers and Harste (2007), "'The arts' often refers to the visual, musical, and performance arts, including paintings, ceramics, photographs, films, plays, storytelling, concerts, and others" (p. 8); they also integrally connect to aesthetics, a field that considers how humans perceive, imagine and represent the world. Seen this way, the arts are not only selected activities that may involve various forms of text, but also a distinctive form of imaginative engagement. Because literacy involves and invites aesthetic acts of imaginative engagement (Cope and Kalantzis 2023; Rosenblatt 1982; Weber et al. 2023), it is integral to fulfillment of rights in this area.

Children benefit from opportunities to create, enact, and experience the arts on their literacy pathways, often in ways that synergistically support traditional literacy outcomes (Saunders 2025). Creative expression may be fostered through literacy pedagogies that integrate dance, drama, art, photo stories, podcasts, media arts, and music (Brown et al. 2025; Burwell 2023; Saunders 2025; Stephenson and Dobson 2020). Picturebook readalouds have proven powerful for imaginative engagement (Sipe 2002), and it is noteworthy that "ordinary" reading and writing can be structured in ways that encourage children to act with imagination (Kirmizi and Kasap 2017). However, reducing literate activity solely to utilitarian purposes may not adequately support children's creative rights.

9. *Children have the right to literacy education that fosters human dignity and humanity, including their understanding of human rights; their empathy and ability to relate to others; their capacities as democratic citizens, including the capacity to stand up for beliefs; and their sense of respect and justice for themselves, other people, and the world.*

Article 29, on the aims of education, highlights three aspects to required support for children's dignity and humanity. First, developing "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" is imperative (cf. Article 42), both so children can self-advocate and so they can uphold and protect others' rights. The second aspect emphasizes "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin," including development of respect "for civilizations different from his or her [sic] own." The third aspect requires that children be supported in developing "respect for the environment." These three dimensions are undergirded by the aforementioned right to "freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly" (Article 15), which guarantees that children can also engage in civic activity, including protest, to stand up for what they believe. Although Article 29 provisions could be addressed in part through social studies and/or science instruction, texts and literate activity are likely to be a key factor in addressing each aspect of the right adequately.

To ensure the first aspect is fulfilled, children should understand the significance of rights and be able to identify their enumerated rights as legal entitlements, not simply as values or beliefs (Lundy and Martínez Sainz 2018). The children's version of the CRC cited earlier (UNICEF n.d.) makes rights accessible in child-friendly language. Children may also benefit from deliberately selected children's literature with child characters "who seek to realize their rights and/or responsibilities" and exercise agency (Superle 2016, 152). Interventions focused on developing knowledge of rights through key texts, discussion, and cross-cultural classroom exchanges have shown promise (Jones and Manion 2023; Tenenbaum et al. 2022). As Lundy and Martínez Sainz (2018) point out,

> Children have a right to know what their schools and others should not be doing to them, as well as what they should.... Informing and enabling children to challenge breaches of their rights in schools should be an essential part of a transformative human rights education.
>
> (p. 18)

That is, children need opportunities to read, discuss, and think critically about rights in relationship to their personal experiences and observations of the world around them, including school (cf. Souto-Manning 2009).

With respect to the second aspect of nurturing children's humanity, texts themselves can foster empathy and the development of theory of mind (Kidd and Castano 2013), and literacy education can provide fertile spaces for the examination of human emotions, dilemmas, and differences (Kelly et al. 2023; Martucci 2014; Newstreet et al. 2019). Children who read texts on intercultural topics show reduced prejudice and more positive intergroup intentions (Vezzali et al. 2012). Writing and drama enable empathy, exploration of multiple perspectives, and more developed social understanding (Brill 2004; Ozen-Uyar et al. 2025; Wells et al. 2021). Furthermore, reading comprehension and cognitive empathy (defined as "understanding and predicting the behavior of others by attributing their mental states," p. 1) are mutually reinforcing and can be nurtured together (Wenren et al. 2024). Literacy education that integrates science can foster an ethic of environmental stewardship toward the natural world in service of the third aspect of fostering children's humanity (Arabaci and Okyay 2023; Holyoke and Fletcher 2024; Merritt et al. 2024).

Literacy education should also provide opportunities for active participation in a community that inevitably includes different identities, interests, and ideas. If one takes a free society to mean a democratic one, then it is vital for children to make, hear, and evaluate reasoned arguments (Bleazby et al. 2022). Opportunities for active talk, reading, and writing can further children's abilities to do such work (Michaels et al. 2008; Mirra et al. 2016). In addition, children should have opportunities to participate in civic action involving literate activity, for example, through designing posters aimed at shaping their community or writing letters to policy-makers; educators should also make space for children's right to protest when children care enough to do so (Brownell 2022; Kornelsen 2016; Lau 2012).

Fostering children's dignity and humanity is not value-neutral (Jerome 2018). However, nurturing knowledge, abilities, and dispositions that enable all children to enjoy and respect agreed-upon rights (Bricker 2024) is no less imperative than supporting other rights that children are owed.

10. *Children have the right to literacy education that provides access to textual materials and knowledge to support their wellbeing.*

The CRC emphasizes children's knowledge rights, requiring access to "scientific and technical knowledge" enabling understanding of the world; "vocational information" (Article 28) likely to be useful into adulthood; and "basic knowledge of child health and nutrition" (Article 24) facilitating wellness. The most elaborated knowledge provision, Article 17, mandates "access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her [sic] social, spiritual and moral well-being ... and mental health."

Texts are one important way children acquire knowledge. Because the CRC mandates "dissemination of children's books" (Article 17) to support knowledge accessibility, schools must provide varied genres of text on a wide range of topics (Koss and Paciga 2022). The need for "particular regard to the linguistic needs" of language minority children is mentioned in the same article, requiring that knowledge be made linguistically accessible, for example, through text availability in various languages (Chaudri and Torres 2022).

Knowledge, of course, is far more than an accumulation of facts from books—it includes strategic knowledge, cultural understandings, and metacognitive awareness of how to apply knowledge, among other forms; literacy instruction can help children build multiple kinds of knowledge (Britt et al. 2014; Hattan and Lupo 2020). Instruction should be content-rich, thematically coherent, and support knowledge of how to gain, organize, and use textual information (Cervetti et al. 2016; Koray and Boran 2023). Integrating literacy learning and content instruction, for example, through discipline-anchored approaches to text, can be fruitful (Cabell and Hwang 2020; Goldman et al. 2016). Readalouds can also serve knowledge development, especially when children are not yet reading independently (McClure and Fullerton 2017).

11. *Children have a right to literacy education that honors their freedom of expression and thought, including freedom to seek out information, to see the world differently than others do, and to form and communicate ideas.*

The CRC guarantees "the right to freedom of expression" (Article 13) and "freedom of thought" (Article 14). Freedom of expression includes "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice" (Article 13). Children should be able to *seek and receive* texts, resources, and interactions on what *they* want to know, self-selecting from a wide range of available material (Neuman and Moland 2016). In addition, children need opportunities to *impart* ideas through literacy (Herder et al. 2020).

Freedom of thought, in turn, depends on "freedom to keep our thoughts private so that we may not be coerced into revealing them; freedom from indoctrination or influence on our conscious or subconscious mind through manipulation; and a prohibition on penalising a person for their thoughts or opinions" (Alegre 2017, 222). Ligthart et al. (2022) argue that provision of this right requires fostering "an enabling environment for freedom of thought" (p. 2), noting:

> A person's freedom of thought requires receiving expressions from others. Thinking and reasoning are not solitary activities but gain sustenance from dialogical exchanges with others. Free thinking requires questioning and interlocutors.
>
> (p. 5)

Thus, to fully exercise freedom of thought, children need opportunities to encounter ideas, directly through texts but also, importantly, through rich open dialogue. Freedom of thought requires freedom of expression, and vice versa.

Yet such dialogue remains infrequent in classrooms, as Segal and Lefstein (2016) document, in part because the realization of student voice during discussion depends on "(a) opportunity to speak, (b) expressing one's own ideas, (c) on one's own terms, and (d) being heeded by others" (p. 3). Opportunities to speak are often present, but even during "discussions," children are often positioned to regurgitate or anticipate teacher-sanctioned ideas, not generate ideas of their own. When children do express their ideas on their terms, those ideas are often ignored, truncating both thought and expression. Instead, literacy educators should integrate student-centered forms of discussion, for example, using dialogic pedagogy (Alexander 2018; Segal and Lefstein 2016).

In seeking to nurture freedom of thought, teachers may face tensions between wielding power to direct children's thinking (e.g., toward preferred answers) and supporting children's "right to make up their own minds" (Kucharczyk and Hanna 2020, 59). If resolution of this tension routinely tilts toward the former, children's freedoms are unsupported. "The line between legitimate persuasion and unlawful manipulation" (Alegre 2017, 227) requires careful judgment, keeping in mind that legitimate persuasion often involves the following: multiple perspectives are explored; children's reasoning is invited; and children act as persuaders themselves.

Finally, scholars (e.g., McCarthy-Jones 2019) have raised alarms about how technological advances affect these freedoms. For

example, search engines and chatbots may undermine thought privacy and manipulate thinking, and students are increasingly turning to generative AI to direct or even replace their written expression—with children grappling, often on their own, with what such technologies mean (Higgs and Stornaiuolo 2024). Although not all technologies are as egregious as Grok spouting Nazi talking points (Jones 2025), new technologies should be critically examined at the societal level (to assure that available technologies maximally protect freedoms); at the implementation level (for when and how educators will allow and monitor tech use to protect freedoms); and at the student discernment level (to prepare children to engage with AI in ways that preserve freedoms). Literacy education is pivotal in this work.

12. Children have the right to a literacy education that avoids censorship but buffers them from directly harmful or misleading material.

Article 17 mandates "the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her [sic] well-being." There is potential tension between this right and children's right to freedom of expression; therefore, these rights need consideration in tandem. The emphasis on free access to "all kinds" of ideas "regardless of frontiers" (Article 13) makes clear that nearly all censorship of children's reading, speaking, and writing is unacceptable. There are several stated exceptions, which include: "For respect of the rights or reputations of others, or for the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals" (Article 13). However, the bar for meeting these exceptions is high: there must be clear harm stemming from information. Adult discomfort around certain topics is not enough; the goal must be to ensure access to texts unless this high bar is met. Book bans and restricting access to texts undermine children's freedom of expression as well as their overall well-being (Hannegan-Martinez 2025). Literacy educators must also guard against what Fanetti (2012) termed *preemptive censorship*, that is, the tendency to avoid making books available to prevent controversy even where no bans exist.

That said, some information can provoke fear and anxiety in young children (Muris et al. 2000), suggesting that educators should be mindful of children's development in considering classroom materials. Children also should be protected from material that is misleading, false, or problematically biased (e.g., propaganda), or that could cause children to disregard others' rights (e.g., material valorizing racism) (Dickinson and Cowin 2022). Even with problematic material, censorship may not offer the best protection. Children benefit from learning tools to critically examine texts, for example, by discussing bias or examining the trustworthiness of sources (Brewer 2023; Lee et al. 2024).

13. *Children have a right to literacy education that encourages them to voice views on matters affecting them within and beyond the classroom; those views should be heard and have influence.*

Arguably, the most famous CRC provision (Noël 2022) indicates that states "shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her [sic] own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (Article 12). In other words, children should have a voice in shaping the world that shapes them. Lundy (2007) identifies four necessary elements:

***Space*:** Children must be given the opportunity to express a view.

***Voice*:** Children must be facilitated to express their views.

***Audience*:** The view must be listened to.

***Influence*:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate. (p. 933)

Literacy educators should honor each element, bearing in mind that the realization of other rights may depend on this one (Lansdown 2022a) and that children rank having their voices be heard as their top rights-related concern (Lundy 2007). Educators should consider how social identities may affect which perspectives are least likely to be heard, and elevate marginalized identities (Gunter and Thomson 2007). A study of Brazilian children's perceptions related to this right indicates they felt most constrained from having a meaningful voice by their race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, gender, and disabilities (Cuevas-Parra 2023).

Because literacy centrally involves expression of ideas, meeting of *space* and *voice* requirements fits squarely within literacy education. Children should be given access and support to articulate the concerns and ideas they have. To determine which matters importantly affect children, Lundy (2007) suggests simply asking them. Discussion of relevant books can spur children to more actively participate in classroom decision-making (Akyol 2024), and activities such as talking circles, drawing, exit slips, or consultation about school policies may provide opportunities to weigh in (Fisher and Frey 2004; Lewison et al. 2008; Wolf and Rickard 2003).

Literacy education should also ensure that the *audience* requirement is met when children express their views. Teachers can help students connect with important audiences, such as teachers themselves, other students, parents, media outlets, or politicians (Brownell 2023; Land 2022; Stenvall et al. 2023). However, what constitutes "audience" from a rights-affirming perspective is different from the term *audience* as often used during writing instruction. In composition instruction, *audience* tends to be used to draw the child's attention to their (future) reader, so they tailor their message: the focus is on how the child should attend to the audience. From a rights perspective, the emphasis is flipped: the focus is on how the audience, through deep listening, should attend to the child. Although these perspectives may be compatible, even synergistic, only the second kind of audience fulfills the child's right to be heard.

Finally, literacy education must ensure the *influence* requirement is met when children voice their views. This requirement may be the most difficult to meet, as it demands acknowledging the child as an active agent (Sargeant and Gillett-Swan 2015). Literacy educators should provide opportunities for children to influence the contexts in which they live and learn, from the local to the global (Hayes 2024; Lucas et al. 2024; O'Brien et al. 2024; Satchwell et al. 2025). They should incorporate opportunities for student choice and decision-making and seek ways to act on ideas children suggest. When children voice concerns, at a

minimum, educators should respond with "what decision was made, how their views were regarded and the reasons why action has proceeded in a certain way" (Lundy 2007, 939).

Although influence encompasses formal processes and engagement with children's requests to shape their environments, influence also requires responsiveness from interlocutors in moment-to-moment exchanges (Boyd et al. 2024). Bae (2012) found that early childhood teachers elevate student voice, for example, when they focus on where a child is directing attention; connect with playful overtures; engage with non-verbal cues; pose relatively few questions; and accept mistakes. A rigidly followed scripted curriculum, in virtually all cases, would be the antithesis of the child's Article 12 rights because it disallows for many of these forms of child influence, whereas dialogic spaces (Boyd et al. 2024) frequently facilitate them.

Influence does not mean that children's overtures and preferences are always accommodated (Lundy et al. 2024). In some cases, educators may perceive tensions between what a child wants and the child's best interests. That said, as Lundy (2007) argues, children's CRC-given "right to have their views given due weight cannot be abandoned on the basis that the adults in their lives know what is best for them" (p. 938). Indeed, if this were always the case, there would be no need for Article 12. Limits on children's self-determination should apply primarily in situations when exercising their autonomy negatively impacts (a) the rights of others; or (b) their own dignity, development, or future opportunities (Feinberg 1992; Lundy 2007; Street 2020).

14. Children have a right to literacy education that protects them from cruel, degrading treatment and safeguards dignity and privacy, ensuring their right to learn in a safe and respectful environment.

Because Article 37 prohibits "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment," schools should reject discipline that harshly punishes children. Practices such as corporal punishment transparently violate this right, but more subtle punishments, including shaming, can also degrade children (Goodman and Cook 2019). In addition, Article 16 specifies that "No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her [sic] privacy." This right requires that children have sufficient personal space, bodily autonomy, and control over their information.

Literacy education should preserve privacy regarding things the child creates or appears in, such as written compositions or photos (Čulo Margaletić and Preložnjak 2023). Children's images and writing must not be shared without their prior consent; even young children can learn processes for giving and securing such consent (Eckhoff 2015). Children should understand who will read what they write and should learn to protect their digital privacy (Desimpelaere et al. 2020). In addition, particularly given issues with how school data are handled, schools themselves should safeguard children's digital privacy (Liu and Khalil 2023) and reconsider or calibrate use of platforms, such as Google, that may compromise it (Krutka et al. 2021).

Literacy educators also should pay attention to how they manage children's information, allowing children to keep important aspects of their literacy, such as literacy struggles (Hall 2009) or which texts they are reading (Brown 2018; Kirkland 2024), private if they wish. Making assessment information publicly available, for example, through data walls, violates children's right to privacy and is often profoundly degrading (Goodman and Cook 2019).

15. Children have a right to literacy education that provides equal access to all human rights without discrimination.

The CRC foundationally establishes non-discrimination. Everyone is entitled to rights regardless of "colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth, or other status" (Article 2). This means that children cannot be deemed too young for certain rights, even if some rights, such as the right to be heard, may look subtly different across ages. In the literacy domain, the right to equity means, for example, diversity of representation within material, a standard that classrooms are far from reaching (Adam and Barratt-Pugh 2019; Crisp et al. 2016). Teaching and assessment practices also deserve close scrutiny, as these may discriminate against certain groups of students (Dyson and Smitherman 2009; Lundy and Martínez Sainz 2018).

In addition, literacy educators must not withhold rights from individual students, nor privilege any child's rights over another child's. Rights must not be contingent on mastery of certain material or fulfillment of certain responsibilities. As Melton (2008) argues,

> a requirement that a child (or any person) accepts a responsibility before a right is conferred shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept. There is no entitlement if rights are contingent.... a conception of children's rights that is effectively limited to good (responsible) children is empty indeed. (p. 913)

For example, children must not lose their right to play because of behavior, a practice that remains prevalent in many schools (Clements and Harding 2023).

Parents also cannot waive children's rights. The European Court of Human Rights found, for example, that schools can require that children participate in education "aimed at educating responsible and emancipated citizens capable of participating in the democratic processes of a pluralistic society" (Lundy and Martínez Sainz 2018, 11) even if parents disapprove. Although educators should work closely with parents, parental preferences do not outweigh children's best interest: all rights must be honored for all children.

5 | Summary of Literacy Education Rights

In summary, children are owed education that upholds these LE rights:

1. *Literacy Development*: Empowers children to read, write, discuss, use, and critique texts and ideas for active participation in the world.

2. *Development of the Whole Child*: Fosters children's growth as unique individuals, celebrating strengths and enabling literate identities to flourish.
3. *Rest, Leisure, and Play*: Supports children's requirements for rest, leisure, and play in and alongside literate activities.
4. *Social Interaction*: Offers opportunities for meaningful social interaction, including peer connections.
5. *Family Involvement*: Collaborates with parents/guardians to ensure that children can exercise their rights.
6. *Language and Linguistic Identity*: Respects both the native languages of children and the dominant language.
7. *Cultural Understanding and Connection*: Promotes familiarity with, respect for, and understanding of cultures and cultural identities.
8. *Imagination and Creativity*: Provides opportunities to imagine, compose, and design creatively.
9. *Humanity and Citizenship*: Nurtures empathy, democratic citizenship, a sense of justice, and an understanding of human rights.
10. *Access to Knowledge*: Provides access to important knowledge, texts, and materials that support well-being.
11. *Freedom of Thought and Expression*: Supports children's freedom to express themselves, seek information, and form and communicate their own ideas.
12. *Protection from Censorship and Harmful Content*: Avoids censorship while protecting children from harmful or misleading content.
13. *Voice and Influence*: Ensures that children's views are heard and considered, both within and beyond the classroom.
14. *Safe and Respectful Learning Environment*: Protects children from harmful treatment and safeguards their dignity and privacy.
15. *Freedom from Discrimination*: Provides equal access to human rights for all children.

Rights-affirming literacy education (RALE) is education deliberately designed and enacted to uphold all these LE rights. As with the CRC rights themselves (Article 41), the LE rights represent the floor, not the ceiling, of rights children are owed. Stakeholders might decide that children have additional rights. However, all these LE rights are nonnegotiable and have trump status: only literacy education that actively works to uphold them honors the CRC in letter and spirit.

6 | Realizing Rights-Affirming Literacy Education

Some individual educators and schools are already attentive to children's rights, and some educational initiatives have an explicit rights focus, such as Amnesty International's (2017) toolkit for developing human-rights-friendly schools or the Child Thrive Program of the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (Jones and Manion 2023). Until now, however, there has been no explicit platform linking the CRC to everyday literacy education; RALE provides this platform. As the rights descriptions above make clear, the framework is actionable. However, there are challenges to its realization that should be addressed.

6.1 | Ideologies as Barriers

6.1.1 | Failure to Recognize the Importance of Rights-Affirming Education

Some people express skepticism about human rights (Cliquennois et al. 2024) and presumably would not want children to learn about them; these individuals form a vocal minority. Fortunately, 81% of people worldwide believe in human rights (Bricker 2024). Yet human rights education (where it exists) may be better at teaching *about* human rights than teaching *through* and *for* them (Johnsson 2025), meaning that many adults have not experienced rights-affirming education themselves. Moreover, education in the Global North sometimes fosters the belief that rights violations happen only to children far away, failing to connect rights with local concerns (Cassidy et al. 2013). Helping stakeholders better understand CRC rights and see the everyday importance of teaching and enacting them is essential (Byrne and Lundy 2019). One study noted, for example, that Ugandan parents initially concerned that their children were learning about the CRC and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child became receptive when they learned more (Jones and Manion 2023).

6.1.2 | Resistance and Deficit Views Among Educators

Some educators are skeptical, afraid, or resistant to integrating children's rights (David 2002). Barriers include apprehensions about loss of authority; concerns that content learning will be compromised; and worries about parent pushback (Cassidy et al. 2013; Jerome 2018; Lyle 2014). In addition, some teacher beliefs reflect a deficit view, including fears that children are too immature, unruly, incompetent, or innocent to engage constructively in a rights-affirming environment (Jerome 2018; Lyle 2014). Those who see children as competent are more likely to integrate rights-affirming pedagogies. Still, even doubting teachers become more rights-affirming when supported in learning relevant pedagogical approaches (Lyle 2014).

6.2 | Practical Challenges

6.2.1 | Complexity and Tensions

Literacy itself is complex, with multiple aspects to be coordinated (Aukerman and Birch 2025). Acknowledging 15 LE rights amplifies this complexity. RALE tasks educators—already facing full plates—with attending to more than they have traditionally needed to do, and with coordinating multiple rights. Judgments need to be made about how to sufficiently support rights for diverse children who may have varied skills, personalities, and concerns. Adding to this complexity is the fact that LE rights, although often synergistic, can also sit in perceived or real tension. For example, opportunities to play, socialize, and engage in creative activity could mean less time for other literacy activities

that demonstrably "move the needle" toward assessed reading proficiency. Even in possible cases where reading advancement would not be quite as fast, children's other rights must not be blithely sacrificed on the altar of reading proficiency. However, there is reassuring evidence that rights-affirming approaches can also further literacy achievement outcomes, suggesting that such tensions may be navigable (Braden et al. 2025; Chandler et al. 2008; López 2016).

6.2.2 | Need for Pedagogical Expertise, Autonomy, and Support

The complexity of this teaching work points to a related challenge: relatively few educators have a strong understanding of human rights or feel prepared to integrate them (Cassidy et al. 2013). Because literacy teachers need opportunities to develop pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1986) on rights-affirming instruction, teacher education should center on RALE. Moreover, although expertise is important, it is of limited use unless teachers also have sufficient autonomy and support to integrate such pedagogies.

6.2.3 | Misaligned Policies and Materials

Existing policies and materials may be at odds with rights-affirming education (Aukerman and Chambers Schuldt 2017; Braden et al. 2025). Schools and teachers may be penalized if students fail to perform adequately on tests (Huddleston et al. 2024), which may incentivize approaches that maximize reading performance at the expense of other rights, such as the right to imagination. Moving forward, literacy policies should be adopted only if they do no harm with respect to children's rights; existing policies that do not meet this bar should be redesigned or scrapped. To be fully aligned with RALE, policies must maximize opportunities for children to experience and exercise their full range of rights. Standards and curriculum materials, similarly, should be vetted for how well they support literacy development, including requisite skills, but also for how well they integrate opportunities for student voice, freedom of thought, democratic citizenship, and so on.

6.2.4 | Limiting Forms of Assessment and Evaluation

Student success within RALE is more multi-dimensional than within the traditional neoliberal framework, where reading achievement is heavily determinative (Luke 2012). Certainly, schools should still assess traditional literacy to identify individual needs and progress, as well as to examine programmatic strengths and weaknesses (Fjørtoft et al. 2024). However, other salient aspects of development must also be considered.

Children's development as it pertains to some rights areas may be difficult to quantify and neatly standardize; literacy educators should recognize children's learning not only in their performance on measures that are similar across students but also in their unique personalities and perspectives (Ballenger 2019). Such recognition is indispensable: unless schools meaningfully document children's development in messier rights areas, there will be little information on the fulfillment of those rights, and schools may inadequately provide for them.

In addition, RALE requires that children's protection and participation rights be well-supported, even though these may not be developmental outcomes. Thus, schools should engage in documentation of opportunities for students to think freely; share concerns and textual ideas, and have these be meaningfully heard; and so on. Literacy pedagogies that support, say, freedoms of expression and thought (e.g., dialogic pedagogy) may also positively affect literacy achievement (Alexander 2018). However, protection and participation rights must never be made contingent on academic progress, and a program cannot be considered adequate, much less exemplary, unless there is evidence that these rights are upheld.

In short, RALE requires evidence relevant to the full range of LE rights to support students, determine progress, and uphold civil rights. Some evaluation may be done at scale, building on existing literacy assessments and Child Rights Impact Assessment tools (Payne 2019), whereas some may be based on locally tailored approaches. Children should be integrally involved in determining how well their LE rights are being upheld; they can make meaningful recommendations, and indeed, having genuine opportunities to do so is necessary to fulfill their right to voice (Sargeant and Gillett-Swan 2015).

6.2.5 | Limited Research Base

RALE's needed systemic changes in beliefs, policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation should be guided by literacy research. Both research associated with SoR and research from outside that paradigm could be included, provided it is of high quality. However, particularly in the case of SoR, existing research often focuses on single outcomes, notably reading achievement. It is important that future research, including quantitative studies of reading achievement, routinely attends to how instruction, policy, and teacher education can support multiple LE rights, although a single study may be unable to consider every LE right simultaneously. Finally, in keeping with children's right to voice and influence, more research should highlight their perspectives and potentially involve them as co-investigators (Kilkelly et al. 2005).

6.3 | Example: *Philosophy for Children*

Given the extent of changes needed, RALE might seem pie-in-the-sky. However, existing research-based approaches already show promise. We briefly highlight one of these, *Philosophy for Children* (P4C), a discussion-intensive approach used with preschool to secondary children in more than 60 countries worldwide (Ab Wahab et al. 2022). We chose to focus on P4C, not as the only or "best" example, but because it is a well-defined approach where there is an extensive research base looking at it through multiple lenses beyond "reading proficiency," allowing for visible research-informed connections to LE rights. P4C is an approach that encourages dialogic discussion of philosophical concepts that are "common to all human societies, central to understanding how people live together and yet contestable (making it hard to agree on a universal definition), but connectable to human experience"

(Lyle 2014, 223). P4C integrates well into literacy instruction, as it often uses texts to foment talk; it also encourages students to pose questions, clarify their ideas, and respectfully disagree.

To determine P4C alignment with LE rights, we completed a literature search in which we looked for P4C along with relevant rights-related keywords for each right (e.g., "imagination"), and selected examples consistent with our articulations of each right. We considered P4C "likely to support" the right if there was research evidence indicating that P4C directly supported the right as it is routinely taught and practiced; we considered the right "possible to integrate" if P4C programs with specialized

TABLE 2 | Support for LE rights within P4C.

LE right	Designation	Notes
Literacy development	Likely to support	Shows positive impact on comprehension (Gorard et al. 2015; Yan et al. 2018). Care must be taken to ensure students who need decoding support receive this instruction at another time.
Development of the whole child	Likely to support	Shows positive effects on self-esteem, engagement, and reasoning (Pourtaghi et al. 2022; Trickey and Topping 2004; Yan et al. 2018).
Rest, leisure, and play	Possible to integrate	Texts can be selected for their humor, playfulness, and ambiguity, facilitating a "pleasure of the perplexity" (Haynes 2016, 280). Children often relish discussions (Barrow 2015; Elbra-Ramsay 2025). Care must be taken to ensure age-appropriate rest alongside discussion.
Social interaction	Likely to support	Encourages social interaction through talk; can support children's socialization (Naraghi et al. 2013; Unal and Gunes 2024).
Family involvement	Possible to integrate	Some P4C programs offer materials aimed at fostering philosophical dialogue in the home (Bradbury and Jones 2022).
Language and linguistic identity	Likely to support	Supports language learning (Tian and Liao 2016). With less research available on P4C as a support for linguistic identity and home language, care must be taken to ensure adequate support in these areas.
Cultural understanding and connection	Possible to integrate	Culturally responsive versions have been developed, for example, incorporating storytelling in South Africa (Letseka 2014) and discussing child exploitation in Mexico (Reed-Sandoval 2019).
Imagination and Creativity	Likely to support	Stimulates creative thinking (Ghaedi et al. 2015). Can be organized around artwork, aesthetic questions, and/or children's own drawings (Auriac-Slusarczyk et al. 2018; D'Olimpio and Teschers 2016; Haynes and Murris 2013).
Humanity and citizenship	Likely to support	Supports dialogue on democratic principles, consideration of ethical citizenship, and development of empathy (Ab Wahab et al. 2022; Echeverria and Hannam 2016; Di Masi and Santi 2015; Siddiqui et al. 2022).
Access to knowledge	Likely to support	Facilitates development of social and cultural knowledge (Austin 2020). Many, but not all, content objectives in subjects like science can be met through P4C (Boyraz 2022).
Freedom of thought and expression	Likely to support	Children describe P4C as offering "firstly the freedom to think differently and secondly the freedom to actually state these differing ideas" (Elbra-Ramsay 2025, 6).
Protection from censorship and harmful content	Possible to integrate	Approaches may encourage P4C students to critically probe difficult issues such as extremism (Fletcher 2019). Unless care is taken, teachers' discomfort with controversial topics/texts may curtail opportunities (Chetty 2018).
Voice and influence	Likely to support	By facilitating expression and critical questioning, students may be better equipped to exercise voice (Anderson 2020). Care must be taken to ensure that students have influence, both through mechanisms for feedback and through teacher responsiveness.
Safe and respectful learning environment	No research found	Although little extant research has probed this topic, privacy and safety can likely be maintained.
Freedom from discrimination	Likely to support	Less developed readers, emergent bilinguals, and children from varied socioeconomic backgrounds thrive in P4C (Gorard et al. 2015; Jenkins and Lyle 2010; Tian and Liao 2016). Care must be taken to ensure all children get heard.

designs/particular iterations supported the right; and "no research found" if we could not locate research connecting P4C to the right. Table 2 shows what we uncovered: it indicates that P4C is likely to support many LE rights.

Indeed, some have already recognized P4C's rights-affirming promise. For example, in Wales, where the government requires schools to make the CRC central to classroom practice, a P4C intervention was implemented in 64 schools to meet this mandate (Lyle 2014). That said, given that P4C is not intended as an all-encompassing literacy program, it should be one dimension of a broader rights-affirming literacy curriculum.

Pursuing similar analyses with other programs would enable informed decision-making on whether and how they might be used, adapted, or combined to secure children's full range of LE rights. Some instructional approaches may offer benefits related to only one or two LE rights. If they are to be used, such use must be judicious and in conscious combination with additional approaches and/or with adaptations that enable them to support more rights. Approaches that run a grave risk of undermining LE rights should be reconsidered.

6.4 | Toward a New Paradigm

As previously discussed, current SoR discourse largely fails to center the full range of children's rights, leaving children vulnerable to instructional decision-making that undermines their rights. Such decision-making, however well-meaning, can be damaging. Although some existing SoR-based instruction may align with multiple children's rights already, the continued dominance of SoR, particularly in its narrow iterations, limits the literacy field's ability to fully embrace rights-affirming education. RALE is better suited to facilitating rights-conscious decision-making about literacy education practices, policies, and research worldwide. That said, RALE should integrate useful insights from SoR, including its steadfast articulation of reading as a right and its highlighting of research-informed decision-making. Elevating these tenets, while simultaneously requiring that *all* children's LE rights be honored, can powerfully support positive systemic change.

Changing paradigms is ambitious, but there are at least two powerful reasons it is needed. Most importantly, children are owed their rights. Unless the affirmation of children's rights becomes a guiding force for policy, curriculum, and instructional practices within literacy education, many children will continue to learn literacy in ways that undermine their dignity. The second reason is that children who experience education in which they can exercise their rights are more likely to embrace the importance of human rights (Torney-Purta et al. 2008). Such children are poised to stand up for their own rights and those of other people—now and in the future. To protect the future of human rights, these are the kinds of citizens that literacy instruction should be helping to develop.

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