

Article

Reading the Word and the World: Overstanding Literacy in Aboriginal and Chinese Classrooms

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Abstract

This qualitative comparative case study examines how culturally grounded philosophies of education shape the teaching and learning of reading in two cross-cultural contexts—an Aboriginal Australian classroom and urban Chinese elementary schools. Drawing on interpretive and reflexive methodologies, it investigates how Aboriginal and Confucian epistemologies influence literacy practices and how these practices align with or resist dominant, decontextualized models of reading instruction. Data sources include classroom observations, reading assessments, teacher interviews, and researcher reflections. Conceptually framed by Gadamer's hermeneutics, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, Habermas's typology of knowledge, and the Caribbean concept of overstanding, this research finds that Aboriginal literacy is embedded in relational, land-based knowledge systems, whereas Chinese literacy instruction reflects moral discipline and social hierarchy rooted in Confucian traditions. This study introduces overstanding as a pedagogical stance that foregrounds ethical engagement, cultural respect, and mutual understanding. By challenging universalist models of literacy, this research offers a framework for developing dialogical, culturally responsive, and equity-oriented reading practices.

Keywords: qualitative case study; comparative; cross-cultural; Chinese public school; Aboriginal Australia; K-2 reading

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1. Introduction: Literacy Beyond Technique

Current educational definitions of literacy in policy and research emphasize technical reading skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension (Castles et al., 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000). While these benchmarks serve useful purposes for monitoring skill development, they reflect a narrow, skill-based model that is yet mistakenly treated as culture-free. Standardized curricula and assessments overlook how literacy learning is embedded in cultural traditions, moral values, and epistemological assumptions (Compton-Lilly et al., 2020; Souto-Manning, 2021; Gu, 2021; Dobson & Fudiyartanto, 2023). In this study, literacy and reading are used interchangeably to highlight reading instruction as a culturally situated literacy practice.

The dominant literacy paradigms marginalize students whose knowledge systems diverge from Western, decontextualized models (Rigney, 2023c; Brock et al., 2023). In Australia, Aboriginal and non-Western communities have long called for culturally relevant teaching approaches that reflect their own traditions and epistemologies (Nakata, 2007; Paris & Alim, 2017; Muhammad, 2020; Rigney, 2023b). The standardized assessment

frameworks of Aboriginal Australia overlook oral, land-based, and relational literacy practices, perpetuating deficit views of Aboriginal learners (Nakata, 2007). In China, Confucian values such as moral cultivation, respect for hierarchy, and memorization shape reading instruction. While these approaches often produce strong standardized results, they tend to prioritize conformity and moral discipline over interpretive freedom and critical engagement (Li, 2012; Tan, 2015, 2017; Gu & Dobson, 2024). Research comparing Aboriginal Australian and Chinese philosophical traditions of reading remains limited, even though their cultural foundations strongly influence teaching methods, student participation, and achievement.

Comparing these contexts provides a cross-cultural lens for examining how different philosophical traditions shape the aims, values, and practices of reading education. Both societies have deeply rooted educational philosophies, including Aboriginal relational epistemologies grounded in Country and Confucian moral frameworks emphasizing social harmony, which continue to inform classroom practice. By analyzing these contrasting yet enduring traditions side by side, this study reveals how cultural foundations influence reading instruction, teacher expectations, and students' engagement with text. This comparative approach highlights how global literacy policies and standardized assessments interact with local epistemologies, exposing both tensions and possibilities for culturally sustaining pedagogy.

This study examines how literacy is shaped by cultural meaning systems and how educational expectations may conflict with community knowledge, producing epistemic dissonance—tensions that arise when school literacies diverge from community-based ways of knowing. It addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Aboriginal and Confucian educational philosophies shape the teaching and learning of reading in culturally specific classroom contexts?
2. In what ways do reading practices reflect or resist dominant literacy models within each educational context?

This comparative research highlights how Western and Confucian philosophies shape reading instruction, revealing both their cultural insights and epistemological constraints.

2. Literature Review

This study builds on a growing body of scholarship that challenges the dominance of technical definitions of literacy and foregrounds its cultural, ideological, and philosophical dimensions.

2.1. Western and Aboriginal Perspectives

Wagner (1984) showed that reading practices exist within cultural contexts and power structures through his distinction between autonomous and ideological models of literacy. Comber and Kamler (2007) and Luke (2012) extend this understanding by demonstrating that literacy is never neutral because it is shaped by policies, institutional agendas, and sociocultural assumptions about who and what counts as literate.

These insights have informed contemporary equity-oriented frameworks such as culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) and equity-centered instruction (Muhammad, 2020), both emphasizing the importance of honoring students' cultural and historical backgrounds in literacy education. Standardized approaches focused on decontextualized literacy skills are increasingly challenged for excluding students' real-life knowledge and their diverse languages (Rigney, 2023c, 2023b; Brock et al., 2023; Maher et al., 2024; Sisson et al., 2024). Policy-driven frameworks such as the *Science of Reading* movement in the United States and the *Phonics Screening Check* in England exemplify this

tension: both prioritize discrete skill mastery, decoding accuracy, and benchmark testing while overlooking cultural, linguistic, and contextual dimensions of literacy. These global examples demonstrate that conflicts between standardized assessment and culturally responsive pedagogy extend beyond Australia and China, reflecting a worldwide trend in literacy policy and instruction.

In Aboriginal Australian contexts, Nakata (2007) and Ober (2009) argue that dominant literacy curricula often exclude local knowledge systems. These exclusion highlights the disconnect between standardized and culturally grounded reading practices. Their advocacy for “both-ways” education calls for a genuine exchange between Aboriginal and Western epistemologies, transforming school literacy into a relational practice that respects multiple ways of knowing.

2.2. East Asian and Confucian Approaches

Li (2004), Tan (2015), and Wei and Wang (2024) show that reading instruction in Chinese contexts is closely tied to academic achievement, moral growth, family duties, and social harmony. These Confucian-informed perspectives (Gu & Dobson, 2024) differ markedly from Western liberal models of literacy that emphasize individualism, interpretive autonomy, and critical thinking. Within China’s centralized education system, literacy instruction is shaped and at times constrained by political agendas and cultural expectations prioritizing national cohesion, ideological alignment, and respect for authority (Gao, 2021). As a result, reading instruction often emphasizes memorization, model-answer reproduction, and moral discipline over dialogic or inquiry-based learning (Tan, 2017).

Standardized reading assessments in China have faced criticism for reinforcing narrow definitions of literacy that privilege conformity over creativity and for maintaining cultural biases that disadvantage students whose strengths fall outside state-sanctioned norms (Luke, 2012; Dobson, 2018). The national Chinese language curriculum assessment (Guo, 2013; Yang, 2015) focuses on character recognition, memorization, and standardized comprehension responses, which restrict interpretive thinking, creative expression, and recognition of regional linguistic diversity. These critiques align with international concerns about overreliance on technical reading metrics and highlight the need for justice-oriented literacy education that embraces cultural, personal, and contextual differences.

The following table illustrate the differences between these two perspectives discussed in this section, adapted from Wagner (1984), Bourdieu (1986), Nakata (2007), Ober (2009), Paris and Alim (2017), Brock et al. (2023); Maher et al. (2024), Rigney(2023a); Muhammad (2020), Tan (2015), and Wei and Wang (2024):

As shown in Table 1, these approaches reveal how cultural literacy practices operate within systems of power that determine which forms of knowledge and methods of teaching reading are recognized as legitimate.

Table 1. Cross-Cultural Literacy Framework Comparison.

Dimension.	Aboriginal Perspectives	Confucian Approaches
Epistemological Roots	Oral traditions, land-based knowledge, and student identity grounded in relationships with Country and community	Moral cultivation, collectivism, hierarchical order
Primary Literacy Goal	Affirming cultural identity, storytelling, narrative expression	Moral development, social responsibility, and academic excellence
Pedagogical Emphasis	Dialogic instruction, storytelling, culturally sustaining pedagogy that values community knowledge	Memorization, model-answer reproduction, moral alignment within structured classroom routines

View of Teacher	Facilitator of co-constructed meaning	Moral guide and authority figure
Cultural Alignment with School	Often misaligned—Aboriginal students' home literacy may differ from school expectations	Typically well-aligned with family and societal values, though this alignment can also reinforce conformity and limit interpretive autonomy

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws its foundation from multiple theoretical perspectives which combine philosophical, sociological, and decolonial approaches to analyze how cultural values and institutional power affect literacy development. The intersecting lenses reveal how reading practices exist within larger systems of meaning and hierarchy.

Gadamer's Hermeneutics (2004) forms the foundation of this framework, defining understanding as a dialogical and culturally situated process. From this perspective, reading is an interpretive act through which learners fuse prior knowledge with social and linguistic traditions to create meaning. Gadamer's notion of the *fusion of horizons* highlights that comprehension arises through interaction between one's historical context and the text, emphasizing that students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences are integral to interpretation.

Habermas' theory of knowledge-constitutive interests (Habermas, 1972) extends this interpretive foundation by distinguishing three domains of human inquiry—technical, practical, and emancipatory. The conventional literacy instruction tends to privilege technical domain, emphasizing efficiency and control while neglecting the practical and emancipatory process of education. This study draws on Habermas' theory to challenge narrow paradigms and advocate for teaching that view reading as a social and liberatory practice.

Bourdieu's concept of Cultural Capital (1986) further reveals how literacy systems reproduce social hierarchies. Schools legitimize specific linguistic and cultural forms as markers of competence, thereby marginalizing students whose knowledge practices differ from dominant norms. In this framework, standardized literacy functions as a mechanism that perpetuates inequities by privileging institutionalized forms of cultural capital.

While Bourdieu exposes how dominant literacies reproduce social hierarchies through the validation of specific cultural norms, Caribbean philosophy, particularly the concept of *overstanding*, pushes further by affirming alternative knowledge systems and promoting transformative, culturally rooted ways of knowing. Rooted in Rastafari and Caribbean epistemologies, *overstanding* entails a critical consciousness that goes beyond surface interpretation to validate knowledge derived from cultural affirmation, historical awareness, and resistance (Afari, 2007). The notion of overstanding calls for teaching and learning of reading that affirms Aboriginal and non-Western ways of knowing, encouraging students to read the world and the word in transformative and culturally sustaining ways.

The interpretive method of understanding according to Gadamer requires people to discover meaning through their cultural background and historical context. The concept of overstanding surpasses the framework which Gadamer established for understanding. Overstanding based on Rastafari and Caribbean epistemologies requires interpretation to develop into ethical dialog which leads to mutual recognition, respect, and transformative change through communication between different perspectives. The process of understanding requires uniting different perspectives, but overstanding achieves solidarity through ethical conduct and humble dialog which validates alternative knowledge systems instead of forcing them into mainstream traditions. This distinction highlights this study's central aim: to reimagine literacy as both a cultural and ethical practice grounded in mutual respect and epistemological inclusion.

In this study, overstanding serves as a guiding principle for reimagining reading as ethically and culturally grounded practice. It positions literacy as a relational practice which emerges from historical contexts, personal identities, and worldviews, which demand pedagogies rooted in humility, reciprocity, and epistemological inclusion.

The theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Gadamer and Habermas create a coherent theoretical framework for examining how reading develops through power, culture, and interpretation. Through Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, he shows how institutions support knowledge systems and language usage, yet Gadamer explains how meaning develops through cultural horizons during interpretive dialogs. Educational settings become visible through Habermas's knowledge-constitutive interests, which demonstrate how technical, practical, and emancipatory goals work together. The analysis connects philosophical concepts to classroom practice through a short examination of Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power and Bernstein's (2000) work on pedagogic control. The concepts explain how Confucian reading instruction uses classroom authority to enforce moral rules yet Aboriginal Australian dialogic practices fight against these disciplinary systems. The theoretical frameworks demonstrate that reading education functions as a cultural and ethical practice which exists within systems of power and interpretation.

4. Methodology

This research adopted a comparative qualitative case study (White & Cooper, 2022; Yin, 2017) to examine how cultural values shape reading education in Aboriginal Australia and urban China. Each case was treated as an embedded unit of analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to explore how reading is understood, taught, and experienced across distinct cultural and philosophical traditions.

4.1. Case 1: Aboriginal Australia

This case is drawn from the author's doctoral research conducted at a regional public elementary school in the Northern Territory, Australia, where approximately 40% of the student population identified as Aboriginal. At the time, I was a non-Aboriginal educator and doctoral researcher teaching a second-grade class of 24 students including 10 Aboriginal students and 14 non-Aboriginal students (13 white and 1 Indian). My position placed me within the school system but outside the cultural experiences of my Aboriginal students. More than a decade of teaching experience had deepened my concern that standard educational approaches to reading instruction often failed to acknowledge Aboriginal students' cultural knowledge and lived realities.

The Aboriginal participating students spoke local dialects at home, yet the curriculum was delivered in Standard Australian English using Western pedagogies. These cultural and linguistic mismatches raised critical questions: Why do Aboriginal students continue to underperform in reading despite ongoing reform efforts? What cultural biases underline common assessment tools and instructional practices? And how might schools better draw on students' cultural capital rather than interpret their differences as deficits? That doctoral research aimed to explore these questions and raise awareness of the vital role cultural experience plays in shaping young Aboriginal students' literacy development.

Participants: Six students from my own second-grade classroom participated in this study: three Aboriginal and three White students, all aged seven. They were purposefully selected to form three cross-cultural pairs, each consisting of one Aboriginal and one white student with similar reading proficiency (categorized as high, middle, or emerging). I served as both their classroom teacher and the researcher for this project.

Data generation: Data was collected over six months in the natural classroom setting to minimize disruptions. Formal assessment data included the PAT Reading and Fountas

& Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System, supplemented by a culturally relevant storybook intentionally selected by myself for its resonance with Aboriginal students' lived experiences. Although the storybook was selected by me, this decision was made in close consultation with the Aboriginal advisory group to ensure cultural appropriateness and authenticity. This collaborative process helped minimize researcher bias and reinforced this study's commitment to cultural integrity and relational accountability. These assessments were embedded within the instructional curriculum. The inclusion of culturally related texts allowed for comparison of students' reading performance on familiar versus decontextualized materials. Additional data included semi-structured interviews and student-generated narrative accounts of their daily routines to help analyze how students' cultural experience shape the way they learn and read. Interview and narratives were conducted during my release time while a specialist teacher led the rest of class.

Ethical Consideration: Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Australian university where I completed my doctoral studies and from the Department of Education governing the participating school. Prior to data collection, an Aboriginal advisory group comprising three Aboriginal staff members from the school was established to provide cultural and ethical guidance throughout the research process. All participants were drawn from my own second-grade classroom, which helped establish trust and familiarity; however, this dual role as teacher and researcher required ongoing attention to potential power imbalances, coercion, and researcher bias (Chilisa, 2019). Several measures were implemented to safeguard students' autonomy and ensure ethical participation. Informed consent and child assent were obtained through bilingual, orally explained forms to ensure that families and students clearly understood their rights to voluntary participation, confidentiality, and withdrawal at any time without consequence. Given the children's age and the broader context of educational marginalization, this relationship-based approach was essential to creating a secure and respectful research environment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually while a specialist teacher continued classroom instruction. Following each interview, participating students were guided to review the lesson content with the specialist teacher to ensure their learning progress remained continuous and aligned with their peers. Throughout this study, I used reflexive journaling to monitor my positionality and the potential influence of my authority, while receiving ongoing feedback from the Aboriginal advisory group. These strategies helped maintain trust, transparency, and relational accountability, minimizing coercive forces and reinforcing ethical rigor (Tilley, 2016) across all stages of this research.

Analytical lens: This research applied Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory to study how objectified (texts and assessments), embodied (oral storytelling, dialects), and institutionalized (standardized tools) literacy forms interacted in the classroom. The findings showed students performed poorly on decontextualized reading tests, yet their understanding improved dramatically when reading materials linked to their cultural background and personal experiences.

Research approach: This research design used a case study with culturally responsive research methods. Children's voices were prioritized, and Aboriginal epistemologies were respected through the formation and involvement of the advisory group. Rather than adopting an extractive model of data collection, this research was relational and collaborative (Nakata, 2007; Smith, 2008). The methodology offered a holistic understanding of children's literacy practices while challenging deficit-based policy discourses that often dominate mainstream educational narratives.

4.2. Case 2: Urban China

This case draws on my research project designed to amplify teachers' perspectives on how China's current mandated literacy curriculum shapes reading instruction in urban elementary schools (Grades 1–6). This study used a combination of semi-structured interviews with three literacy teachers and reflexive, autobiographical methods informed by the author's own experiences as both a student and educator in China. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted by Illinois State University. In addition to teachers' informed consent, institutional approval was obtained from each participating school's principal and the corresponding district education office prior to data collection, ensuring this study complied with both university and national research ethics protocols.

Participants and site: Three literacy teachers participated in this study, recruited through professional networks and a distributed flyer. All were employed in public elementary schools and used the nationally prescribed literacy curriculum. One participant was from a school in Shanghai with over 15 years of teaching experience. The other two were based in different schools in Zhejiang Province: one with more than 15 years of experience and the other with 2 years. Each teacher provided informed consent after reviewing the purpose and procedures of this study. One-on-one semi-structured interviews, each approximately 30 min in length, were conducted via Zoom and audio recorded. Participants' names were altered in transcripts to protect their identities.

Data generation: The data sources for this study included transcripts from teacher interviews, the researcher's personal experiences as both a student and teacher in China, entries from a reflective research journal, and official educational policy documents. The combination of sources delivered complex and diverse information about reading instruction, student reading experiences, and educational governance in urban Chinese elementary schools.

Analytical lens: The analysis was guided by Confucian philosophical principles emphasizing moral cultivation, social harmony, and hierarchical respect, which informed the interpretation of teachers' perspectives and classroom practices. The educational ethos extended beyond classroom boundaries because parents maintain high expectations and after-school tutoring remains widespread. Such forces work together to create an environment of structured literacy that incorporates moral elements.

The reflexive autobiographical method allowed me to analyze these practices by using cultural embeddedness, researcher positionality, and social context as interpretive lenses. As Ellis and her colleagues (2010) point out, reflexivity can be used as a methodological approach to ensure transparency, humility, and cultural sensitivity.

Research approach: This study adopted a case study (Yin, 2017) that produced "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) of how reading is socially structured and morally framed in Confucian educational traditions through interviews, policy analysis, and reflective journaling. Both structural and interpretive insights into the beliefs and practices that support literacy education were revealed.

Both research designs intentionally foregrounded reflexivity. I continued to be conscious of my dual positionalities: in the case of the Aboriginal Australians, I was an insider to the educational system but an outsider to the cultural experiences of the students; in the case of the Chinese, I am both an insider and an outsider as an analytical researcher in contrast to the Confucian educational tradition. My research questions, data interpretation, and ethical decision-making were all influenced by these positionalities. I recognized how my own cultural background and educational background shaped this study's interpretations. Therefore, I kept on ongoing self-reflection and emphasizing the importance of cultural humility in this cross-cultural comparative study.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), consistent with this study's interpretive and decolonial orientation. The analytic process was

iterative and reflexive rather than mechanical. First, all data sources, including interviews, observation notes, public educational documents, and reflective journals that were read multiple times to gain familiarity and note initial impressions. Second, meaning units relevant to cultural values, pedagogical interactions, and reading practices were inductively coded. These initial codes captured how participants described the purposes and experiences of reading. Third, codes were grouped into broader interpretive categories such as relational literacy in the Aboriginal Australian case and moral cultivation in the Chinese case. These categories emerged through constant comparison within and across data sets, supported by ongoing reflexive journaling and feedback from cultural advisors.

In the Aboriginal case, codes related to storytelling, kinship, and land-based understanding coalesced into the theme of relational literacy, reflecting reading as a practice embedded in relationships and Country. In the Chinese case, codes describing discipline, respect, and moral exemplarity formed the theme of moral cultivation, capturing how reading functioned as a moral and social act. Throughout this process, reflexivity guided interpretation by foregrounding the researcher's positionality and the cultural-philosophical frameworks shaping meaning-making. Themes were then reviewed for coherence and resonance with the theoretical framework, ensuring alignment between empirical data and philosophical interpretation.

In this study, overstanding was operationalized as an analytical lens to guide interpretation. It directed attention to moments in the data where participants engaged in ethical listening, reciprocal understanding, or relational meaning-making that transcended formal assessment norms. During coding and theme generation, instances reflecting mutual recognition, empathy, and culturally grounded interpretation were highlighted as evidence of overstanding in practice. This approach allowed the analysis to move beyond describing cultural differences toward examining how dialogic encounters fostered shared understanding and epistemic respect in reading classrooms.

4.3. Reflexivity

As a bicultural researcher with work experience in both Australia and China, I carried out this study. This study was conducted from an interpretive perspective which was influenced by my cultural background, teaching experience, and educational training. I did not see myself as an objective observer because I recognized that my positionality would affect the design, analysis, and interpretation of the data in both case studies (China and Australia). To reduce this influence, I employed several strategies: reflexive journaling to monitor my assumptions, triangulation of data sources to reduce single-perspective bias, and collaboration with cultural insiders to cross-check interpretations and challenge my presuppositions. As Ellis and her colleagues (2010) point out that reflexivity was used as a methodological approach to ensure transparency, humility, and cultural sensitivity in both settings.

The first case took place in an Aboriginal Australian classroom where I worked as a non-Aboriginal educator (outsider) within the school environment (insider). This research demanded ongoing ethical consideration while I worked together with a senior Aboriginal advisory group who offered essential guidance throughout the entire study. The research process followed community protocols while prioritizing Aboriginal epistemologies and preventing extractive data collection methods according to Smith (2008) and Nakata (2007). The process of reflexivity in this context required me to pause while paying close attention to information and make Aboriginal knowledge systems central to both data analysis and literacy practice.

In the Chinese case, my reflexivity was also shaped by a dual perspective: I was both an analytical researcher and someone with lived experience of China's Confucian educational traditions. Drawing on this positionality, I engaged in a reflexive, autobiographical

approach supported by interviews with literacy teachers across three urban schools. These teacher perspectives illuminated how moral development, discipline, and academic performance were deeply intertwined in the teaching of reading. My insider familiarity with the cultural scripts of Chinese education enabled deeper insight, while my researcher stance allowed for critical questioning of how pedagogical practices are normalized and reproduced. Reflexivity here involves acknowledging cultural continuity while remaining attentive to subtle tensions and contradictions (Hanson, 2012) within institutional logics.

The Hermeneutics, specifically fusion of horizons (p. 305) concept by Gadamer (2004) served as my interpretive framework for both research cases. The process of understanding required me to engage ethically with the historical contexts and relational dynamics that formed each setting rather than creating distance. I used reflexivity (Ellis et al., 2010) as a method to gain deeper cultural understanding by acknowledging my essential role in shaping both the research process and its findings.

5. Findings

5.1. Case 1—Aboriginal Australia: Reading as Relational and Land-Based

This case demonstrates how Bourdieu's and Gadamer's theories become visible in practice. It reveals the epistemic dissonance that arises when Western assessment tools which are built on objectified cultural capital and assumptions of neutral comprehension are applied to Aboriginal learners whose reading practice are grounded in relational, oral, and land-based ways of knowing.

Reading Assessment Disparities

Quantitative results from the PAT and F&P assessments suggested widespread underachievement among Aboriginal students: only one Aboriginal participant met grade-level reading benchmarks (Yang-Heim, 2023). However, according to Yang-Heim (2023), these outcomes sharply contradicted observations from narrative-based tasks and oral comprehension activities, which revealed rich linguistic abilities, cultural knowledge, and narrative competence. To illustrate this contrast more vividly, the following examples demonstrate how Aboriginal students' interpretations reflect relational and land-based epistemologies that differ markedly from standardized expectations.

For example, one student explained that an emu "waited at the waterhole not just to drink, but because he was waiting for the others to catch up—he knew they were tired." Another participant, when asked how kangaroos found sugar bags, said, "If you follow bees, they will take you to where you can find them." Such example shows that children's interpretations draw upon observation, empathy, and reciprocity—key values within Aboriginal ways of knowing—rather than upon textual cues alone.

When compared with standardized reading assessments such as the PAT and Fountas & Pinnell tests, which prioritize decontextualized vocabulary, literal recall, and inferential reasoning from print, these oral interpretations reveal a broader concept of comprehension rooted in relationship and experience. While the tests measured accuracy, sequencing, and word recognition, the students' responses demonstrated ethical reasoning, environmental awareness, and community interdependence. Such differences highlight the epistemic dissonance that occurs when standardized assessments privilege technical literacy skills while disregarding the relational, narrative, and moral dimensions of Aboriginal literacies.

These examples reveal the depth of students' interpretive and relational thinking, illustrating how their literacy practices embody cultural logics that standardized measures often fail to recognize.

Bourdieu's (1986) framework of cultural capital is also particularly illuminating here. The objectified cultural capital embedded in standardized assessments with texts reflecting Anglo-Western experiences, unfamiliar vocabulary, and decontextualized narratives

that failed to recognize the embodied cultural capital Aboriginal students demonstrated through Dreamtime story retellings, the use of local dialects, and land-based metaphors.

This case also surfaces the institutionalized cultural capital at play: formal literacy tools like the PAT and F&P assessments systematically marginalize Aboriginal ways of knowing by measuring reading as a disembodied technical skill rather than a contextual, relational practice. The students' better performance on oral retellings of Dreamtime stories and Aboriginal-themed texts indicates that the problem lies not with the learners but with the misrecognition of their cultural literacies.

Narrative and Relational Literacy

The Aboriginal Australian students demonstrated a unique approach to meaning-making through their storytelling which extended the cognitive assessment criteria of school-based literacy tests. Their responses reflected a relational characteristic, drawing from cultural perspectives which regard land, animals, and ancestors as active learning participants (Rigney, 2023a). These narratives expressed an ontological framework based on Aboriginal epistemologies where knowledge exists within lived relationships with Community, kin, and story. Through storytelling, students articulated their position within the network of relationships, revealing a culturally situated way of comprehension.

For example, when one student explained, "*The kangaroo jumped 'cause the land told him to,*" he invoked a relational ontology in which land is not background but animate and instructive (Yang-Heim, 2023). This was not simply figurative speech but an ontological claim that reflects Aboriginal epistemologies of Country as sentient and communicative.

Similar relational logics surfaced in this case. One student recounted how a tree "*had been there a long time and knew where was safe,*" using this rationale to explain why she chose it as a hiding spot during a game of tag. Here, land is framed not as inert scenery but as a wise elder, bearing knowledge through time and capable of advising young students. Similarly, a story told by another participating aboriginal student on how kangaroos obtained sugar bags. She said to me, "*if you follow bees, they will take you to where you can find them*" (Yang-Heim, 2023). This narrative reflects a worldview where animals possess social awareness and act with intention based on kinship-like responsibilities.

These oral responses challenge the assumed neutrality of school assessments and affirm Gadamer's (2004), notion of the "fusion of horizons" (p. 305) that argues understanding is always shaped by the interpreter's cultural and historical frame. When students' home horizons that are rooted in kinship, oral traditions, and an animist worldview are not acknowledged in school-based literacy, comprehension becomes both culturally misaligned and pedagogically constrained.

The case supports Habermas' (1972) position that knowledge acquisition extends beyond technical control because it serves both communicative and emancipatory functions. Reading becomes a dialogical encounter between worldviews when it moves away from decontextualized decoding tests, thus creating a space for mutual recognition and cultural affirmation. The children demonstrated narrative sophistication, cultural insight, and a sense of belonging through their voices when they read stories from their cultures or when their narratives received interpretive attention in this context.

5.2. Case 2—China: Reading as Moral Cultivation and Social Discipline

In this case, Confucian philosophical principles such as moral cultivation and hierarchical respect are not abstract ideals, they are embedded in daily pedagogical routines. These classroom practices exemplify how ethical and cultural traditions shape reading instruction, aligning closely with Habermas' practical knowledge interest (1972) and Gadamer's notion of tradition-bound understanding (2004). In contrast to the relational, land-based epistemologies evident in the Aboriginal Australian context, reading instruction in

urban Chinese classrooms was structured around a deeply Confucian philosophy of education that views literacy not merely as a means of information transfer, but as a vehicle for moral development, social order, and national cohesion (Li, 2012; Tan, 2015, 2017; Cui et al., 2025). This case draws on the author's reflexive, autobiographical accounts of teaching and observing reading lessons in three Chinese primary schools, complemented by interviews with teachers, as well as public policy documents.

Confucian Philosophy in Practice

The reading instruction followed a moral-educational model which incorporated Confucian values about social order, disciplinary practices, and virtuous behavior (Tu, 1996; Lee, 2004; Cui et al., 2025). The learning process started with group reading activities and memorization of classical texts before students participated in teacher-led discussions about moral values. The educational practices in this system seemed both familiar and restrictive to me because I experienced them firsthand and now study them critically. Through my personal experience I learned to understand the moral content in phrases and rituals that seem unimportant to outsiders, but my analytical perspective made me challenge how these rituals affect student identity and limit their interpretive abilities.

Participating teachers described themselves not only as instructors but as moral exemplars. One teacher noted, “当我教阅读时，我不仅是在纠正声调，而是在塑造品格。每一个词语里都藏着更深的含义” (Translation: When I teach reading, I'm not just correcting tones, I'm shaping character. Every word has a lesson hidden in it). The other teacher shared, “孩子们必须用心去阅读，不是有口无心(念)，阅读教会人纪律和善良。” (Translation: Children must learn to read with their heart, not just their mouth. Reading teaches discipline and kindness). Corrections were often firm and public, consistent with the belief that good teaching involves directive, rather than dialogical or guidance. This is also reflected in Lee's (2004) study that classroom interactions emphasize listening, obedience, and respect for hierarchy over student voice or interpretation.

From a Gadamerian perspective (Gadamer, 2004), this pedagogical model reflects a different “fusion of horizons” (p. 305) that values historical continuity over mutual transformation. Understanding is achieved through alignment with tradition rather than negotiation between perspectives (Gadamer, 2004).

This instructional approach also illustrates Habermas' (1972) notion of technical and practical knowledge interests at work. On one hand, technical mastery that values precision in oral reading, correct phrasing, and literal comprehension. On the other hand, reading serves a practical function to ensure that students internalize socially accepted norms, thus contributing to the moral fabric of society. Emancipatory interests such as critical thinking or the questioning of dominant ideologies that are noticeably absent.

5.3. Cultural Capital and Family Expectation

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital helps explain how reading success in this context is sustained not only within schools but through alignment with family practices and societal expectations. As one teacher explained, “家长常常要求我给‘正确答案’。他们担心孩子如果写出自己的想法，会出错、失分”。 (Translation: Parents often ask me to send home the ‘correct’ answer. They worry that if their child writes something original, they'll make mistakes and lose marks). Parents were deeply involved in reinforcing school-based literacy practices, often requiring children to memorize school approved responses verbatim. Urban Chinese parents played an active role in reinforcing school-based literacies. As documented in fieldnotes, and resonant with my own upbringing, parents frequently reviewed reading comprehension exercises at home and expected precise reproduction of model answers. This dual perspective, as both researcher and cultural insider, sharpened my awareness of how family-school alignment promotes academic success but often discourages interpretive autonomy. I observed in interviews how teachers, echoing what I

had once experienced as a student, felt pressure to prioritize correctness over exploration due to parental expectations and institutional accountability.

This home-school alignment created what Bourdieu would describe as a seamless reproduction of institutional values. The embodied cultural capital of students such as memorization skills, and language use matched the institutionalized expectations of school assessments. Reading materials reinforced objectified capital, privileging Confucian virtues, and school expectations.

The outcome was a high degree of internalization: Chinese learners came to see reading not only as a school subject but as a moral duty and a social pathway to success. Literacy was deeply entangled with filial piety, academic achievement, and national pride. As one teacher explained during an interview: “阅读既锻炼头脑，也培养品格。一个会阅读的孩子，也是一个好孩子。” (Translation: Reading trains both the mind and the character. A good reader is a good person). Yet this tight alignment also limited interpretive freedom. While it supported high test performance, it often stifled creativity and encouraged conformity over exploration, and accuracy over inquiry (Tan, 2017; Luke & Freebody, 2000; Rigney, 2023a). The very mechanisms that promoted academic achievement simultaneously narrowed the scope of literacy’s potential. The quality of being a “good student” seems to be primarily measured by academic achievement, which reinforces a narrow definition of success. Emancipatory interests such as fostering critical thinking or questioning dominant ideologies are noticeably absent.

6. Discussion

The themes of relational literacy and moral cultivation illustrate how reading instruction reflects broader systems of cultural meaning and educational power. These findings interpreted through the lenses of Bourdieu, Gadamer, and Habermas, reveal how power, culture, and interpretation shape classroom practice. Bourdieu explains how schooling privileges certain linguistic and moral forms, while Gadamer reframes reading as a dialogic act of meaning-making. Habermas bridges these perspectives by showing how technical, practical, and emancipatory aims intersect in classroom life. Likewise, Foucault’s (1977) concept of disciplinary power and Bernstein’s (2000) idea of pedagogic control clarify how authority and conformity operate, particularly in Confucian settings. Overall, reading emerges as a culturally situated and ethically charged act grounded in broader epistemological, relational, and moral worlds. When educational systems fail to recognize the cultural foundations of literacy, they risk distorting learning into acts of compliance or deficit measurement. By bringing Aboriginal Australian and Chinese literacy practices into dialog, this study challenges dominant notions of reading success and invites educators to reimagine literacy through the lens of overstanding.

Western and Confucian philosophies of education, though distinct in origin, share universalizing tendencies. The Western model privileges technical rationality and individual achievement, while the Confucian model emphasizes moral order and social harmony. Both frameworks constrain pedagogical freedom and limit recognition of diverse ways of knowing; neither alone ensures equity or cultural responsiveness. By situating Aboriginal relational epistemologies and dialogic interpretations of overstanding alongside these dominant paradigms, this study challenges what counts as legitimate knowledge and reading success. This framing situates the discussion of cultural capital and teacher roles within broader debates on education and power.

Pedagogically, overstanding functioned as a transformative principle that repositioned reading as an ethical and relational act. In Aboriginal classrooms, it appears when teachers validated children’s storytelling as legitimate literacy practices tied to Country and kinship. In Chinese classrooms, it surfaced when teachers encouraged interpretive dialog around moral texts, inviting students to connect classical lessons to their own lives.

Across both contexts, overstanding illuminated how reading could foster intercultural empathy and ethical awareness rather than mere compliance with standardized expectations.

6.1. *Beyond Deficit: Recognizing Cultural Capital*

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital explains how institutional literacy systems value certain forms of knowledge while devaluing others. In the case of Aboriginal Australians, formal assessments that prioritized western-centric reading standards failed to acknowledge students' storytelling abilities, use of land-based metaphors, and oral retellings of Dreamtime stories. In China, cultural capital aligned closely with institutional values, but at the cost of interpretive openness. Students succeeded by mastering the "model or perfect answer," but often lacked opportunities to engage with texts critically or creatively.

This comparison shows that alignment with school culture does not ensure deeper literacy engagement, particularly when it emphasizes reproduction over reflection or control over connection.

6.2. *The Role of Teachers: Moral Guides and Cultural Interpreters*

The way literacy education operates depends heavily on the beliefs and actions of teachers. In China, teachers served as moral leaders (Li, 2004, 2012), guiding students toward Confucian moral values and textual interpretations. Their authority preserved order but limited dialogical exchange. In contrast, the Aboriginal Australian classroom revealed the potential of teachers as listeners and co-narrators who hold space for Aboriginal children's ways of knowing to surface and take form.

Across both contexts, teachers act as philosophical agents shaping what counts as knowledge. Freire (1970/2000) urged educators to move beyond the "banking model" of education (p. 81), which treats students as passive vessels to be filled with information. Memorization without interpretation turns learning into a mechanical process rather than a meaningful dialog. Freire instead calls for teachers to work alongside students as co-investigators, fostering collaborative and critical inquiry across cultures.

6.3. *Implications*

The comparative findings call for a new literacy paradigm grounded in overstanding—a term drawn from Rastafari and Caribbean philosophy (Afari, 2007) that emphasizes relational knowing, ethical listening, and mutual recognition. As Gadamer (2004, p. 305) reminds us through his concept of the "fusion of horizons", understanding emerges from the interplay of differing cultural perspectives. Yet, in both Confucian and Anglo-Western traditions, dominant literacy paradigms often suppress alternative worldviews, reducing opportunities for dialogical learning.

Habermas' (1972) knowledge interests offer further insight. Viewing literacy solely as a technical skill limits opportunities for communicative and emancipatory engagement. Overstanding enables educators to transform literacy into a cultural and ethical practice which supports diversity and develops teaching-student partnerships for meaning co-creation.

Rather than viewing students as passive recipients of knowledge, it positions them as culturally situated learners with complex epistemologies. In both Aboriginal Australian and Chinese contexts, dominant literacy models—whether misaligned or rigidly aligned with students' home cultures—tend to restrict more expansive, relational, and culturally affirming engagements with reading.

In Rastafari epistemology, overstanding signifies a form of understanding that surpasses surface-level comprehension, enabling marginalized knowledge systems while

resisting assimilation. It calls educators to move beyond basic understanding and cultivate methods that value ethical listening, narrative diversity, and epistemological humility.

Overstanding illuminates how both Aboriginal Australian and Confucian Chinese educational traditions expand literacy beyond technical skill, though they do so through distinct cultural logics.

In Aboriginal Australian contexts, overstanding aligns with relational understanding, storytelling, and stewardship of Country (Martin, 2007; Yunkaporta, 2009). These practices affirm knowledge as lived and shared through relationships with people, places, and spirit. They resist deficit views of Aboriginal literacy and challenge Western frameworks that separate reading from identity and belonging. Rooted in relational ontology, Aboriginal overstanding transforms literacy into an ethical and communal act of knowing. This approach builds on the goals of Australia's "two-way" education models (Department of Education NT, 2006), which sought to bridge Aboriginal and Western knowledge systems but often fell short due to limited policy and teacher preparation (Devlin, 2011; Fogarty et al., 2018).

In the Chinese context, overstanding draws upon Confucian traditions of moral cultivation and social harmony (Li, 2012; Tu, 1996) but reframes them toward greater dialogic and interpretive openness. While conventional reading instruction in China often emphasizes conformity, memorization, and moral order (Tan, 2015, 2017; Luke & Freebody, 2000), integrating overstanding invites critical reflection and intercultural dialog without abandoning core cultural values. This approach recognizes students' diverse experiences and interpretive agency while preserving the Confucian emphasis on ethical development. The *New Curriculum Standards for Chinese Language* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022) reflect this direction, supporting literacy models that integrate moral cultivation with esthetic appreciation and critical thinking (Cui et al., 2025).

Rather than suggesting that one system is superior, this comparison shows how overstanding deepens literacy as a moral, relational, and dialogic practice. In Aboriginal Australia, it restores relational knowing grounded in Country; in China, it extends moral learning toward interpretive engagement. Across both, overstanding highlights literacy as a cultural and ethical process that values connection, reflection, and mutual understanding.

Despite their differences, both educational environments find common ground through overstanding which enables cultural sustaining and socially just literacy education. Implementing this approach requires systemic changes in teaching, curriculum, and institutional frameworks grounded in local knowledge systems. Curricula in Aboriginal Australian contexts requires the integration of oral narratives, land-based metaphors, and kinship-informed reasoning as fundamental rather than supplementary literacies (Nakata, 2007; Rigney, 2023a). In Chinese classrooms, the practice of overstanding extends Confucian-based models by fostering dialogic interpretation, ethical responsiveness, and engagement with linguistic and cultural diversity. Teachers should use inquiry and reflection to create meaning with students about classical texts while respecting both traditional knowledge and modern changes.

To achieve this shift, the assessment systems need to move beyond standardized testing that measures achievement through scores (Li & Gu, 2023). Alternative assessment methods should utilize local interpretive frameworks together with community languages and culturally grounded meaning-making practices (Paris & Alim, 2017; Dobson & Fudiyartanto, 2023). Teacher preparation programs need to equip educators with cultural interpretive skills and ethical responsiveness to design community-focused pedagogies rather than enforce external standards (Dobson, 2018). Professional development

programs should concentrate on teaching culturally sustaining pedagogies together with place-based literacies and school-community partnerships (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Compton-Lilly et al., 2020; Gao, 2021). Curriculum development needs to integrate vertical disciplinary rigor with horizontal cultural relevance to position literacy as both a cognitive practice and an ethical commitment (Muhammad, 2020).

6.4. The Need for Policy Support

However, these shifts cannot occur at the classroom level alone. The lack of educational policy backing makes it impossible to establish sustainable and cohesive efforts for overstanding literacy development. Systemic change needs policies which support funding culturally responsive resources while prioritizing assessment reform and validating Aboriginal and local knowledge as valid curricular content.

The development of teacher education programs and school accountability frameworks need to support reading success models that are inclusive, justice-oriented, and culturally grounded. The purpose of literacy education should evolve from its current role of social exclusion and sorting to become a tool for cultural affirmation, critical dialog, and mutual understanding. Literacy education should establish dialog spaces between worldviews to enable students and teachers to create shared meanings despite their differences.

The practice of overstanding literacy requires us to transform reading from technical skill development into a cultural practice which respects traditions while creating opportunities for change and achieving educational fairness.

7. Limitations

While this comparative case study provides valuable insights into culturally grounded literacy practices, it also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The two cases differ in methodological emphasis: the Aboriginal Australian case draws on classroom-based empirical data, student reading assessments, interviews, and narratives; while the Chinese case does not include direct student data, this was an intentional methodological decision grounded in ethical considerations and cultural respect. Given the sensitivity of educational hierarchies and the researcher's evolving access to school communities, the Chinese study focused on teacher interviews, classroom observations, public curriculum documents, and reflective narratives. This study provided deep understanding about Confucian literacy practices both in philosophical terms and institutional implementation. The absence of student voice should therefore be viewed as a culturally responsive research choice which placed relational trust and ethical integrity above all else. However, future research could use this established base to include student perspectives through ethical and contextually suitable methods.

In addition, longitudinal studies of overstanding could help access its impact on student outcomes across multiple time periods. Additional research across different cultural and linguistic contexts would help develop and validate the use of overstanding as both a teaching method and ethical approach for classrooms dealing with globalization and migration and policy standardization. Research in this area will deepen understanding of literacy as relational and context-dependent practice.

8. Conclusions

This study contributes to critical philosophy of education by revealing how reading instruction embodies competing moral and epistemological traditions. It argues for an ethics of overstanding that values relational dialog, cultural humility, and epistemic justice within literacy education. Through overstanding, reading transcends text

comprehension to become an act of listening to different perspectives while respecting personal experiences which creates just and inclusive futures through word power. This study calls for transformation of literacy into a cultural and ethical practice that validates multiple epistemologies rather than enforcing dominant standards. Achieving this goal depends on sustained cultural dialog, philosophical humility, and structural change. In an increasingly divided world, overstanding literacy offers a vital framework for reimagining education as an inclusive and deeply human endeavor.

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