

# BULLETIN

## From the President

To those of us in LDA whose main concern is with children with learning difficulties, the continuing high rate of children who struggle with reading is a matter of real concern. Information from the results of international surveys such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) point to the relatively low level of reading achievement of Australian students as compared with students in other countries, as well as a relative decline in reading standards compared to other countries, while the results of the NAPLAN testing indicate an increase in the number and percentage of students from Year 3 to Year 9 who are at or below the minimum standard for reading (from 13.4 per cent at Year 3 to 23.3 per cent at Year 9). This failure at the school level is continued into the workforce, as indicated by reports such as that of the Australian Industry Group's report into workplace literacy and numeracy, which concludes that inadequate skill level in these basic areas is now a defining feature of the Australian workforce.

This problem is not unique to Australia.

Robert Sweet, President of the National Right to Read Foundation, in his 2013 Annual Letter, drew attention to the continuing failure in

the United States to teach children to read, resulting in one third of the American public being unable to read proficiently. He argues that there is no excuse for this problem, that we have the tools and the knowledge to teach children to read, and that if taught correctly all children can learn to read. Some children may take longer than others to learn, and there are a few, a small fraction of the total population, who have some kind of neurological dysfunction that prevents them from learning to read. The challenge is in waking up the public to the fact that there is a solution to this problem, and so to bring about change.

The same point is made by Jennifer Buckingham, Kevin Wheldall and Robyn Beaman-Wheldall in their recent paper 'Why Jaydon Can't Read: The triumph of ideology over evidence in teaching reading'. As Jennifer Buckingham pointed out in her article based on this paper in the last issue of the *LDA Bulletin*, "The problem of low literacy is not one of funding and it is not intractable. The problem is an entrenched gap between research and practice; despite what we know about teaching reading, too many children are not receiving effective, evidence-based reading instruction."

What can we in LDA do about this? As Robert Sweet points out, it is a David and Goliath struggle, where it is up to "ordinary, unknown folks like you and me" to challenge



the educational establishment, and to overcome the influences of an entrenched ideology that has dominated reading instruction in Australia over the past 20 to 30 years.

The core of the problem, as identified by both Sweet and Buckingham et al., is the teacher training institutions. Sweet refers to the "ground-breaking report" of the National Council on Teacher Quality, issued in June 2013, which provides data on 1130 institutions that prepare 99 per cent of the nation's traditionally trained new teachers. This report found that 80 per cent of prospective elementary teachers are not receiving even minimal preparation in all five components of early reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension), and less than 10 per cent of rated programs earned three stars or more, with only four programs, all at secondary level, earning the maximum of four stars.

Continued page 3 >

### LDA Mission Statement

Learning Difficulties Australia is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research, both in the classroom and through individualised instruction.

For more details of LDA activities, professional development opportunities and publications, visit our website at [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org)

P1 From the President

## SYMPOSIUM ON THE DYSLEXIA DEBATE

- P4 The dyslexia debate: some key myths – Julian Elliott
- P7 Should we dispense with the D word – Kevin Wheldall, Anne Castles, and Mandy Nayton
- P10 The Dyslexia Debate – Alison Clarke
- P12 The Dyslexia Debate: More heat than light? – Julian Elliott
- P14 Why Jaydon Can't Read: A forum on fixing literacy – Jennifer Buckingham, Justine Ferrari, and Tom Alegounarias
- P25 Responses to the statutory Year One phonics screening check in England according to media coverage – Debbie Hepplewhite
- P29 What's working in the West – and why aren't we there yet? – Wendy Moore
- P33 Read like a Demon: Milo and the Melbourne Football Club – Maureen Pollard
- P35 More than 'I do, we do, you do' – Lorraine Hammond

## LDA NEWS

- P3 LDA submissions to government bodies
- P11 Call for nominations – LDA General Awards 2014
- P13 Louisa Moats to visit Australia in 2015
- P38 Professional Development Calendar
- P39 Consultant News
- P40 Letter to the Editors

## LDA Council 2013–14

### OFFICE BEARERS

President: Dr Molly de Lemos  
President-Elect: Jan Roberts  
Immediate Past-President: Dr Lorraine Hammond  
Treasurer: Dr Pye Twaddell  
Secretary: Alison McMurtrie

### COUNCIL MEMBERS

Diane Barwood\*  
Professor Anne Castles  
Alison Clarke\*  
Mary Delahunty  
Pam Judge\*  
Dr Alison Madelaine  
Dr Nicole Todd  
Jo Whithear\*  
Dr Wendy Moore\*  
*\*New members of Council, 2013–2014*

### COMMITTEES AND COVENORS

Executive/Management Group Convenor: Molly de Lemos  
Administration Committee Convenor: Molly de Lemos  
Publications Committee Convenor: Alison Madelaine  
Consultants' Committee Convenor: Diane Barwood  
Professional Development Committee Convenor: Lorraine Hammond

### PUBLICATIONS

Executive Editor: Alison Madelaine  
Journal Editors: Kevin Wheldall and Alison Madelaine  
Bulletin Editors: Kevin Wheldall and Alison Madelaine

### WEBSITE

Website Editor: Pye Twaddell

### REFERRAL SERVICES

Acting Referral Officer, Victoria: Ruth Jeffery

### ADMINISTRATION

Administration Officer: Kerrie McMahon

## Contacts

PO Box 349  
Carlton South VIC 3053  
ABN: 26 615 758 577  
Reg: AOO13706L. ISSN: 1321 – 3369

**LDA Office and General Enquiries:**  
Kerrie McMahon Ph/Fax: (03) 9890 6138  
Email: [ldaquery@bigpond.net.au](mailto:ldaquery@bigpond.net.au)  
[www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org)

**Consultant Enquiries:**  
Diane Barwood Ph: (03) 9836 9282 M: 0408 001 847  
Email: [dianebarwood@gmail.com](mailto:dianebarwood@gmail.com)

**Referral Service, Victoria:**  
Ruth Jeffery Ph: (03) 5964 9296  
Email: [ruth@professionalresources.com.au](mailto:ruth@professionalresources.com.au)



Similarly, the Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in 2005 found that less than 10 per cent of time in compulsory units of primary teaching degrees was devoted to reading instruction, with less than 5 per cent of time in half of the courses surveyed. As Buckingham et al. note, subsequent surveys and inquiries have found that not much has changed, a view supported by recent teacher graduate Johanna O'Farrell in an article published

in *The Age* in December last year, who, based on her own experiences, expressed the view that "teaching courses around the country have tossed aside any sort of rigour, routine and repetition when it comes to classroom learning, especially in the junior years".

In this context the announcement on 19 February 2014 of the establishment of a Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group to provide advice on how teacher

education programmes could be improved to better prepare new teachers with the practical skills needed for the classroom is of particular significance. We hope that this will lead to the kind of change that is essential to bring about fundamental changes in ideology and practice relating to the teaching of reading in Australian schools.

*Dr Molly de Lemos  
President, LDA*

## LDA submissions to government bodies

**LDA has made submissions to two government inquiries.**

**Submission to the Inquiry of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs into speech pathology services in Australia**

The first submission was to the Inquiry of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs into the prevalence of different types of speech, language and communication disorders and speech pathology services in Australia.

This submission referred to the overlap between the work of speech pathologists, whose major area of interest is oral language, and specialist teachers who provide support for students with reading difficulties. The submission pointed to the need and value of speech pathology services, particularly in terms of the early identification of children with language problems that, if identified early, could lead to interventions that might prevent or ameliorate subsequent reading problems. The LDA submission put the view that more routine collaboration between speech pathologists and educators could improve literacy outcomes for all students.

**Submission to the Review of the National Curriculum**  
The second submission was to the Review of the National

Curriculum, to be undertaken by Professor Ken Wiltshire and Dr Kevin Donnelly.

The LDA submission welcomed this review, given the increasing concerns about student outcomes, particularly in the area of basic literacy and reading. It reiterated the points made in the LDA Submission to the Draft Australian Curriculum in May 2010, which drew attention to flaws in the section of the curriculum relating to the teaching of beginning reading. It noted that the fundamental problem of this section of the curriculum is that it is based on a model which fails to identify the critical processes that are necessary for the effective teaching of reading, and that failure to distinguish between strategies used for word recognition and strategies used to gain meaning from text leads to the encouragement of inappropriate strategies in teaching children to read.

It also noted that the curriculum is only one side of the story. It is also necessary to address the issue of teacher training. For effective implementation of the curriculum, it is necessary to have teachers who have a good understanding of the processes involved in learning to read and the research evidence relating to effective and ineffective approaches to the teaching of reading.

*The full text of these submissions can be downloaded from the LDA website at [www.ldaaustralia.org](http://www.ldaaustralia.org).*

## About your Bulletin

Deadline for next issue of *LDA Bulletin*: 31 August 2014

### Joint Editors:

Kevin Wheldall

(Email: [kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au](mailto:kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au))

Alison Madelaine

(Email: [alison.madelaine@mq.edu.au](mailto:alison.madelaine@mq.edu.au))

### Assistant Editors:

Molly de Lemos

Robyn Wheldall

Please submit articles for the *Bulletin* to:

[ldapublications@gmail.com](mailto:ldapublications@gmail.com). (Please indicate 'Article for LDA Bulletin' in the subject line.)

Please send correspondence about the *Bulletin* or letters for publication to either of the Joint Editors.

Articles and advertising in the *Bulletin* do not necessarily reflect the opinions or carry the endorsement of Learning Difficulties Australia.

Requests to reprint articles from the *Bulletin* should be addressed to the Joint Editors.

# The dyslexia debate: some key myths



**Julian Elliott**

*In our book, *The Dyslexia Debate*, recently published by Cambridge University Press, Elena Grigorenko and I sought to provide a detailed examination of the dyslexia construct in terms of its conceptualisation, operationalisation, and relevance for assessment and intervention. To achieve this, we drew upon extant knowledge across a number of relevant disciplines – genetics, neuroscience, psychology, and education. Our conclusion was that dyslexia was no longer a term that had value for research or practice and, as a result, we recommended that this should be discontinued. In its place there should be a more fine-grained account of particular reading and associated difficulties.*

*As the book adopts a heavily scientific stance that does not make easy reading for the non-specialist, I sought to outline some of the key issues, and the implications of these for educational and clinical practice, in a briefing paper that is reproduced below.*

## In search of a diagnosis: five key dyslexia myths

Many children struggle to learn to read, and some experience literacy problems throughout their lives. When these difficulties become evident, a common reaction from observers runs along the following lines: “Perhaps your child is suffering from dyslexia. You might be wise to get this checked out.” When dyslexia is diagnosed, the parental reaction is often: “Thank goodness that the true nature of my child’s problem has finally been discovered. I only wish that this had been diagnosed earlier, but at least we shall now get the kind of help that my child needs.”

One can locate a series of myths that lie behind these beliefs.

- Myth A: Dyslexia is a special kind of problem that is found in only some children who struggle to decode text.

- Myth B: Special tests are needed to identify which of these children are dyslexic and which are ‘just poor readers’.
- Myth C: Diagnosing dyslexia will remove the risk of false attributions of laziness or stupidity.
- Myth D: A diagnosis of dyslexia will help teachers to select the most powerful ways to intervene.
- Myth E: A diagnosis of dyslexia should rightly result in the allocation of special accommodations (particularly in exams) and additional resources.

The reality is that each of these beliefs is problematic.

**Myth A: Dyslexia is a special kind of problem that is found in only some children who struggle**

**to decode text.**

While many people assume that specialists agree about what is meant by the term dyslexia, the reality is that it is understood in many different ways. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that estimates of dyslexia often range from 4-20 per cent of the population.

Beyond an agreed focus upon decoding, it begins to get complicated. For some, dyslexia simply refers to all who experience a particular difficulty in decoding text. Identifying this problem for an individual is relatively easy and the child’s teachers should be capable of doing this by means of classroom observations and formal reading tests. Others suggest, however, that not all who struggle in this way are dyslexic and, for this reason, detailed clinical assessment is necessary to identify which poor readers have dyslexia and which do not. Sometimes, the latter group is known as ‘garden variety’ poor readers. As *The Dyslexia Debate* demonstrates, the basis for determining a dyslexic subgroup from a wider pool of poor readers is highly problematic. While a number of symptoms are often found in samples of poor readers, it is wholly unclear which of these might be necessary for a diagnosis of dyslexia.

For some, it is a serious mistake to associate dyslexia ‘narrowly’ with poor decoding as this discounts problems with a range of everyday academic, organisational and self-regulatory skills. Indeed, in the opinion of many clinicians, it is possible to have dyslexia even when one’s current literacy skills are sound. Such a position greatly complicates matters and opens the floodgates for claims for resources and special assistance. University students diagnosed with dyslexia, for example, whose reading is relatively sound, may be deemed to require help with more general study skills such as how to organise and structure written assignments.

Such differences of opinion render problematic any suggestion that diagnoses of dyslexia can be consistent, meaningful, and valid. They may be welcome, but they can

hardly be considered to be scientific.

Some of the various ways that dyslexia is understood by researchers, clinicians and teachers can be found in the following list *The Dyslexia Debate* explains in some detail the problems associated with these conceptions.

- Anyone who struggles with accurate single word decoding.
- Anyone who struggles with accurate and/or fluent decoding.
- Those for whom decoding is merely one element of a more pervasive dyslexic condition marked by a range of comorbid features. This can include so-called 'compensated dyslexics' who no longer experience a severe reading difficulty.
- Those who score at the lowest end of the normal distribution on an appropriate reading test. Cut-off points may vary greatly and typically range between 5-20 per cent.
- Those whose decoding difficulties cannot be explained in alternative ways (e.g., because of severe intellectual or sensory impairment, socio-economic disadvantage, poor schooling, or emotional/behavioural difficulty).
- Those for whom there is a significant discrepancy between reading performance and IQ.
- Those whose reading difficulty is unexpected.
- Those whose poor reading contrasts with strengths in other intellectual and academic domains.
- Those whose reading problems are biologically determined.
- Those whose reading problems are marked by certain associated cognitive difficulties (in particular, phonological, rapid naming, and verbal memory deficits).
- Those poor readers who also present with a range of symptoms commonly found in dyslexics (e.g., poor motor, arithmetical, or language skills, visual difficulties, and low self-esteem).
- Those who demonstrate a discrepancy between reading and listening comprehension.

- Those who fail to make meaningful progress in reading even when provided with high-quality, evidence-based forms of intervention.

### Myth B: Special tests are needed to identify which of these children are dyslexic and which are 'just poor readers'.

One of the biggest myths associated with dyslexia is that it should be defined in relation to intelligence. The so-called 'discrepancy definition' of dyslexia recognises as genuine dyslexics only those whose level of reading is significantly worse than would be expected on the basis of their intelligence (typically measured by an IQ test). Research over the past 20 years has demonstrated the folly of this belief. Puzzlingly, while the discrepancy model has been discredited (and is no longer advocated by dyslexia lobby groups), it is still widely employed by clinicians. In our book, we outline several reasons for this:

1. The link between IQ and dyslexia has a long history and is now steeped in everyday understandings that are not easy to break.
2. Those with IQs that place them in the lowest 1 per cent of the population (and who would normally struggle to cope in mainstream schooling because of their intellectual difficulties) often encounter problems in learning to read.
3. IQ is often used as a criterion when selecting 'dyslexics' for research studies. However, in such instances, this step is usually taken to help isolate underlying cognitive factors that might not otherwise be easily revealed, not because this should be taken as a meaningful diagnostic criterion.
4. Some advocate the continued use of IQ in the assessment of dyslexia because of a perceived lack of alternative procedures. Such a position, of course, is unjustifiable.
5. IQ tests have long been used in the US and many other countries for determining eligibility for additional education services.

## The Dyslexia Debate



JULIAN G. ELLIOTT  
ELENA L. GRIGORENKO

Longstanding practices such as these are not easy to dispel.

6. There is a clear relationship between IQ and higher order reading skills of inference, deduction and comprehension. Thus IQ tests may be valuable for providing understanding of broader learning difficulties.
7. The administration of IQ tests is restricted to certain professionals and thus has an influential role in maintaining and preserving professional influence and status.
8. The erroneous notion that dyslexics are all highly intelligent individuals who struggle with decoding (itself a low-level cognitive task) can prove powerful and liberating.

Some argue that while IQ tests are inappropriate for a diagnosis of dyslexia, other tests of underlying cognitive processes (e.g., working memory, rapid naming) can be employed to help to diagnose dyslexia. *The Dyslexia Debate* reviews this issue in detail and shows that relevant studies have provided contrasting findings that have limited value for the design of effective forms of reading intervention. Our current knowledge indicates that it is generally better to concentrate directly on academic skills rather than seeking to improve underlying processes.

Continued next page >

### **Myth C: Diagnosing dyslexia will remove the risk of false attributions of laziness or stupidity.**

Many poor readers have been unduly hurt by being treated as lacking in intelligence and a diagnosis of dyslexia often seems to be a sound way to counter this. However the real problem to be tackled is not that dyslexia had earlier failed to be identified but, rather, that assumptions of low intelligence are made on the basis of reading skills. In reality, IQ and decoding ability are largely unrelated and, for this reason, teachers need to ensure that poor literacy skills do not translate into classroom demands that fail to reflect the child's true intellectual abilities.

The charge of indolence is rather more problematic. Of course, many children will become less motivated and engaged at school when they struggle to cope with literacy. In such cases, some may describe the child as lazy. This term has a pejorative ring that is not helpful and is certainly best avoided. The key task is to encourage the struggling reader to maximise effort even when significant gains are not evident.

One particular danger of using the term dyslexia to offset attributions of laziness is that this criticism might be seen as a fair description of poor readers who have not been given this diagnosis.

In summary, using the term dyslexia to avoid improper understandings of a child as lazy or stupid is to fail to deal with the real problem of inappropriate attributions.

### **Myth D: A diagnosis of dyslexia will help teachers to select the most powerful ways to intervene.**

There is a widespread belief that a diagnosis of dyslexia will help point to appropriate forms of educational intervention. This is wholly incorrect. There is no effective treatment for those who are adjudged to have dyslexia that differs from accepted practices for all children who struggle to decode. What is clearly evident is that the extensive use of so-called 'whole language' approaches which downplay the

role of structured and targeted phonics teaching as a key element of a broader literacy programme is inappropriate for poor readers. A wealth of research evidence has clearly shown that, in comparison with normally reading peers, those who struggle to acquire reading skills typically require more individualised, more structured, more explicit, more systematic, and more intense reading inputs.

High quality research studies that seek to find ways to help tackle severe reading difficulties often refer to their participants as having dyslexia but in the great majority of cases, this term is used as a generic descriptor with no differentiation between dyslexic and other poor decoders.

To date, accumulated scientific studies have not supported the notion that children with severe reading difficulties (whether they are deemed dyslexic or not) can be helped significantly by the use of:

- Physical exercises/perceptual-motor training (sometimes misleadingly labelled as "brain-based"),
- Coloured lenses or overlays,
- Vision therapies,
- Auditory training programmes,
- Fatty acid (e.g., fish oil) supplements, and
- Biofeedback.

### **Myth E: A diagnosis of dyslexia should rightly result in the allocation of special accommodations (particularly in exams) and additional resources.**

There are two key problems here. Firstly, there is the issue of equity and fairness. Myth E is particularly problematic if it results in a failure to provide appropriately for those poor readers who do not receive a diagnosis of dyslexia. Certainly, there will be many poor readers who, for a variety of reasons, are less able to gain access to labels of this kind. Secondly, given that the basis for a diagnosis of dyslexia is highly problematic, allocating resources on an unscientific basis of this kind is untenable.

Rather than basing provision upon a diagnosis of dyslexia, specialist resourcing should be closely tied to performance over time in relation to the acquisition and development of specific literacy skills. An increasingly popular approach for helping children with a variety of learning difficulties (including reading), is known as Response to Intervention. Here, intervention takes place immediately a child begins to struggle academically. This is preferable to waiting for the child to continue to fail over time and, in the light of this, eventually seeking an assessment in the hope of ultimately obtaining a (questionable) diagnosis. According to the Response to Intervention model, the form of intervention utilised should be supported by high quality research evidence, and the amount and nature of help provided should be determined largely on the basis of the child's response during the course of the specialised intervention.

### **Final comments**

Anyone who observes the anguish of a child who struggles to read will surely react with a mixture of sadness and sympathy. For parents of such children, the hurt and humiliation will often be compounded by a sense of frustration, impotence, and uncertainty as to how to help. One thing that many parents feel that they can do is lobby for their child. In such circumstances, it is unsurprising that so many seek a dyslexia assessment with all the advantages that this promises. However, as *The Dyslexia Debate* demonstrates, parents are being misled by claims that such assessments are scientifically rigorous, and that a diagnosis will point to more effective forms of treatment.

It is surely time to adopt a more scientific approach that will ensure that all children who encounter literacy difficulties receive the help that they need.

*Julian Elliott is Principal of Collingwood College and Professor of Education at Durham University. Email: joe.elliott@durham.ac.uk*

# Should we dispense with the D word?



**Kevin Wheldall, Anne Castles and Mandy Nayton**

**T**he word dyslexia seems to arouse strong emotions, both for and against, and has a chequered history. Viewed by some as a device to spare the blushes of middle-class parents whose children struggle to learn to read, it is seen by others as a credible explanation for the reading difficulties their child has been experiencing.

In their recently published book, *The Dyslexia Debate* ([www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/psychology/educational-psychology/dyslexia-debate](http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/psychology/educational-psychology/dyslexia-debate)), Joe Elliott and Elena Grigorenko open up a can of worms. But it is a can that needed opening, and we applaud these authors for bringing this important issue up for discussion and debate. Elliott and Grigorenko argue that the term 'dyslexia' should be abandoned – that it is an imprecise and unhelpful label that does nothing to assist the individuals to whom it is applied.

So what do Elliott and Grigorenko say, and why do they say it?

Two key points need to be made before proceeding. First of all, this debate is largely about terminology. Elliott and Grigorenko are not denying the reality of children's reading difficulties, or that these difficulties need to be identified and treated as early as possible. What they are arguing is that giving the label of "dyslexia" to children who experience such problems is not helpful.

Secondly, it is important to keep in mind that reading ability falls on a continuum in the population; it is normally distributed like height or weight. This means that deciding whether a child does or does not have a reading difficulty will always involve applying a somewhat arbitrary cut-off. In this sense, a diagnosis of dyslexia is similar to a diagnosis of obesity, but quite different from a diagnosis of, say, measles where it is clear when someone has it and when they don't.

With these points in mind, let's look more closely at Elliott and Grigorenko's two main arguments.

## 1. There is no agreement about how to diagnose dyslexia

Elliott and Grigorenko's first key point is that applying the label of dyslexia is intrinsically unscientific because there is no universally agreed set of criteria for its diagnosis. What one clinician might call dyslexia, another does not. Some apply the label to any child who struggles with learning to read; others apply it only when the reading difficulty is accompanied by strengths in other intellectual domains; still others when the reading difficulty is associated with particular cognitive 'markers' such as phonological or visual deficits. And even within these different definitions, there is variability associated with where the cut-off for an impairment is applied: consequently, estimates of the prevalence of dyslexia may range from 3–20 per cent of the population.

It is undoubtedly true that the term 'dyslexia' has been used in a wide variety of contexts over the years, and that this has led to considerable confusion. We think that three particular factors have contributed to the problem:

Firstly, there has been a failure to distinguish between research and clinical uses of the term. Researchers often select samples of 'dyslexics' with very specific profiles. They do so in order to answer particular research questions, or to control for factors in which they are not interested in a certain context. For example, they may select their sample to have average or above average IQ, so that this factor does not influence their results. But the fact that the use of these specific selection criteria can be valuable in a research context does not mean that they should necessarily inform a clinical diagnosis of dyslexia. Similarly, researchers may decide that, for their experimental purposes, 'dyslexia' will be defined very generously as those students scoring below one standard deviation from the mean. But this does not necessarily mean that this (relatively large) proportion of the population (about 16 per cent) should be regarded as dyslexic and hence in need of special treatment and/or afforded educational

Continued next page >



dispensations.

Secondly, there has been a tendency to conflate symptoms and causes within definitions of dyslexia. Sometimes the condition is defined purely in terms of the presenting problem – a reading accuracy and/or fluency difficulty – with the diagnostician remaining agnostic as to its underlying cause. In other cases, the definition incorporates a particular theoretical perspective as to why the reading difficulty arose in the first place. The most prominent and certainly widely-supported of these theories centres on underlying language-based phonological deficits, but there are also a host of other neural, visual and attentional theories. Given the wide range of theories as to the causes of dyslexia, it is not surprising that this has generated an equally wide range of definitions.

Thirdly, the term is widely used, and very frequently misused, by non-experts in the field and by the mainstream media. The label is particularly popular with promoters of dyslexia “cures” of dubious merit, including such things as: nutritional supplements, exercise regimes, coloured glasses and ‘high frequency’ ear plugs. The briefest of Google searches confirms this fact – and this, of course, only serves to add to the confusion.

But, these points aside, is it the case that there is no generally agreed set of criteria for the diagnosis of dyslexia? We think that this may be overstating the case. Amongst experts in the field, there is in fact a substantial degree of consensus about what is meant by the term and how it should be defined in a clinical context. Dyslexia is widely viewed as a severe and enduring reading difficulty that persists despite high quality instruction and evidence-based intervention. This is enshrined in documents such as the Rose report (<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/0201-2006pdf-EN-01.pdf>) in the UK and the report of the Australian Dyslexia Working Party (2010) ([www.dyslexiaaustralia.com.au/DYSWP.pdf](http://www.dyslexiaaustralia.com.au/DYSWP.pdf)).

The definition of dyslexia above is effectively couched within the widely-accepted ‘Response to Intervention’ model of remediation (RTI) ([www.musec.mq.edu.au/community\\_outreach/musec\\_](http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/community_outreach/musec_)

briefings#17):

a model that seeks to match the amount and nature of reading intervention to the support needs of the child. In doing so, it provides relatively straightforward means of distinguishing between children who are performing poorly on reading measures because they have not received the appropriate instruction for some reason and children who are performing poorly because they have severe and enduring learning difficulties that require sustained intervention (whom we might classify as having ‘dyslexia’ or some other label).

The RTI model works as follows: all children receive a systematic program of scientific evidence-based reading instruction right from the outset of schooling, i.e., a program of instruction that is predicated upon what reading scientists have found to be critical and most effective in terms of teaching children to learn to read. This is referred to as Tier 1 instruction. The reading progress of all students is closely monitored, and those children whose performance, following instruction, is poor on curriculum-based measures, regardless of the reason, are identified as low-progress readers and are provided with more intensive small-group reading instruction. This is referred to as Tier 2 and typically involves about 20 per cent of the age cohort. (In some socially disadvantaged areas, of course, this figure will be much higher.) The progress of Tier 2 children is again closely monitored and those who continue to have low scores, that is, who are not “responding to Tier 2 intervention”, are provided with even more intensive one-on-one intensive remediation and support. This is Tier 3 instruction.

Children who still struggle following a period of intensive Tier 3 intervention or who progress at an unusually slow rate, are viewed as having, a severe and enduring reading difficulty that persists despite high quality instruction and evidence-based intervention. This has been estimated to be about 3 per cent of the population of students. Thus, without needing to look to underlying causes, or to associated deficits, a small subgroup of children can be identified who can reliably and consistently be given a diagnosis of ‘dyslexia’ on the basis of their need for continuing

intensive literacy instruction. However, it is generally viewed as important to gather additional clinical information from appropriate professionals at this point to contribute to the development of effective individual education plans (IEPs) with recommendations for both remediation and accommodations.

There are two key features of this definition. First, it makes a distinction between children who are struggling with reading because they have not had the appropriate instruction (perhaps because they have not attended school regularly, or have had poor teaching) and those who are struggling despite having had sufficient opportunities. Secondly, it focuses the diagnosis at the level of reading itself. Scientists have come a long way in developing precise and detailed theories of the reading process, and these have been translated into valid and reliable clinical assessment tools. It is our view that, armed with these tools, well-trained clinical experts are in a stronger position to provide a scientifically-informed diagnosis of dyslexia than Elliott and Grigorenko suggest. Whether the actual term ‘dyslexia’ is used or some other label is employed, this small group exists and can be identified.

It is only fair to note, however, that while RTI does have the potential to improve reading outcomes significantly and will, in addition, identify students at risk of reading failure far earlier, create a more equitable system and should result in better ongoing monitoring and assessment of all students, we are only seeing a minority of schools implementing anything even vaguely resembling RTI at this stage in Australia. This makes the use of it, at this point, as the mainstay identification model challenging, to say the least. This is not to say, however, that it should not be an important goal. It also means that until RTI is established, students will not necessarily be picked up as falling behind until later in primary school or even into secondary school. This means that the transition through the three tiers is not as straightforward as it is in the early years. Identified students will simply move straight into a Tier 2 or even Tier 3 intervention. And finally, while it is our firm view that the RTI model has many advantages, it is viewed by some as being limited in that it does not individualise, it does not

diagnose, and it does not classify.

## 2. Reading interventions will be the same whether dyslexia is diagnosed or not

The second key point made by Elliott and Grigorenko is that a diagnosis of dyslexia does not have any implications for treatment. Again, they are broadly correct. Let us suppose that two eight-year-old girls present at a clinic, both of whom can barely read. One girl has frequently been ill and has attended school only intermittently over the past two years. As a result, she has fallen behind in learning to read. The other girl has a history of struggling to learn to read in spite of having been provided with additional instruction. The latter child might well be diagnosed with 'dyslexia'; the former most likely not. But the programs of intervention put in place for each child would most likely differ very little in both content and method. A large body of evidence tells us that the most effective thing we can do for each of these children is to provide them with systematic, intensive evidence-based reading remediation, targeted at the gaps in their reading skills.

So does this mean, as Elliott and Grigorenko argue, that a diagnosis of dyslexia (or some other label) is unnecessary and redundant? Again, we feel that this may overstate things. Although the nature of the treatments provided to these children will be similar, the evidence tells us that their length and intensity are likely to be quite different. Our first girl should respond quickly and well once she receives the required intervention; our second girl, by definition based on the RTI model, is likely to need sustained and ongoing support. She may need one-on-one assistance and, ultimately, compensatory technology.

More generally, the fact that the treatment is similar across the spectrum of a condition does not mean that there is no justification for giving a label to those at the extreme end. In the same way that the diagnosis of 'obesity' serves to identify the most severe and at-risk cases along the continuum of weight, and the diagnosis of 'hypertension' serves to identify the most severe and at-risk cases along the continuum of blood pressure, a diagnosis of dyslexia

can identify the most severe and at-risk cases along the continuum of reading. Such labels focus attention and resources where they are most urgently needed. Where we might disagree is in the term we use to describe such children and their condition.

There remain the quibbles about terminology. Many researchers and clinicians do not like the term 'dyslexia' because it medicalises the condition and invokes a disease model that is not appropriate. They prefer a term like 'reading disability' or 'reading impairment'. Others, however, counter that the use of a medical term like dyslexia attracts attention and resources to a problem that may not be so forthcoming if these other terms were used. And as Dorothy Bishop notes, this concern seems to be borne out in the case of the much less visible condition of 'Specific Language Impairment' (<http://deevybee.blogspot.com.au/2010/12/whats-in-name.html>). Finally, not to be underestimated is the positive effect that a diagnosis of dyslexia has on the parents and children involved, validating their concerns and often providing a much-needed boost to self-esteem. For these reasons, there is considerable divergence in the field as to which label should be preferred (and indeed divergence even amongst we three authors!).

Elliott and Grigorenko argue that the most important thing is that all children who encounter literacy difficulties receive the help that they need. We could not agree more. At the end of the day, what we choose to call the small proportion of students with severe and persistent reading problems is not nearly so important as ensuring that they receive the support that they need. In the past, passionate advocates for dyslexia may have gilded the lily by claiming that up to 20 per cent of children are dyslexic (and some still do). This is unhelpful and ultimately counter-productive since government agencies will balk at the expense of providing special treatment and dispensations for such a large proportion of the population. Nor is such expenditure warranted when the reading difficulties of the vast majority of low-progress readers may readily be attended to in school with effective small group Tier 2 and individualised Tier 3 interventions.

*The fact that the treatment is similar across the spectrum of a condition does not mean that there is no justification for giving a label to those at the extreme end.*

*Kevin Wheldall is an Emeritus Professor of Macquarie University and Director of the MultiLit Research Unit. You can follow him on Twitter (@KevinWheldall) where he comments on reading and education (and anything else that takes his fancy). You can also follow his blog, 'Notes from Harefield: Reflections by Kevin Wheldall on reading, books, education, family and life in general' ([www.kevinwheldall.com](http://www.kevinwheldall.com)). Email: [kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au](mailto:kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au).*

*Professor Anne Castles is Head of the Department of Cognitive Science at Macquarie University and Deputy Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders. You can follow her on Twitter (@annecastles), where she comments on issues related to reading difficulties and other cognitive disorders.*

*Mandy Nayton is currently the Executive Officer of DSF Literacy and Clinical Services in Perth, Western Australia as well as President of AUSPELD, The Australian Federation of SPELD Associations. She is an educational and developmental psychologist and qualified teacher with extensive experience in the field of literacy education, and an Adjunct Research Fellow at Curtin University's School of Psychology and Speech Pathology. You can follow Mandy on Twitter (@mandynayton) where she hopes to comment on a wide range of literacy-related issues.*

# The Dyslexia Debate

Alison Clarke

Professor Joe Elliott of Durham University in the UK is one of the authors of a soon-to-be-published book arguing that the diagnosis 'dyslexia' is poorly-defined and not useful.

Pre-publicity for this book says that he and co-author Elena Grigorenko examine how reading difficulties are conceptualised and tackled, and discuss the latest research in cognitive science, genetics and neuroscience.

They argue that the interpretation of the term 'dyslexia' often does a disservice to children, and that resources and effort currently put into diagnosing dyslexia would be much better put into improving early teaching, and making sure that all strugglers get the extra help they need.

This makes a lot of sense if you're thinking at a population level about how to improve all children's literacy skills in future. But what about current learners who have already tried to learn to read, and failed?

## Who gets a dyslexia diagnosis?

Sometimes it seems like the main thing children diagnosed with dyslexia have that other strugglers don't have is articulate, determined, capable, middle-class parents.

These parents keep searching for the reason their children are failing to thrive, and a program that will help them, long enough for someone to say the D-word.

This has the immediate positive effect of making the problem seem medical and serious. Once you have a diagnosis, there's no more "wait and see". Action is required.

Once you type the D-word into a search engine, you find plenty of good programs that will help (as well as a few snake oil vendors, but most capable middle-class parents can soon spot them).

However, a dyslexia diagnosis has the negative effect of firmly locating the problem within the child, and thus absolving the educational system of its contribution.

## Reducing the failure rate

The main educational contribution is our universities' and education departments' failure to train and equip teachers to teach 95-97 per cent of children to read in their first year of school, not just 80-85 per cent of them.

Teachers repeatedly tell me they learnt very little about our language's sounds and complex spelling system at university, and nothing at all about synthetic phonics. This is consistent with the findings of the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading.

Children who still can't read after a year of trying are usually either very down-in-the-mouth or highly stressed little people.

Having such unhappy and unsettled little people in one's classroom day after day, and trying but being unable to help them, is very bad for teachers' job satisfaction.

Teachers' smiles are a mile wide when these kids get the right sort of help, and start to catch up. The ones I know bail me up in the hallway or staffroom with the news that Chloe just read a Level 26 book, Mohammed got 10/10 for his spelling test or Jayden was so stuck in his book that he was still sitting in the classroom reading five minutes after everyone else had gone out to play (names have been changed to protect the ratbags).

They want to know how to provide this sort of help in the classroom too, and it's time they were trained and equipped to provide it.

## Who doesn't get a dyslexia diagnosis?

Meanwhile, the children of less well-resourced, articulate parents tend not to be dragged off to psychologists, speech pathologists, special educators and others for assessment and intervention, or given tutoring outside school.

Their families often can't afford it, might have language and/or literacy difficulties themselves, or may not speak much English, for starters.



Inside the school system, if they're unlucky, these children can be sentenced to years endlessly and pointlessly studying the 100 most frequent words list, until their self-esteem and willingness to keep trying deteriorates, and often so does their behaviour.

Many end up in the principal's office, labelled with behaviour problems, and set on a path that leads to the juvenile justice system.

For these kids, having the middle-class kids diagnosed with 'dyslexia' is actually a negative, because it helps schools maintain the view that most reading problems are due to child factors, not teaching factors.

This in turn prevents the critical analysis of how the teaching system – teaching literacy in big, indigestible lumps rather than in a fine-grained, digestible form – has helped cause these kids' misery.

One day, early years teachers will teach in a way that prevents most reading failure, and the 3-5 per cent who have persistent problems won't need a dyslexia diagnosis. Schools will routinely target their difficulties as soon as they appear, first in small groups, and then if problems persist, individually.

In the meantime, middle-class parents will probably keep seeking dyslexia diagnoses, and some professionals will keep providing them, as a way of having reading and spelling problems taken more seriously, and locating effective programs.

Who can blame them? Not being able to read or spell is a serious,

serious problem, whether it's called dyslexia or not.

You can see Professor Elliott talking about his perspective on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=0qZ-ipCryY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=0qZ-ipCryY).

I look forward to getting my hands on a copy.

*Alison Clarke is a Melbourne speech pathologist with a Masters in Applied Linguistics who has worked in the UK and Mexico, and been a City Councillor*

*and Mayor. She now works at the Clifton Hill Child and Adolescent Therapy Group, is a member of Learning Difficulties Australia's Council, runs the synthetic phonics blog [www.spelfabet.com.au](http://www.spelfabet.com.au), and can be contacted at [spelfabet@gmail.com](mailto:spelfabet@gmail.com).*

## Call for nominations for the LDA General Awards 2014

Members of LDA are invited to submit nominations for the 2014 Mona Tobias and Bruce Wicking Awards. Applications are also called for the 2014 LDA Tertiary Student Award. The closing date for nominations and applications is Friday 27 June 2014. These Awards are open to both members and non-members of LDA. LDA reserves the right not to confer an Award in any of these categories if no suitable nomination is received.

The LDA Awards are designed to recognise outstanding work in the field of learning difficulties.

### The Mona Tobias Award

The Mona Tobias Award is presented in recognition of an outstanding contribution to the field of learning difficulties in Australia. This contribution may be in the area of leadership, research, practice or teacher and community education.

Emily Mona Tobias, B.E.M., died in 1980 at the age of 74 years. She was acknowledged for her exceptional skills as a teacher and her devotion

to children with learning difficulties. Mona took early retirement from the Victorian Education Department to study learning disabilities under Sam Clements at the University of Arkansas. This led to her second career where she influenced many teachers and parents of students with learning difficulties. The Mona Tobias Award commemorates the pioneering work of Mona Tobias in helping children and adults with learning difficulties.

### The Bruce Wicking Award

The Bruce Wicking Award is presented to an individual or an organisation in recognition of innovative programs or practices relating to the teaching of children with learning difficulties. Bruce Wicking established the Currajong School in 1974, and was committed to the provision of programs which catered for the individual needs of children with learning difficulties. The funds for the establishment of this award were provided through the generosity of the Wicking family and

their friends to commemorate the life and work of Bruce Wicking.

### The Tertiary Student Award

The LDA Tertiary Student Award is presented in recognition of significant research which advances the understanding of theoretical and practical issues in the field of learning difficulties, carried out by a student in the course of their tertiary level studies. The Award is based on the submission of a research article to LDA, which will be considered for publication in the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*.

### Announcement and Presentation of Awards

Recipients of the 2014 Awards will be announced in August. Awards are normally presented at the LDA Annual General Meeting. Travel and accommodation expenses to attend the ceremony will be met by LDA. Further information regarding the Awards and nomination procedures are provided on the LDA website at [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org).

## Call for submissions for the AJLD Early Career Researcher Award

Submissions for the new AJLD Early Career Researcher Award are invited from early career researchers who wish to be considered for this Award.

The AJLD Early Career Researcher Award is an LDA Award, funded by Taylor and Francis, publishers of the LDA journal, and is designed to encourage early career researchers to submit articles based on their research findings to the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*.

This Award will be by open competition, and will be based on the submission of a paper in a form appropriate for publication in the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*. Those eligible to receive this Award will be researchers who have completed their PhD within the last six years, and who are currently engaged in research which has the potential to make a significant contribution to theory or practice in the learning difficulty area. Selection of the Early Career Researcher Award will be based on recommendations from

the Editors of the Journal to the LDA Awards Committee.

Researchers wishing to be considered for this Award are required to submit their paper, by email, to Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall, Joint Editor of the Journal, at [kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au](mailto:kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au), by Friday 27 June 2014. The covering email should specify that the paper is being submitted for consideration for the AJLD Early Career Researcher. All papers submitted for this Award will be considered for publication in the Journal, and those not qualifying for the Award may qualify for the special commendation of 'highly commended'. Both members of LDA and non-members of LDA are eligible to be considered for this Award. The Award carries with it a prize of \$500.

*If you would like further information about this Award, please contact Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall, Joint Editor of the Journal, at [kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au](mailto:kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au).*

# *The Dyslexia Debate: More heat than light?*

Julian Elliott

**M**uch recent discussion surrounding issues in my new book, *The Dyslexia Debate*, written with Elena Grigorenko, has been highly charged emotionally and has led to outrage in some quarters – even though the book had yet to appear in the public domain. Certainly, the fury of many respondents seemed inappropriate given my actual utterances on the topic in both print and in the media. Nevertheless, this reaction came as little surprise to me, as 40 years' experience as a teacher of children with special educational needs, as a local authority educational psychologist, a trainer of teachers, and an academic researcher have provided me with some insight into the complexities involved. In this piece, I shall focus upon these phenomena and endeavour to explain the reasons for the storms of protest that have routinely followed my challenge to the use of the dyslexia label.

The research evidence for our claims about the problematic understandings of dyslexia is overwhelming so why the outrage when these points are made? To understand this, it is necessary to switch from a disinterested, scientific perspective to a consideration of how all of this looks to those with personal experience of such problems.

To experience severe difficulty with reading in school is typically to encounter many years of hurt and humiliation. Every lesson is a struggle. Your peers tease and torment you. Some teachers seem to believe that you are stupid (although, the present day teaching force is generally more enlightened in this respect than their predecessors). The struggle is such that you sometimes feel that it's not worth making huge efforts so you

start to ease off on your studies. Rather than run the risk of being perceived as stupid or incapable, you reduce your efforts in ways that are highly visible to all. Then, when you don't perform well, others will put this down to a lack of effort, rather than inability. This strategy, known in the academic literature as self-worth protection, is one that I have witnessed countless times in my work with children who struggle at school. However, this is rarely a wise strategy and reduced effort can often result in charges that the child is lazy, a description that has a strong pejorative ring which, in my opinion, should never be applied to any child with learning difficulties.

Given this scenario, it is unsurprising that parents (and the child) are usually delighted to receive a diagnosis of dyslexia. This provides a quasi-medical explanation for a problem that is typically causing immense distress. It offers the hope that others will be less likely to make inappropriate attributions of stupidity or laziness. The individual often finds the diagnosis lifts a weight off their mind – “I always thought that I was stupid but now I realise that I'm not”. It is believed that the diagnosis has revealed the true nature of the problem and will surely point to the most effective forms of treatment – “Now they'll know how best to help me”. It is a gateway to ensuring that the child receives the assistance, accommodations and resources that they need. The diagnosis is everything that one could want.

When someone challenges the scientific basis of the term, it is unsurprising that this elicits a strong reaction. On occasions, the response seems to be to challenge my integrity and motives, and some recent criticisms have taken the form of personal attacks such as, “You're only saying such things so you can flog your book”. The fact that the book appeared after more than a decade of arguing this position in

professional and academic journals is an inconvenient truth that, if known by the accuser, is still ignored. Of course, headlines in the parts of the media stating, “Professor states dyslexia is just a middle class way to hide stupidity” and newspaper columnists' gibing about Robin or Poppy being “denser than a slab of uranium” represent a gross misrepresentation that doesn't help to engender a serious and dispassionate consideration of the issues.

Perhaps such messages help to explain why staff from a special school for dyslexic children thought it appropriate to send me a letter from an 11-year-old pupil expressing her hurt that I had called her lazy. Did her teachers not think that it would have been wiser to reassure the child that this was not the case? Were they, supposedly specialists in the field caring for vulnerable youngsters, not willing or able to check things out more carefully? As many people have told me since the recent media storm, a few minutes searching the internet could quickly reveal my true position.

A few days ago, I was asked to write a piece on the dyslexia story for a very popular internet site designed for mothers. After a series of exchanges, mainly involving stylistic edits to fit the house style, a piece clarifying the more common misunderstandings of the book's message, and the potential reasons for these, was accepted for the site. To my surprise, the article was pulled at the last minute on the grounds that many upset parents might be further discomfited by discussion of these issues. Thus, the managers of the site thought it preferable that misunderstandings resulting in anger and resentment went unchallenged rather than risk further outrage by providing a forum for me to clarify the message. Such behaviour illustrates the power of emotion over reason, and the fear of anything that might alienate

visitors to the site.

However, it is not merely a case of media misinformation, as outraged responses to more reliable and valid reports are also common. Clearly, there are powerful psychological forces at work. Some years ago, after making a television program on this issue, I received messages from irate parents accusing me of claiming that their child was not dyslexic but stupid. At first, I was mystified by this as the programme had been at pains to state that intelligence and decoding ability were wholly independent and, therefore, it is impossible to make a judgement of an individual's intelligence on the basis of their reading ability. Why the disconnect between the message I sought to communicate and the one that was seemingly perceived? Perhaps I was just not putting across my intended message very well? In my opinion, however, this phenomenon, equally evident these past weeks, reflects a form of projection

whereby past humiliations caused by the insensitivities of others are grafted onto the understandings of what is being said. In essence, the anxious and angry parent is (understandably) antagonistic to anyone who appears to threaten their cherished belief that the label sustains the wellbeing of their child. The perceived opposition are seen to share common perspectives, all of which are insensitive to the needs of those who suffer from dyslexia. Although the reality is very different, it is easier to discount scientific research findings when these are blended with other less tenable assertions.

Ultimately, rational discussion based upon scientific evidence is the better way forward. I understand the anger; I just cannot accept this as the basis for considered action.

*Julian Elliott is Principal of Collingwood College and Professor of Education at Durham University. Email: joe.elliott@durham.ac.uk*

*Such behaviour illustrates the power of emotion over reason, and the fear of anything that might alienate visitors to the site.*

## Louisa Moats to visit Australia in 2015

*As a part of our 50th Anniversary celebrations LDA has invited the distinguished United States expert in the field of learning and reading difficulties, Dr Louisa Moats, to visit Australia in March 2015.*

**D**r Moats has been a teacher, psychologist, researcher, graduate school faculty member, and author of many influential scientific journal articles, books, and policy papers on the topics of reading, spelling, language, and teacher preparation. After a first job as a neuropsychology technician, she became a teacher of students with learning and reading difficulties, earning her Master's degree at Peabody College of Vanderbilt. Later, after realising how little she understood about teaching, she earned a doctorate in Reading and Human Development from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Dr. Moats spent the next 15 years in private practice as a licensed psychologist in Vermont, specialising in evaluation and consultation with individuals of all ages and walks of life who experienced reading, writing, and language difficulties. At that time, she trained psychology interns in the Dartmouth

Medical School Department of Psychiatry. Dr Moats spent one year as resident expert for the California Reading Initiative; four years as site director of the NICHD Early Interventions Project in Washington, DC, where she was invited to testify to Congress three times on issues of teacher preparation and reading instruction in high poverty schools. Recently, she spent 10 years as research advisor and consultant with Sopris Learning, serving as Principal Investigator on two SBIR grants.

Dr Moats was a contributing writer of the Common Core State Standards for grades K-5. In addition to the LETRS professional development series, Dr Moats' books include *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers* (Brookes Publishing); *Spelling: Development, Disability, and Instruction* (Pro-Ed); *Straight Talk About Reading* (with Susan Hall, Contemporary Books), and *Basic Facts about Dyslexia*. Dr Moats' awards include the prestigious Samuel T. and June L. Orton Award, in 2013, from the International Dyslexia Association, for outstanding contributions to the field.

See Louisa's website at [www.louisamoats.com/index.php](http://www.louisamoats.com/index.php) for further information on her background and publications.

LDA plans to organise a series of workshops and seminars to be presented by Dr Moats in various state capitals. Details of the program are still to be worked out, but we will keep our members informed of progress.

# Why Jaydon Can't Read: A forum on fixing literacy

**Jennifer Buckingham, Justine Ferrari, and Tom Alegounarias**

## Executive summary

This collection of edited speeches is from a CIS policy forum held on 14 November, 2013 to discuss the article 'Why Jaydon Can't Read: The triumph of ideology over evidence in teaching reading' published in the Spring 2013 issue of *Policy*.

*Jennifer Buckingham, Research Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies and co-author of 'Why Jaydon Can't Read'.*

- Billions of dollars of public money have been spent trying to improve literacy levels of school students over the last decade in Australia, yet hundreds of thousands of students are barely literate.
- Almost all children can learn to read with effective, evidence-based reading instruction. Unfortunately, many teachers still use unproven methods based on whole-language philosophy or ad hoc 'balanced literacy' programs.
- Pre-service teacher education has not prepared teachers in effective reading instruction strategies, and government policy has not promoted the use of evidence-based teaching methods.

*Justine Ferrari, National Education Correspondent, The Australian newspaper*

- The reading or literacy wars have been waging inside the teaching profession for the best part of three decades.
- Rather than examine the reasons thousands of teenagers can go through school barely able to read, defenders of the existing system seem to continue arguing about what is reading. Or they focus on the children who can read – the 90 per cent-plus. If

doctors were losing 10 per cent or 20 per cent of their patients each year, they would re-examine their practice, rethink their treatment plans, and change the medicine.

- In Australia, any observer would recognise that there's a defensive, evangelistic zeal among many literacy educators and an ideological blindness that makes them cling to their beliefs in the face of the evidence of what is NOT working and what is.

*Tom Alegounarias, President, NSW Board of Studies*

- The 'research to practice' gap in reading instruction is due to a lack of engagement with evidence and data in the teaching profession and a lack of confidence in dealing with empirical research. Moreover, ideologies, belief systems and entrenched practices often overwhelm evidence of what works for particular students in particular circumstances.
- This disconnection between research and teaching practice is not a result of a recalcitrant, self-serving, wilful and ideological teaching workforce. Rather, it is a lack of professional, policy and academic leadership. Too often, bureaucrats have found a safe place at the side of the reading wars and watched with detached curiosity.
- The days of generic constructivist homilies masquerading as teaching techniques for reading are over. With regard to reading, the teaching profession needs to evolve to place the responsibility of direct instruction and its contingent relationship to learning at its heart.

## Acknowledgment

Jennifer Buckingham gratefully acknowledges the contribution of her doctoral supervisors and co-authors of



the *Policy* article 'Why Jaydon Can't Read', Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Robyn Beaman-Wheldall.

## The key to improving literacy is effective instruction: Jennifer Buckingham

Last year, I was at a pharmacy with my daughter, who was having her ears pierced. While we were waiting, a man brought his daughter into the pharmacy to have her ears pierced, too. The man and I were each given a form to fill out. He stood there for a long time looking at it. Eventually, before I realised what was going on, one of the sales assistants recognised the problem and discreetly took him aside and read the form to him. He couldn't read it. Can you imagine what that must be like? That distressing incident was just one occasion on one day for that man.

Survey after survey has shown that a large number of Australian children and adults – hundreds of thousands, in fact – are either illiterate, or able to read at only the most rudimentary level – after as many as nine or ten years of school.

Governments know that this problem exists. Billions of dollars of public money have been spent trying to improve literacy levels of school students over the last decade in Australia. Millions more are likely spent privately by families on reading programs, tutoring and specialist services.

It is nearly impossible to calculate

exact spending figures using data in the public domain, but the figures below give some idea of the money involved. Obviously, these data are not complete so they underestimate the real total. For NSW, the amount is for literacy and numeracy but it's reasonable to assume that at least half the total, and most likely more, is literacy spending. Of course, this is just the targeted literacy and numeracy spending. It doesn't include the many billions of dollars that go into schools for the general provision of education that should include teaching children to read.

- **National Partnerships (Literacy and Numeracy) 2008-09 to 2011-12:** \$500 million from the federal government and \$500 million from state governments.
- **National Partnerships (Low Socio-economic Status) 2008-09 to 2011-12:** \$1.5 billion, some of which was also used for literacy programs.
- **NSW Government Targeted Literacy and Numeracy Spending 2002-03 to 2007-08:** \$800 million.
- **Victorian Government Literacy Program Funding 2003-08:** \$650 million.

What did we get for all this extra spending?

Table 1 shows the proportions and estimated numbers of children who were in the lowest two bands of achievement in the NAPLAN tests in 2013. We can assume there are similar numbers of students in the intervening year levels.

These proportions have changed only marginally since the NAPLAN tests began five years ago. The state Basic Skills Tests, which took place in the decade or so before NAPLAN replaced them, also indicated that little progress had been made in improving literacy levels.

Data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) are even more damning (Table 2). They suggest that one in four Australian students in Year 4 is achieving only the low international benchmark at best.

Whether the proportion of the population these figures represent has

shifted marginally up or down in the last 10 years does not change the fact that many thousands of children are not achieving a sufficient level of literacy to allow them to be successful in their education. Whether Australia's ranking is sixth or tenth in the world makes no difference to the many people who can barely function in our information-soaked society, let alone enjoy the latest Man Booker Prize-winning novel. Calling this a crisis suggests something sudden and temporary. Boris Johnson is more accurate when he calls it a "slow motion disaster".

Why, after at least \$100,000 worth of schooling and thousands of hours of instruction, do so many children fail to learn to read? A small number have cognitive or congenital disabilities that make learning very difficult. How do we explain the rest?

There are two plausible explanations. One is that there is something wrong with the children – they are too stupid or too poor or too naughty. The other explanation is there is something wrong with the way the children are being taught.

It is much easier for educators to posit the first explanation. It lets them off the hook. Fortunately, however, it is wrong. Almost all children can learn to read, given the right sort of instruction. Also, fortunately,

scientific research has shown what kind of instructional strategies are most effective and for the greatest number of children.

Sixty years ago, Rudolph Flesch made the bestseller list with his book *Why Johnny Can't Read*. He explained in plain language why the methods of teaching reading at the time were not working:

"The teaching of reading – all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks – is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense. Johnny couldn't read until half a year ago for the simple reason that nobody ever showed him how.

Reading means getting meaning from certain combinations of letters. Teach the child what each letter stands for and he can read."

Schools had adopted an approach to reading based on an educational theory that students learn naturally and construct their own knowledge from experience. Children would learn to read words if exposed to them often enough. In reading lessons, this took the form of 'basal readers' that were constructed of a few words repeated many times. This method is called 'LookSay' or 'Whole

Continued next page >

**Table 1: Students at/below minimum standard for reading, NAPLAN 2013**

	Percentage of cohort	Estimated number
Year 3	(4.7 / 8.7) = 13.4	37,000
Year 5	(3.8 / 9.9) = 13.7	35,000
Year 7	(5.8 / 12.7) = 18.5	51,000
Year 9	(6.6 / 16.6) = 23.3	64,000

Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy: National Report for 2013 (Sydney: ACARA, 2013).

**Table 2: Students at/below the 'low' international benchmark, PIRLS 2011**

	Percentage of Year 4 cohort	Mean rank out of 45 countries
Northern Ireland	13	5
Canada	14	12
United States	14	6
Ireland	15	10
England	17	11
Australia	24	27
New Zealand	25	23

Source: Sue Thomson, et al., *Monitoring Australian Year 4 Student Achievement Internationally: TIMSS and PIRLS 2011* (Melbourne: ACER, 2012).

Word' – children had to remember each and every word individually, a bit like a pictograph. Flesch explained that this method overloads the memory unnecessarily and does not give students the ability to use the alphabetic principles and rules of written language to work out new words.

Whole language, which is the method that dominates classrooms today, is a somewhat different beast to whole word. It abandons the restricted vocabulary of the basal readers and whole word teaching, instead theorising that if children are read to and shown 'high quality literature,' their word range will expand. In this theory, learning to read is just like learning to speak. Children will learn to read just by reading.

"The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that we learn to read by reading...The Comprehension Hypothesis is a central part of whole language."

– Stephen Krashen, 2000

Whole language is a nice theory, but it is just a theory. Hundreds of scientific studies and dozens of thorough literature reviews, stretching back to Jeanne Chall's *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967), have shown that learning to read is a much more complex process than just environmental exposure.

Effective, evidence-based reading instruction has five elements, all of which are necessary and none of which is sufficient alone. They are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. It is difficult to say it any more clearly – phonics is one of five essential elements. Nowhere has it ever been claimed by serious reading scientists that phonics alone is sufficient.

"In implementing systematic phonics instruction, educators must keep the end in mind and ensure that children understand the purpose of learning letter sounds and that they are able to apply these skills accurately and fluently in their daily reading and writing activities."

– National Reading Panel, 2000

"The [National Inquiry into Teaching Literacy] committee recommends that teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. Equally, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies."

– National Inquiry into Teaching Literacy, 2005

"High-quality, systematic phonic work as defined by the [Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading] should be taught discretely...Phonic work should be set within a broad and rich language curriculum that takes full account of developing the four interdependent strands of language: speaking, listening, reading and writing and enlarging children's stock of words."

– Jim Rose, 2006

Yet it is quite possible to teach phonics badly and for it to have little effect. That is what happens in 'balanced' literacy programs. Balanced literacy sounds like it is the best of all worlds, but in reality it is either simply whole language in disguise or a mishmash of approaches. Phonics instruction helps beginning and struggling readers most when it is taught explicitly (that is, not incidentally in book reading), in a particular sequence, and is purposefully integrated into text reading.

Almost every school in Australia will say it teaches phonics, but a large proportion of schools are not teaching it well. Some are doing too much, some not enough. This is why phonics often becomes the bone of contention in the 'reading wars.'

"What is often lacking in initial reading instruction, in particular, is effective, specific instruction in what is known as synthetic phonics; how to relate letters to sounds and to blend letter sounds

into words...

Phonics instruction provides a self-teaching mechanism by which children can teach themselves an increasing number of new words, initially by sounding them out. With sufficient repetition, and this varies for each child, these words are learned as sight words; they do not subsequently have to be sounded out each time they are encountered in text."

– Kevin Wheldall, 2006

This brings us to 2013 and 'Why Jaydon Can't Read.' The name has changed, but the problem is the same – Jaydon can't read because he has not been taught to read using strategies proven to be the most effective.

There are main two culprits – pre-service teacher education and government policy.

The first part of the problem in pre-service teacher education is what has been called the 'Peter effect'. In the Bible, when a beggar asked the apostle Peter for money, he responded that he could not give what he did not himself have. In the context of reading instruction, the Peter effect is that one cannot teach what one does not know.

The data in Table 3 are from one of a number of studies of literacy and language knowledge of pre-service teachers, that is, people who are undertaking teaching degrees. It is typical of the findings of studies in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom showing that a large proportion of pre-service teachers and in-service teachers had insufficient knowledge of meta-linguistics – basic language constructs such as phonological awareness and morphology – to be able to use it in their teaching. Surveys of teacher educators and senior school staff in a national sample of university education faculties and schools found a low level of confidence in the personal literacy skills of beginning teachers. This is partly due to low entrance requirements for many teaching degrees. Yet this skill deficit is not being addressed before graduation.

It's not as if pre-service and beginning teachers are oblivious to

the gaps in their knowledge. The survey data presented in Tables 4 and 5 are again indicative of what is found more widely.

These data indicate that pre-service and beginning teachers are not confident about their own knowledge and abilities to teach reading. They are aware that they have not been adequately prepared.

An audit for the National Inquiry into Teaching Literacy (NITL) found that in almost all 34 four-year primary education teaching degree courses, less than 10 per cent of content in compulsory subjects was preparation to teach reading. In half the degree courses, it was less than 5 per cent. The range among all 34 institutions was as low as 1 per cent and peaked at 15 per cent. It's strange that the ability to teach reading is not considered a higher priority for primary school teachers.

Furthermore, the audit did not scrutinise the content of the courses, leaving open the question of whether even this small amount of time was spent wisely. This quote from 2008 from the inquiry chairman, Ken Rowe, in his usual take-no-prisoners style, leaves little doubt about his response to the content of the courses and why so little had changed since the inquiry.

“Higher education providers of education and those who provide ongoing professional development of teachers, with a few exceptions, are still puddling around in postmodernist claptrap about how children learn to read.”

– Ken Rowe, 2008

Education faculties seem to have a deep antipathy to the scientific method, instead preferring to use case studies, and even poetry, to analyse and evaluate educational issues. Tom and Justine will say more about this.

Professor Keith Stanovich, a pre-eminent and influential reading scientist from Canada, talks about the impact of the ‘authority syndrome’ on education, which ascribes knowledge to an expert individual, and contrasts it to a scientific approach, which is democratic and open to change.

Continued next page >

**Table 3: Pre-service teachers' knowledge of basic language constructs**

Question	Percentage of pre-service teachers who gave correct response
Q: What is a phoneme?	73%
Q: How many phonemes are there in these words?	
Chop	33%
Box	7%
This	28%
Q: What is phonics?	96%

Source: Ruth Fielding-Barnsley, 'Australian Pre-Service Teachers' Knowledge of Phonemic Awareness and Phonics in the Process of Learning to Read,' *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties* 15:1 (2010), 99-110.

**Table 4: Beginning primary school teachers' perceptions of their teacher education courses – Development of conceptual understanding of aspects of literacy**

Aspect of literacy	Percentage of beginning teachers who said their course had adequately developed their conceptual understanding
Reading	75%
Writing	75%
Speaking and listening	70%
Viewing	57%
Grammar	53%
Phonics	52%
Spelling	51%

Source: William Loudon and Mary Rohl, “Too Many Theories and Not Enough Instruction”: Perceptions of Preservice Teacher Preparation for Literacy Teaching in Australian Schools,' *Literacy* 40:2 (2006), 66-78.

**Table 5: Beginning primary school teachers' perceptions of their teacher education courses – Preparation to teach aspects of literacy.**

Aspect of literacy	Percentage of beginning teachers who said their course had adequately developed them to teach
Reading	64%
Writing	64%
Speaking and listening	58%
Viewing	46%
Grammar	43%
Phonics	43%
Spelling	42%

Source: William Loudon and Mary Rohl, “Too Many Theories and Not Enough Instruction”: Perceptions of Preservice Teacher preparation for Literacy Teaching in Australian Schools,' *Literacy* 40:2 (2006).

“Nothing has retarded the cumulative growth of knowledge in the psychology of reading more than failure to deal with problems in a scientific manner.

Education’s well-known susceptibility to the ‘authority syndrome’ stems from its tacit endorsement of a personalistic view of knowledge acquisition: the belief that knowledge resides within particular individuals who then dispenses it to others... An adherence to a subjective, personalized view of knowledge is what continually leads to educational fads that could easily be avoided by grounding teachers and other practitioners in the importance of scientific thinking for solving educational problems.”

– Keith Stanovich, 1993

Teacher education is one source of the problem. The other is government policy. Policy development on reading and literacy in all governments too is consistently undermined by the vagaries of the political cycle, a reliance on non-expert ‘experts’, and misallocation of vital resources into ineffective programs, partly because of persistent failure to evaluate programs properly.

Australian governments are not unique in this regard. For example, some aspects of the reforms to New York City’s education system under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools chief Joel Klein are well-known, particularly school report cards and expansion of charter schools. These reforms have been divisive and the lack of improvement in New York schools is sometimes held as evidence of the failure of these reforms.

What is not known is that reading instruction was also reformed in NYC under Klein and Bloomberg. Klein and Bloomberg claimed that only programs proven to work would be used in New York’s public schools and that reading instruction would focus on phonics daily. To that end, a program called Month-by-Month Phonics was approved for schools. Yet, as is so often the case, this was a balanced literacy program that hijacked the language of effective, evidence-based reading instruction.

“Not only has [Month-by-Month Phonics] never met the ‘proven to work’ standard set by the mayor; it isn’t even a systematic phonics program, despite its name.

In a letter to Bloomberg, Klein, and Lam, seven noted reading specialists, including three who had served on the National Reading Panel, said that Month-by-Month Phonics is ‘woefully inadequate,’ ‘lacks a research base,’ and ‘puts beginning readers at risk of failure in learning to read.’”

– Sol Stern, 2005

Such subterfuge is happening in Australian schools, too. Untested programs are being implemented in schools, often with children most at risk of reading failure. The result is large numbers of children who require remedial reading intervention, with only a small number receiving it. Often the intervention itself does not meet the criteria of effective, evidence-based reading instruction.

Everyone considers themselves an expert on teaching reading. They are not. Initial and remedial reading instruction in particular is highly specific and scientific. Using proven, effective teaching methods is the only way to relieve children of the burden of illiteracy, and it’s only one of the many things schools are not doing.

### Observations on the ‘reading wars’: Justine Ferrari



I’m not a teacher, never have been, and I cover education rather than work in it, so I’m an independent observer. But I am also a true insider – as a parent and as an avid reader.

Reading has always been an

important part of my life. I’ve been trying to remember when I didn’t read, but can’t. I don’t remember learning to read, nor did I struggle with it. I do remember my father telling me about my younger sister learning to read, and how she seemed to pick it up so quickly, until he realised because he was reading her the same books he’d read to me, she knew them by heart. She could tell the story, even recite it word-perfect, but she wasn’t reading it. He had to buy her a whole new set of books.

My sister did go on to learn to read but I was thinking of my father’s story because it illustrates how there are children who appear to read but can’t, just as there are teachers who appear to teach reading but don’t, and academics who appear to train teachers in teaching reading, but don’t. And that’s the problem.

I didn’t know there was more than one way to teach reading until my son started school, which was before I started covering education for *The Australian*. He couldn’t read before he started school but he knew his letters and could write his name, and I conscientiously read to him every night. So I was perplexed when he started bringing home ‘readers’. What was he meant to do with them? I asked his teacher: Should I sound out the letters, point to the words as I read to him, get him to repeat them after me? She told me to just read it with him and he’d pick it up. Like by osmosis, or magic?

That was my introduction to the reading wars. But it was not until I started covering education for *The Australian* a few years later that I knew there was a dispute about the teaching of reading. And a dispute about what we mean by reading. So let me share some of my war stories.

I contrast the approach of my son’s teacher – a sort of blind faith in a teaching dogma – with that of a teacher at Peakhurst South Public School, Anna Matekja.

Anna was a Year 1 teacher and sick of seeing at the end of every year a handful of children in her class who couldn’t read. She read the research and introduced in the school, to some resistance, a program that taught the children the 42 letter-sound combinations that make up

the English language and how to blend them into words. The results were immediate and dramatic. After only five months, the Kindergarten students were reading at the level of the Year 1 students above them. Every child in the class learned to read.

Anna's experience raises these questions. Is there more than one way to teach reading? Is there a right way to teach reading? Do reading and literacy mean different things? Is reading a different, and subordinate, skill to literacy?

From a parent's – and a journalist's – point of view, the distinction between reading and literacy seems a specious argument: the sort of discussion elbow-patched academics might engage in by the fireside over whisky and pipe-smoking.

The more extreme proponents of the whole language side of the reading or literacy wars often use the term 'reading' in a derogatory fashion to denote an inferior skill to literacy. They use it to refer to the simple decoding of symbols without understanding the word, as if reading the actual letters on the page is somehow separate to gaining literacy. They sometimes use the phrase "barking at print" to indicate that the activity is divorced from meaning or understanding.

In her book on the literacy wars, Monash University education professor and former teacher Ilana Snyder takes aim at critics of the whole language approach. (*The Australian* gets particular attention for airing the debate).

Professor Snyder declares that literacy is difficult to define, and that there is no single correct view of literacy that is universally accepted. She says that literacy traditionally has been considered a psychological ability, an "unchanging set of basic skills" used to crack the alphabet code. But today literacy is, in Snyder's words, "a repertoire of social practices".

According to this view, learning to be literate is more like learning to play a musical instrument in an orchestra than the mechanical acquisition of decoding and encoding skills in a classroom.

It is interesting, and perhaps ironic, that she should use the analogy of

mastering a musical instrument, because that's the one which most often comes to my mind when listening to arguments about reading, particularly that children learn to read naturally like they learn to talk.

No one expects a child to become proficient in playing the piano simply by listening to it, or by having their parents play to them every night.

Sure, some gifted children will teach themselves to play and pick it up by sight, but for the vast majority of us, it requires explicit teaching to match the notes to the keys, which key is which, how to strike them, how to read music, and, of course, practise.

While Snyder and too many of her colleagues debate abstract arguments about whether it's reading or literacy, or 'making meaning' rather than sounding out words, schools push through tens of thousands of children every year without the reading skills they need.

Is it that complicated? As a parent, I know whether my children can read or not. I expect that my child's teacher knows whether my child can read or not, and most importantly, knows what to do about it.

The reading or literacy wars have been waging inside the teaching profession for the best part of three decades. They first came to the public's attention when *The Australian* published an open letter from a group of education researchers to then federal Minister for Education Brendan Nelson, which resulted in the 'Teaching Reading: National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy' led by Ken Rowe.

The whole language approach to reading was part of the rise of progressive education in the 1970s. It was a reaction to traditional teaching methods that taught letter-sound relationships divorced from any words or actual stories. Drill-and-kill is how it's sometimes described. For killing a love of reading.

Many things changed for the better with the intervention of the progressivists. Engaging the child in their own learning became more important, as did teaching skills in the context of how they're used. Children's experiences of school and the classroom were energised and they became more active participants

in their own learning. The trouble is that from an observer's perspective, too often the context became more important than the skills being taught.

The whole language movement coincided with the rise of post-modernism and the introduction – some would say invasion – of cultural studies into subject English, which led to a further questioning of what constitutes reading.

If 'making meaning' becomes the central and defining feature of subject English, then the content of that subject is no longer language – words and sentences. Instead we now have texts. And what is a text? A text seems to be anything that conveys meaning. But is reading bus tickets or a text message or a billboard as meaningful as reading Shakespeare? As I understand it, the term 'literacy' has come to refer to various forms of 'making meaning' from 'texts', not books, whether they are composed of words, images, moving pictures, sounds or combinations of all of them.

Of course understanding what you are reading is important. But the academic theorists are yet to explain to parents and the community how anyone can 'make meaning' from a book when they can't read the words on the page.

It should always come back to words.

These methods of reading are pushed by groups of teachers and academics like the Literacy Educators Coalition, which describes itself as a group of 'passionate literacy advocates'. They're headed by some of the biggest proponents of whole language – which with consummate sleight of hand they now call the 'balanced approach' – including the children's author Mem Fox and representatives past and present of the English teachers associations.

On the website, the literacy educators have a section helpfully called 'What We Believe', which is instructive in understanding their philosophy. Third on the list of 15 beliefs (cutely lettered a-o rather than numbered) is this: "The only reason for reading is to construct meaning" and in brackets it says: "Reading does not

Continued next page >

---

require the production of sound, but it may.” It means you can read without moving your lips but that doesn’t mean the sound is divorced from the meaning. Each of those letters represents a sound, that’s the point.

At letter ‘f’ they declare: “The teaching of phonics is closely related to the teaching of writing; and the teaching of writing is closely related to the teaching of reading.” That’s phonics, the symbols that represent the sounds in our spoken language.

Until about March 2012, the website also boasted that more than 90 per cent of students are at or above national minimum standards in literacy. By April, the website was redesigned and this statement disappeared. Maybe the weight of evidence of declining results in national and international literacy tests became too much.

Still it’s a statement worth examining, because every time I write a story focusing on the proportion of children falling behind, this figure is quoted ad nauseam as ‘proof’ that there is no problem with our reading skills. According to NAPLAN, the national literacy and numeracy tests, about 25 per cent of Year 9 students are at or below the minimum standards in reading. That’s about 70,000 teenagers.

Rather than examine the reasons why these teenagers can go through school barely able to read, defenders of the existing system seem to continue arguing about what is reading. Or they focus on the children who can read – the 90 per cent-plus.

This is a bare minimum of standards we’re boasting about here, not an aspirational level of skills. Should we be aiming for a minimum standard? And what about the kids below the benchmark? What priority are they?

If doctors were losing 10 per cent or 20 per cent of their patients each year, they would re-examine their practice, rethink their treatment plans, and change the medicine. But activists in this debate point to the 90 per cent they’ve saved. Is that good enough? Doctors may not be able to save every patient, but every child can learn to read. As a researcher in learning difficulties once said to me, there’s no such thing as a learning

difficulty, there are only teaching difficulties.

So to return to my main question: Is there a right way to teach reading? The evidence says yes, there is.

Unfortunately, not enough teachers know it and too few children experience it. I, like many parents, often feel let down by the teaching profession, though I don’t mean to single out teachers for blame, and I make a distinction between teachers doing their best and ‘literacy educators’. I think teachers have been let down by education faculties in universities, which are dominated by progressivists – teachers should be the custodians of the profession’s practice. The best practice, the methods that work developed through years of experience and compiling evidence.

In medicine, doctors follow clear professional protocols in diagnosing patients and prescribing the right treatment, based on the profession’s years of experience and research evidence. The practice is fairly standardised across the profession; some doctors might be better diagnosticians but all basically follow the same rule book for the same condition. Even my car mechanic or the dishwasher repairman uses an established and consistent protocol to diagnose and fix a problem.

This diagnosis of a problem, and a prescribed action to fix it, is lacking in teaching. But it’s not impossible or even difficult to do.

The school where a colleague sends his son called in the parents of the Kindergarten kids who were not learning to read as fast as the rest of the class. We need your help, the school said, to make sure your children keep up. They were given some basic drills to do in the car on the way to school for one term. In three months, the boy was reading.

Catholic schools in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, where a lot of disadvantaged families live, including refugees and new migrants, started a trial teaching kids how to speak before they learn how to read. These schools were responding to research that kids in poor families hear millions fewer words by the time they start school than middle-class children, and you can’t read language

you can’t speak. They now teach children phonics, sentence structure, how to tell a story. It’s a controlled trial, and the reading skills of the children taught oral language are rising at twice the rate of the control group.

Teachers often say we should copy Finland, which tops the international tests, rather than America with its national testing. I agree. In Finnish schools, not only do all teachers have masters’ degrees, but also the bottom 30 per cent of students in a class are given extra help by their teacher to make sure they don’t fall behind.

But in Australia, any observer would recognise that there’s a defensive, evangelistic zeal among many literacy educators and an ideological blindness that makes them cling to their beliefs in the face of the evidence of what is NOT working and what is. They go to great lengths to oppose attempts to change the way reading is taught. When Verity Firth, then NSW Education Minister, announced in 2009 a trial of reading programs to figure out which ones work, the whole language advocates tried to organise a campaign to turn her against evidence-based programs like MultiLit before the trial had even begun. Due to the typical problem of poor evaluation processes, the trial did not end up providing useful information anyway.

The fact that some children don’t learn to read is the responsibility of the whole teaching profession and the academics who train them. Instead, from my experience, there’s a degree of defensiveness about the failure rate that is complacent and unacceptable. Teachers, like doctors, are dealing with kids’ lives. Failure in school cuts off potential in a child’s life, and that starts with a failure to read.

It was never my intention to become a partisan in a specialist professional debate. I am not trained as a teacher, nor do I have specialist literacy expertise. But I bring to this subject my training as a journalist, my experience as a parent, and my common sense. Parents and the community expect the profession that is responsible for the education of our children to apply professional judgment, analysis and evidence-based practice to its work each and

every day. We expect to be able to see that professional expertise in action consistently. We expect that judgments are made on the basis that particular practices work, and that they haven't been influenced by philosophy or prejudice.

I simply do not believe that this is the case in relation to teaching kids to read. And the fact that the literacy wars continue to exist proves my point.

### Policymakers and the research-to-practice gap: Tom Alegounarias



I'm not a literacy expert but a policy analyst. The article 'Why Jaydon Can't Read' argues that there is a gap between teaching practice and evidence of what works in reading instruction, and which has "prevented the widespread adoption of effective methods for teaching reading".

The reasons for this 'research to practice' gap are generally a lack of engagement with evidence and data in the teaching profession and a lack of confidence in dealing with empirical research. Moreover, ideologies, belief systems and entrenched practices often overwhelm evidence of what works for particular students in particular circumstances.

The implications are substantial for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in particular, but also for our capacity to meet the challenges of an increasingly competitive economic environment.

This disconnection between research and teaching practice is not a result of a recalcitrant, self-serving, wilful and ideological teaching workforce, as is commonly asserted.

Rather, it is a lack of professional, policy and academic leadership. The profession and its policy environment have not responded well enough or quickly enough to the demand for universally high-quality education.

So what actions or policy corrections are available to us?

I will make my case drawing on my experience in bureaucracy and policy development, but I want to make two pre-emptive qualifications to what follows. First, I do not absolve myself of responsibility for the collective failure to achieve better rates of reading and literacy. And second, I will not be offering research data to support my assertions. I am aware of the irony in that.

Literacy and reading are universally understood as foundational for an individual's capacity to engage and succeed in education, and subsequently, in life. Our obligation to implement effective literacy practice is therefore nothing short of an obligation to universal enfranchisement. The obligation is not to guarantee each individual's success. Rather, it is to ensure the efficacy of our approaches to teaching literacy to improve equality of opportunity in education.

At an absolute minimum is an obligation to ensure our practices in education do not damage or neglect students' interests. At a slightly higher but contingent level, there is an obligation to ensure that policy and practice are informed by evidence. And then, consistent with our expectations, there is the common requirement that programs and approaches are evaluated rigorously and regularly.

A case can be made that policies have not consistently met any of these standards for literacy teaching. So the question must be asked: Does this reflect a disregard among policymakers for the interests of the least advantaged?

This question is not just a moral one; there is also an economic competitiveness imperative. In the 1970s, around 30 per cent of students applied to go to a university in NSW. In the TV series, *Keating: The Interviews*, Paul Keating says he thinks maybe one or two people from his final school year went on

to university. That figure is now closer to 85 per cent. And that is partly because jobs that don't require a relatively high level of education just don't exist in our increasingly services-based economy.

A low strike rate in terms of higher educational attainment was not previously regarded as the affront to personal, social and economic expectations that it is now. Failure to read and progress to further learning was accepted as a function of social or cultural capital and personal disposition more than a reflection of the efficacy of the teaching and learning process.

Within that context, practices and theories emerged in the 1970s and 1980s that de-emphasised specific content knowledge and explicit teaching. In NSW, traditional grammar was discarded just long enough for us to lose the capacity to produce teachers with the requisite knowledge. In other states, the teaching of history in primary schools was abandoned wholesale. And, of course, the whole language approach to teaching reading took hold, relying as it does on social awareness and personal disposition. Dropping or not providing systematic instruction in grammar or direct and assured instruction in reading, for example, did not previously necessarily entail the economic or social or personal cost that it does now.

When I began working in policy some 25 years ago, it was not uncommon to hear bureaucrats of both the middling and senior kind say things like "the best way to encourage reading is to put a child in a room with books". At one stage in the Department of Education, it was anathema to use the term 'teaching and learning'; the required terminology was 'learning and teaching,' indicating the centrality of the learner as a person rather than the imperative and responsibility of teaching. This reflected a profound faith in progressive dogma counter to ideas of specificity, instruction, causality between teaching strategy and learning, and I believe, professional responsibility and accountability.

Continued next page >

When the demand for high attainment in education was relatively low or narrow, an affluent community such as Australia could afford to allow for the generalised educational practices of the time to complement the cultural capital of individuals who would go on to white collar work.

Times have changed. Teaching is now understood as the key variable for determining schooling outcomes. Student social background is understood as a factor. Personal student capacity is understood as a variable but not one that aligns with a student's background, and therefore, not an excuse for patterns of low achievement. This therefore has implications that go to the nature of teaching. An assurance of high expectations for all and universal or near universal attainment of reading and literacy as a foundation for further learning demands specific teaching practices.

Teachers of reading need to be explicit and systemised in their approach. They cannot assume student knowledge or rely on implication or individual student awareness. They cannot rely on simple exposure of students to texts, hoping to build excitement and motivation, depending on the force of each student's personality and their home culture to provide impetus to success.

So we have established the contextual imperative for effective policy. How has policy responded?

There has been no shortage of policy initiatives for improving literacy over the years, including:

- 1997-2003 NSW State Literacy Strategy Evaluation
- 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy
- 2006-08 NSW State Literacy Plan (\$154 million over four years)
- 2007 NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan
- 2008 Auditor-General's report – Improving Literacy and Numeracy in NSW Public Schools
- 2011 Ministerial Advisory Group on Literacy and Numeracy
- 2012 Auditor-General's report – Improving Aboriginal Literacy in NSW Public Schools

- 2013 DEC Literacy K-12 Policy

And I have witnessed positive change in policy since the early 1990s, though it has been incremental. 'Why Jaydon Can't Read' notes the inclusion of reading strategies in curriculum and the occasional lurching forward in the production or pronouncement of materials that present direct, informed reading strategies.

In addition, the NSW Government's response to the lack of an empirical underpinning to literacy policy is unambiguous and positive. Among a range of initiatives, perhaps the most strategic is the commissioning of research on how literacy interventions are informed by the research and how they are evaluated. A committee of the leaders of each school sector and educational agencies has been asked to develop advice on the use of evidence in determining interventions.

Nonetheless, there should continue to be profound concern about the specific expertise and the general capacity of teachers as a whole to respond to the literacy challenge.

Among teachers generally, the basic building blocks of a professional, empirically informed, scientifically structured approach to teaching reading is lacking. Specifically:

- There is no widespread knowledge and understanding of specific instructional strategies, their uses and effects for teaching reading, and other dimensions of literacy.
- There is no general capacity or confidence within the profession in evaluating professional practice, individually or as groups of professionals.
- When students are assisted through particular interventions to improve reading, teachers generally lack strategies to assist students to integrate acquired reading skills into their generalised educational and reading experience.

So if I'm right or even partly right about the gaps between research, policy and practice, what are the underlying conditions that result in this circumstance?

One dimension is the ideological contestation that characterises so

much of education, and literacy is one of the favoured fields of battle. The result of the reading and literacy wars has been a lack of professional coherence among teachers, and a lack of real confidence that there are common and agreed truths and best practices that can and should be applied in appropriate circumstances.

Let's take the term 'literacy,' for example. The common-sense understanding of literacy as a capacity to make meaning of written words, write and communicate that we would all recognise has been undermined in a couple of ways. The postmodern understanding of literacy – that meaning is always contingent, and about interpretation, and that there is no actual shared meaning – does not help create a common reference point for improving policy and practice.

There is also the appropriation of the word 'literacy' to add credibility and urgency to a range of other educational domains. So we now have scientific literacy and computer literacy and, of course, visual literacy. I can't help but feel that we are on the verge of 'numeracy literacy'. The effect of this is not only to obfuscate and undermine common understanding of the word, and therefore, the potential for being constructive around the idea of literacy, but also to challenge the primacy and fundamental urgency of learning to read and being literate.

This situation is exacerbated by political attacks on teaching as a whole. Many of these attacks are opportunistic and ill informed. This creates defensiveness among teachers that limits open discussion and, without prejudice, the pursuit of truth or better practice. It makes the professional discourse polemical rather than specific or scientific. It becomes about perceptions rather than evidence of effective practice.

A key concern is the lack of confidence generally among teachers in quantifiable evaluation, and a lack of expertise in, or regard for, measuring learning attainment. Generally, with a smattering of exceptions, teachers and teacher educators – the academics who train or prepare teachers – are not as confident in quantifiable or empirical research as they are in case studies or commentary.

This has a political dimension in that measuring learning attainment is often regarded as treating education as a product or good, which is motivated by a desire to marketise schooling. Empirical research is often characterised as inherently conservative and protective of privilege by teacher educators at universities. There is, ironically, often a stunning disregard for the fact that literacy attainment, for example, is distributed unevenly, and that measurably less literacy is attained by those most in need.

It is also the case that those who go into teaching overwhelmingly have strength in the humanities rather than maths and science. This is particularly true of primary and early primary years teachers. Once at university, there is a lack of expertise among teacher educators in empirical evaluation. So the combination of a lack of specific expertise and techniques, with a lack of empiricism, promotes an anti-science or anti-evidence culture.

When evidence does emerge, as in the work at Macquarie University on literacy addressed in 'Why Jaydon Can't Read,' it gains little currency. There are few professional pathways or channels, common or connected abutments of practice to spread knowledge and practice.

What might some policy remedies be? I recently co-authored advice to the NSW Government that has many of these concerns at its heart. These concerns are reflected in Minister Piccoli's policy blueprint, 'Great Teaching, Inspired Learning'.

And how might policy respond now? Here are four easy ways:

**1. Teachers should be required to have postgraduate qualifications with a research component.**

Research undertaken by the NSW Institute of Teachers shows that teachers who have conducted postgraduate research are generally comfortable analysing student learning data and adjusting teaching strategies accordingly. As the majority of teachers are not comfortable determining the validity or reliability of student learning data, they are unlikely to engage with evidence of effective literacy learning and

evaluation of practice.

It is a common declaration among educators that the point of literacy assessment is to diagnose student needs. That's one point, but assessment is also important for reporting and accountability reasons. To the extent that it is intended to be diagnostic, teachers need to understand and feel comfortable with analysing student outcomes and what the data tell them, not only about individual students but also about their teaching. While there is rightly some concern about the limited diagnostic usefulness of assessments such as NAPLAN, teachers themselves are not comfortable developing strategies that diagnose and then address the specific and detailed needs of students.

**2. A high-level achievement in English should be a prerequisite for entry into teacher education.**

This is not because success in HSC English is a particularly good indicator of being able to teach literacy, though it is unlikely to count against you. Rather, it is because the most reliable indicator of likely success at university is your English mark. This is partly because everyone does a level of English in the HSC or in their exit credential, and all the levels are marked on a common scale. English marks are, in this way, a reasonable measure of an individual's ability. And teaching requires capable, intelligent and resilient individuals.

That is the issue: teaching reading and literacy is, in fact, a technical and difficult task. Adjusting instruction to meet individual student variations, while maintaining the integrity of the instruction, is even more difficult. Translating progress in reading and writing into integrated academic competence and confidence is yet more demanding and nuanced, even if the original reading strategies are direct. We need minimum standards to ensure high-level entrants into teaching courses. English capacity is a broad but available measure.

**3. All student teachers should be assessed on their knowledge of evidence of what works in reading and writing.**

The curriculum in university

courses should include this content as well as training in its application. It should have a theoretical and practical dimension. All student teachers should be assessed on their literacy (and numeracy) skills before graduation. They should be assessed on their capacity to teach literacy and reading, with particular regard for the literacy demands of their subject area if they are high school teachers.

This would constitute a fair proportion of the curriculum undertaken by early years and primary student teachers in particular. The assessment should include evaluating the teacher's actual practice with students during practicums or internships.

**4. Professional standards describing the characteristics of effective professional practice in teaching literacy should be published, and used to evaluate teacher practice and promote improved practice.**

There have been professional standards describing effective practice in NSW since 2004 and national standards since 2012. The standards are generic, however. They are useful for their purpose but with regard to literacy, they can be counterproductive because, being generic, they underestimate the importance of specific technical knowledge. The specific skills and the practices of direct literacy instruction need to be described and pronounced if they are to be prioritised as effective practice.

These are regulatory or quasi-regulatory expressions of what is required. They in fact highlight the limits of a regulatory approach to generating professional improvement and cultural change. The underlying, or intrinsic, change required is an unambiguous recognition by the teaching profession of the importance of specific and technical knowledge, and of scientific process to achieving literacy for the many, not just the few.

With regard to reading, the teaching profession needs to evolve to place the responsibility of direct instruction and its contingent relationship to learning at its heart. That is not to

Continued next page >

say that all teaching is direct delivery of rules and facts. But at the heart of modern teaching is the responsibility of teachers to provide all requisite knowledge and understanding in clear and explicit terms.

Such technical, accountable and empirically and scientifically supported practice is the product of a greater depth of knowledge and expertise, beginning with universities but in the end defended in standards of practice and ethics by all teachers.

I have worked with teachers, teacher professional bodies, and teacher unions for decades. The inability to match contemporary community demands for universal or near-universal literacy is not down to reluctance by teachers generally. It is not, as is frequently asserted, a recalcitrant and industrially bound workforce that sets limits on an evidence-based dynamic in teaching practice.

When teachers are attacked, teacher spokespersons can be found to defend them. But why is it that teachers feel they can defend practice that doesn't accord with evidence? The lack of specific knowledge and practice reflects a lack of academic leadership, with key exceptions. Too much academic commentary on teaching practice is generic and relies on generalised and ideologically imbued principles. It is often expressed in terms of teaching as democratic process rather than in specific skills and knowledge. This accords with a progressivist ideological settlement within the profession.

In any profession, academic training and research is the bedrock for building sturdy practice, and a reference point for evaluation. From among academic leaders, iconoclasts should emerge with evidence and data that force practitioners to reconsider. I may be idealistic but the contestation should be on the veracity of the evidence. Without a strong and widespread culture of shaping practice to address the evidence, change is unlikely and teachers will not engage.

But bureaucrats such as myself can't be let off the hook. The lack of policy redress also reflects historical policy nonchalance. Too often, bureaucrats have found a safe place at the side of the reading wars and watched with detached curiosity.

The safest possible path to take in this highly contested terrain is the so-called moderate balanced path. The trouble with the moderate balanced path is that it does not take you towards what works for which students and in what circumstances.

In education, the senior bureaucrats are also the most powerful professional leaders. Individuals in senior positions claim professional depth as well as administrative expertise and make judgments about what programs to support. If departments and agencies don't actively promote empirical research without fear or favour, and academics don't, why are we surprised when teachers and their spokespersons defend the orthodox?

Along with the sort of policy prescriptions I outlined earlier, and which are being implemented in NSW, some key understandings and counter orthodoxies should be declared and propagated. The days of generic constructivist homilies masquerading as teaching techniques for reading are over. The evidence is well and truly in. I'm confident teachers will be receptive.

## Endnotes

- Australian National Audit Office, 'National Partnership Agreement on Literacy and Numeracy,' website.
- NSW Auditor-General, *Improving Literacy and Numeracy in NSW Public Schools*: Department of Education and Training (Sydney: Audit Office of NSW, 2008).
- Victorian Auditor-General, *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement—Victorian Auditor-General's Report February 2009* (Melbourne: Victorian Government Printer, 2009).
- Miriam Gross, *So Why Can't They Read?* (Surrey: Centre for Policy Studies, 2010).
- Rudolph Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read And What You Can Do About It* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955).
- Stephen Krashen, 'Has Whole Language Failed?' (Centre for Multilingual Multicultural Education, University of Southern California, 2000).
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, *Report of the National Reading Panel – Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction*, NIH Publication No. 00-4769 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2000).
- DEST (Department of Education, Science and Training), *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL) – Teaching Reading: Report and Recommendations* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2005).
- Jim Rose, *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading: Final Report* (Nottingham, United Kingdom: Department for Education and Skills, 2006).
- Kevin Wheldall, 'Opponents have got it wrong on phonics', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April 2006.
- Jennifer Buckingham, Kevin Wheldall, and Robyn Beaman-Wheldall, 'Why Jaydon Can't Read: The Triumph of Ideology Over Evidence in the Teaching of Reading,' *Policy* 29:3 (2013), 21–32.
- DEST (Department of Education, Science and Training), *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL) – Teaching Reading: Report and Recommendations* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2005).
- Caroline Milburn, 'Battle lines', *The Age*, 8 September 2008.
- Keith Stanovich, 'Romance and reality,' *The Reading Teacher* 47:4 (1993), 280–291.
- Sol Stern, 'A Negative Assessment: An Education Revolution That Never Was,' *Education Next* 5:4 (2005), 12–16.
- Jennifer Buckingham, et al. 'Why Jaydon Can't Read,' as above, 21.
- Michelle Bruniges, Patrick Lee, and Tom Alegounarias, *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning: A Blueprint for Action*, report prepared for the NSW Minister for Education by the NSW Department of Education & Communities, NSW Institute of Teachers, and Board of Studies NSW (Sydney: 2013).

*This symposium of papers is reproduced here by kind permission of the Centre for Independent Studies.*

# Responses to the statutory Year One phonics screening check in England according to media coverage



**Debbie Hepplewhite**

**A**dvocates in the UK of an approach described as 'Systematic Synthetic Phonics' (SSP) have been very grateful to be able to call upon conclusions of the reading inquiries in the USA and in Australia to support their lobbying efforts. Thanks to the internet, links to international research and educational blogs have informed and supported efforts in various English-speaking countries to promote evidence-based early phonics instruction and phonics intervention. To date, however, there is still a long road to be travelled to guarantee high-quality phonics provision for teaching reading and spelling in the English language in all English-speaking countries and contexts. In other words, it is still a lottery as to the reading instruction that children receive – and this should not be the case.

*Since 2006, systematic phonics provision and, later, systematic synthetic phonics provision has been officially endorsed and promoted for early reading instruction by governments across the political spectrum in England.*

Since 2006, systematic phonics provision and, later, systematic synthetic phonics provision has been officially endorsed and promoted for early reading instruction by governments across the political spectrum in England – largely driven forwards by Sir Jim Rose (Teaching of Reading, March 2006) and Nick Gibb, former Schools Minister. This emphasis on the need for phonics teaching has culminated in the creation of a statutory phonics screening check for six-year-olds at the end of their first year of schooling. (Please note that in England the children are likely to have received almost two full years of systematic phonics by the time they take part in the check as most Reception-aged children – the four- to five-year-olds – will have been taught reading and spelling with the systematic synthetic phonics approach even as pre-schoolers).

The current government in England has also provided 'match funding' up to £3000, thus encouraging state schools in England to each spend £6000 on named systematic synthetic phonics programmes for mainstream and intervention provision, cumulative decodable reading books, phonics resources and phonics training – all of which must have passed the government's 'core criteria' for evaluating phonics material and practices. All of the approved resources were included in purpose-designed match funded catalogues for schools.

The Year One phonics screening check was developed by phonics experts in consultation with head teachers, teachers and other experts. It was piloted in around 300 schools in 2011 and was independently evaluated. The check includes 20 real words and 20 non-words consisting of letter/s-sound correspondences of the alphabetic code which are likely to have been introduced by the time the children undertake the check. Colourful little creatures (or aliens) are shown as illustrations alongside the non-words and children are told that the words are 'not real'. Non-words are included because they will be new to all children – avoiding a bias to those with a good vocabulary or good visual memory of words. Children who can read non-words should have the skills to decode unfamiliar words. This is very important as literature includes many new words not within the spoken vocabulary of young children.

Soon after the official completion of the check, access to the check is made freely available for any other schools nationally and internationally that would like to use the check. I actively encourage schools teaching reading in the English language to use the official check and, indeed, I am aware of a number of international

Continued next page >

---

schools using the check for their own assessment purposes.

Sadly, despite the high-level inquiries in the USA, Australia and in England, teachers and lecturers in teacher-training universities are not necessarily knowledgeable or in agreement with the research on the most effective practice. There is still a wide-held belief in the validity of using 'multi-cueing reading strategies' which are based on a lot of guesswork – guess from the pictures, guess from the meaning of the sentence or text, guess from the first letter/s of the words. The past 30 years of research findings have discredited the use of multi-cueing reading strategies which amount to little more than guessing, yet these reading strategies continue to be promoted in whole language approaches and universities and they are associated with the intervention programme, *Reading Recovery*, which remains firmly entrenched as part of the education establishment in all the major English-speaking countries.

Significantly, when Sheffield Hallam University (in England) interviewed teachers taking part in the original 2011 pilot project of the Year One phonics screening check, nearly three-quarters of the teachers revealed that their practice was still based on these discredited multi-cueing reading strategies. To be fair, I have found many teachers in the UK who have not been officially trained in either the multi-cueing reading strategies model (often referred to as the 'Searchlights' model in England) or in the replacement model of the 'Simple View of Reading' (origin: Gough and Tunmer, 1986). The reality is that when many children are given school reading books to read which do not match the phonics they have been taught, then inevitably they must default to 'guessing' if they cannot decode the words through a phonics route – and/or teachers and parents may tell the children to guess the words simply to get through the books. The Simple View of Reading model focuses on two main processes required for skilled reading – word decoding and language comprehension. The 'reader' requires the ability to lift the words off the page technically and then the level of spoken language to understand the

words that have been decoded.

Vociferous critics in England of the government's emphasis on Systematic Synthetic Phonics and of the Year One phonics screening check are highly evident in the press. There is very little 'balance' to be seen of the voice of phonics and reading specialists who could readily address the criticisms and the fundamental misunderstandings of so many who, arguably, should be better informed because of their professional roles in education and literacy.

The impression given by media coverage is that the check is very unpopular with teachers themselves. The claim is that the check is "flawed" – especially because of the inclusion of the non-words which, many argue, the children turn into real words "to make sense" of them. The critics say that the check doesn't tell teachers any more than they already know from their own assessment – despite the fact that so many teachers clearly were very surprised by the results of the check, suggesting that their own assessments may not have given them a complete understanding of their pupils' true decoding ability!

Feelings are so strong about the Year One phonics screening check that some children's authors have signed a petition against it, and some professional bodies have solicited teachers' and head teachers' views such as the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) and the UKLA. Such people, including many teachers, appear not to understand that children need to be able to decode any new words and not just words already known. Without doubt, however, the very fact that there have been so many shocked teachers and detractors illustrates that those in the teaching profession do not share a common understanding of early reading instruction. They do not share an understanding of the desired reading profile of pupils for the long term. It is only phonics which allows even adult readers to lift the words off the page or to read words in a list when the picture cues have disappeared, and when the words are not within one's spoken vocabulary.

In June 2013, the conclusions of a study led by Oxford University psychologists in collaboration with

the University of York and the City of York local authority questioned the validity of the Year One phonics screening check as a statutory assessment. The researchers argued that ongoing monitoring of pupils during early development of literacy skills seems more beneficial to pupils and teachers.

Of course pupils need 'ongoing monitoring' during early development of literacy skills. This is surely stating the obvious. The Year One phonics screening check was not designed to replace this responsibility from early years and infant teachers!

Two of the June 2013 paper's authors, Dr Alison Bailey and Professor Maggie Snowling, have carried out advisory work for the Department for Education in the design of the Year One phonics screening check but subsequently, Professor Snowling commented, "Ethically I think it is questionable to offer screening with no prescribed course of action for those who are identified as at risk".

I find this comment ironic and unfair, considering that the UK government allocated the £3,000 match funding for schools in England to purchase high-quality systematic synthetic phonics programmes, cumulative decodable reading book schemes and phonics training. Children who did not reach the threshold mark of the screening check of reading 32 out of 40 words successfully do not need anything different from any other children – they just need the phonics provision to be guaranteed, high-quality, little and often and not time-restricted. As Sir Jim Rose pointed out in his 2006 independent national review of early reading instruction, it is the same alphabetic code and the same skills of decoding and encoding that all children need to learn.

The match funded initiative left people in no doubt as to the commitment of the government to evidence-based phonics provision and schools taking up this offer should already have ensured that they are equipped to teach 'quality first' phonics, and also how to address any intervention required for children not reaching the 'threshold' at the end of Year One.

Further, on the site for the Department for Education, there is quite an extensive Question and Answer section which includes this advice for children who do not reach the threshold mark: “A programme of phonics support including some one-to-one tuition or small group work may be the first course of action. Extra support should be carefully monitored by the class teacher for progress. Specialist advice can be sought to provide a more personalised approach to teaching phonics and reading if required.”

My own experience of many teachers in infant and primary schools in England is that the results of the Year One phonics screening check has really sharpened their minds about their own phonics provision. Most teachers are honest and hard-working and recognise that if schools in similar contexts can achieve much better phonics results, then this is a clear message that their teaching is not effective enough compared to others.

Some head teachers and teachers love the challenge of improving on their previous results. Once again, they are honest and straightforward and keen to evaluate the quality and content of their phonics teaching. My personal opinion is that many teachers have been misled by being told they could choose the previous government’s official ‘Letters and Sounds’ publication as their phonics programme. They have been misled in the sense that there are no teaching resources and no learning resources provided with ‘Letters and Sounds’, and it is the teachers themselves who have had to work extraordinarily hard to turn ‘Letters and Sounds’ into a two- to three-year classroom programme. Some schools have done this well, piecing together various resources – commercial and/ or in-house – but other ‘Letters and Sounds’ schools continue to struggle to provide cohesion and whole school consistency and continuity.

Whilst teachers’ union leaders, literacy associations and children’s authors have challenged the need for objective national snapshots of something so fundamentally important as the ability of children to lift the words off a page, no-one seems to have focused on the need

for the government itself to be fully accountable for the methods and materials it is promoting and funding!

It is not sufficient, in my opinion, for the government to suggest that the reason for the check is to support teachers in the phonics assessment of their own pupils, when actually the government needs a picture of assessment to reflect the outcomes of what it has promoted. And when something is so fundamentally important as the literacy of the nation, how can it be that so many have given no support, nor reflect any understanding, of the need for accountability at all levels, as well as the need to know how well methods and materials really work?

This issue of accountability has several layers. One is the examination of teachers’ take-up of the phonics steer taken by the government; another is the children’s actual results and how these are reflected in different contexts and amongst different socio-economic groups; another is an attempt at measuring the value for money of the match funding initiative (does it look like results are improving where schools and government have targeted their funds?) – and what about the results according to the actual use of methods and materials from year to year?

Already we have seen a significant increase in results since the average of 32 per cent of children reaching the threshold in the 2011 pilot screening check rising to an average of 58 per cent in 2012. In 2013, the average results rose a further 11 per cent to 69 per cent of children reaching or surpassing the threshold mark of 32 out of 40 words read correctly (or plausibly in the case of the non-words). Interestingly, the results show greater success for the girls and yet in the leading-edge systematic synthetic phonics schools, the boys do better than the girls thus reversing the gender gap! Do the national results, then, indicate that schools do not yet provide the highest quality systematic synthetic phonics or do teachers tend to continue with the ‘multi-cueing reading strategies’ alongside phonics provision?

Some local authorities have been shocked by the poor results of some of

their groups of children – especially the ‘leafy suburb’ authorities that may inadvertently rely heavily on very articulate ‘homes’ to support general literacy standards. Thus, many children probably achieve well as they are particularly advantaged at home. Children who are not so articulate and who would fare much better with high quality phonics teaching may unfortunately attend schools in local authorities where the prevailing approach remains as the ‘multi-cueing reading strategies’. Thus, the outcome of the Year One phonics screening check has sharpened the minds even of local authority advisors and councillors regarding the phonics provision in their local schools compared with much better results, for example, in inner-city London schools!

Whilst some teachers on educational forums such as the Times Educational Supplement (TES) forums have described their anger and upset about having to do the screening check with their children and their frustration that their apparently ‘better’ readers made errors on the non-words, other teachers described how much their children really enjoyed a bit of one-to-one time with their class teachers and said they wanted to “do it again” the next day.

Still further teachers have told me that they used the Year One phonics screening check with their Reception children – many of whom reached or exceeded the threshold and of those who did not, it was mainly the ‘split digraph’ words they did not read correctly because ‘they haven’t been taught those yet’. These teachers appreciate that children are likely to be successful decoding words when the letter/s-sound correspondences have been well-taught.

Such teachers also demonstrate how enthusiastic they are about phonics teaching, noting how empowering it is for the children to be able to read and spell better than with any other previous teaching approaches, and much, much better than the ‘emergent’ reading and writing we have relied so heavily upon in the past. Teachers like this have true professional curiosity as to how well they are teaching and the children

Continued next page >

are learning; they want to know their results compared to other teachers. They welcome the check to give them this indication. Sadly, there is never any media coverage of this kind of hard-working and committed kind of teacher, the kind who does not shy away from being accountable and thrives on striving to improve their teaching knowledge and skills.

Having said that, the judgmental regime in English schools is a very unpleasant state of affairs. Year on year, the inspectorial system is increasingly more intense and depressing – and there seem to be as many advisors, consultants and inspectors nowadays as there are teachers! There is such a vested interest in telling schools what to do, how to micro-manage classrooms and how to account for every last bit of everything teachers plan for their children. It is, quite frankly, an awful set of circumstances and not conducive to supporting happy and productive teachers. How can we really maintain a true balance of accountability for our teaching on the one hand and yet have some freedom to be creative and manage the classrooms and the children according to teachers' individual preferences and passions?

Sir Michael Wilshaw, the current Chief Inspector of Ofsted in England, is attempting to free teachers to teach

according to their own teaching styles and preferences. He is indicating that the final attainment is what really counts. But this is to give yet another mixed message where reading instruction is concerned. The research on reading is such that teachers should no longer be able to choose to disregard the need for systematic synthetic phonics teaching and should no longer be able to choose to teach with whole language methods and the multi-cueing reading strategies.

Of course, it is equally valid to be a teacher who is vivacious and entertaining, or to be quiet, organised and steady. Teachers can provide their reading instruction in whole class scenarios, or in matched groups, or whatever suits the context best – but teachers should no longer be able to pick and choose their method of reading instruction as it must surely be evidence-based.

What I find quite extraordinary has been the difficulty of shifting understanding and practices. Often that 'shift' has been as a consequence only of persistent and collaborative voices in America, in Australia and New Zealand and in England. In effect, it has been an international team effort to push for phonics teaching and there is a need to continue this mutually supportive relationship.

The truth of the matter, as I see it, is

being able to hold those in authority to account – and I mean really hold them to account for what they promote and what they fund.

Although the government in England has not put forward the Year One phonics screening check as a vehicle for its own accountability, nevertheless, this is the furthest we have travelled to really dig deep into the practices of all infant teachers to promote the long-term technical reading skills required to underpin true literacy. It has been a partnership between government and the teaching profession but, sadly, people do not perceive it this way at all.

Thank you so much to our Australian friends, whose work, papers and blogs we continue to rely on, as they have helped us to reach this far in the journey of literacy for all.

*Debbie Hepplewhite, MBE FRSA is a phonics consultant and teacher-trainer and is the author of the Phonics International programme. She is also the phonics consultant for the Oxford Reading Tree Floppy's Phonics Sounds and Letters programme. For free resources, please see [www.phonicsinternational.com](http://www.phonicsinternational.com), [www.alphabeticcodecharts.com](http://www.alphabeticcodecharts.com), and [www.debbiehepplewhitehandwriting.com](http://www.debbiehepplewhitehandwriting.com). Email: [debbie@phonicsinternational.com](mailto:debbie@phonicsinternational.com)*

## LDA Publications for sale

**LDA has a number of publications available for sale, including:**

Knight, B. A., & Scott, W. (Eds.) 2004. *Learning Difficulties: Multiple Perspectives*. Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education. (Based on papers presented at the 2002 LDA Conference.) RRP\$35.00

Daryl Greaves & Peter Jeffery (Eds.) 2001. *Learning Difficulties, Disabilities and Resource Teaching: Selected papers from the AREA 1996 Conference*. Melbourne: AREA. RRP\$20.00

Back issues of the *LDA Bulletin* and the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, from 2005 onwards, are also available for purchase.

The Bulletin can be purchased singly or in the form of multiple copies for schools or teacher training institutions.

Copies of the Journal are \$20 per copy.

For availability and costs, email Molly de Lemos at [delemos@pacific.net.au](mailto:delemos@pacific.net.au), and to place an order, email [ldaquery@bigpond.net.au](mailto:ldaquery@bigpond.net.au).

# What's working in the West – and why aren't we there yet?



**Wendy Moore**

In Western Australia, as elsewhere in the nation, schools are busily attempting to implement the new Australian Curriculum, developed by the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA). The Curriculum positions literacy as a cross-curricular priority, and the Literature, Literacy and Language strands of the English Curriculum provide the principal context for literacy instruction (ACARA, 2013a). The Curriculum provides guidance for teachers from Foundation level to Year 10, and has been adopted by all Australian states and territories. However, each jurisdiction oversees this implementation independently. Timing of implementation and reporting requirements are the responsibility of the state departments of education. Responsibility for supporting students at educational risk also falls to the states.

In Western Australia, the old Curriculum Council (with its Progress Maps and Curriculum Framework) has been dismantled. The School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCASA) has been established to oversee implementation of the Curriculum in this state (SCASA, 2013), and teachers are working valiantly to meet the planning and reporting requirements of the Authority. On top of these demands, hard-working teachers toil to meet the needs of students who are, already, years behind their peers.

Differentiation is difficult to manage in a mainstream classroom; with the system and programs currently in place in Western Australian schools, adequate progress is beyond reach for many students. Particularly at risk are those with high levels of absenteeism, with poor Standard Australian English competency, and with learning difficulties. The State Government has recently announced significant budget cuts from 2014 which will impact on school staffing; employment of education assistants will be particularly affected (Dalzell, O'Keefe, and Marti, 2013).

The NAPLAN 2013 summary report for literacy suggests that students in Western Australia are performing similarly to students in Queensland, but more poorly than students in Victoria and New South Wales (ACARA, 2013b). For example, around 16 per cent of students in WA achieved at or below the benchmark in Reading in Year 3, compared to around 7 per cent of students in Victoria and 10 per cent of students in New South Wales. It should be noted that Western Australian students are slightly younger at the time of testing than students in Victoria and NSW, although they have completed the same number of months of schooling. In addition, more students in Western Australia are rated as vulnerable on one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Index than students starting school in these other two states (23 per cent compared to 20 per cent) according to 2012 data (Australian Government, 2013).

## The Early Years Learning Framework

The Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government, 2009), an outcome of the Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008), has been embraced in Western Australia by most Kindergarten (Pre-Foundation year) and Pre-Primary (Foundation year) teachers, who are comfortable with and committed to its emphasis on play-based, child-

centred learning contexts. This document is frequently championed to counter suggestions about the need for a greater emphasis on teaching phonics to students in the first years of schooling. Many early childhood teachers, adamant that they do teach phonics, describe activities such as completing craftwork related to a letter of the week, or pointing out the sounds that students might hear during songs and stories. Others have begun to employ commercial programs such as Jolly Phonics (Lloyd, 1992) during the Foundation year, while being careful to ensure that students are not pushed into these kinds of activities until they are 'developmentally' ready. As a result, the kind of emergent literacy instruction that students are exposed to during the first years of school varies considerably. Some students entering Year 1, where the 'real' instruction has traditionally begun, may have had extensive opportunities to learn to use the phonic structure of English to read and write. Other students, equally capable, may have had none.

## First Steps

In Western Australia, the First Steps materials have been the principal resource employed over the last 15 or more years to guide students' literacy instruction during primary school. The first edition of *First Steps* (Rees, 1994) took a definitive constructivist perspective; for example, it was suggested letter names were taught because names were constant and the sounds of letters were dependent on their position in words. Decoding was suggested as a strategy for identifying words, but only after students had been encouraged to read around the word, use contextual cues, or guess based on the first letter of a word. Thus decoding was one of several possible reading strategies, but not systematically taught.

The second edition of *First Steps* (Annandale et al., 2003) takes a more 'balanced' view to instruction including advice on teaching phonological

Continued next page >

awareness and phonics. The materials describe stages of development, and include indicators of progress as well as recommended teaching and learning activities at each phase. While teachers are encouraged to build phonological awareness and graphophonic knowledge during the role play, emergent and early reading stages, the suggested games and activities are neither systematic nor comprehensive. Where recommended sound and letter games are provided, most are analytic rather than synthetic. There is no suggested progression for teachers to follow to assist students to develop this graphophonic knowledge; the emphasis is on student exploration within the context of available texts. The materials do not provide guidance for how to support students who may not acquire these understandings at the same rate as their peers.

Despite its ubiquity, there is no evidence that *First Steps* is an effective approach for improving literacy outcomes for students (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2013). Indeed, because of its blanket roll-out in Western Australia, there has been nothing to compare it with. Nonetheless, these materials remain a recommended source of guidance for schools involved in the federally funded National Literacy Partnership programs (Department of Education, 2013b), the purpose of which has been the provision of strategic and financial support designed to boost literacy performance in schools with large numbers of at risk students.

### Signs of change

There are, however, some changes afoot in Western Australia. The wheels of progress may be turning slowly, but they are turning. The Western Australian Education and Health Standing Committee tabled a report in the Legislative Assembly in late 2012 (Government of Western Australia, 2012). Following comprehensive submissions from Mandy Nayton, Executive Officer at Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation in Perth, and in light of the findings of the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading from the United Kingdom (Rose, 2006), the Committee made one of its three core recommendations that of improving literacy levels from an early age. Other

core recommendations related to school attendance and supporting the physical and mental health of children.

Of particular interest is recommendation 13 of the report:

The Committee strongly recommends to the Minister for Education that funding is made available in the 2013/2014 budget to ensure high quality, systematic phonic work is given priority in the teaching of literacy in schools with children learning how to decode (to read) and encode (to write/spell) print using phonics. (p.139)

Changes in the policies and emphases of the Department of Education (presumably in response to these recommendations) have been tentative and muted, but they are still perceptible. For example, the Department has commissioned the production of advisory documents on phonological awareness and phonics for schools. Two documents, one for Kindergarten and the other for Pre-Primary and Year 1, have been developed by Mary Rohl of the University of Western Australia in collaboration with Department staff (Department of Education, 2012a, 2012b). These documents emphasise the need for systematic and intentional teaching of grapho-phonics, while also encouraging teachers to provide a wide range of opportunities to link emerging understandings to purposeful and self-directed communication and play. The writers of these documents have been careful to include explicit links to the Australian Curriculum and to acknowledge the range of different approaches that teachers can employ to meet expected outcomes. The highly desirable focus on explicit instruction and mastery learning is absent, but the importance of a systematic introduction to phonological awareness and graphophonic knowledge is nonetheless emphasised. While not heavily promoted, the documents are available for teachers accessing curriculum support materials on the Department's website.

In November, Western Australia's Director-General of Education, Sharyn O'Neill, published the most recent system priorities for government schools for the coming year (Department of Education, 2013a). Two of the major recommendations of the Education and Health Standing Committee were clearly discernable in

this document. Of the new initiatives to be implemented, the first on the list was "increase intensity of teaching and assessing mastery of phonics throughout the early years". Measures to improve student attendance were also clearly specified. The practical implications of this directive in terms of policies and resourcing remain unclear.

### Literacy teaching and phonics

In Western Australian universities, there has been little change in terms of emphasising phonics-based instruction as a critical pedagogical tool for reducing the prevalence of literacy difficulties in school-aged children. One exception is Edith Cowan University, where Dr Lorraine Hammond, immediate past-president of LDA, co-ordinates the Primary Graduate Diploma in Education program. The Language unit she oversees promotes an explicit, direct approach to teaching literacy in which both the 'what' and the 'how' of phonics instruction are emphasised (Hammond, 2013). Courtesy of this unit, primary education students develop understandings of the importance of systematic phonics and phonological awareness instruction using pedagogical techniques which offer engaging, enjoyable activities appropriate for students in the first years of school. Courses run by the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation in Western Australia are also popular and well attended, and these make available information about strategies and resources to support effective literacy instruction for all students, including those with learning difficulties.

Some schools have chosen to use funds made available through the National Partnerships project to implement systematic phonics instruction for students with poor literacy outcomes. The MultiLit program (MultiLit, 2007) is used increasingly in schools to provide Tier 3 intervention, although schools generally find that they have less time available than students who would benefit from this program. The related MiniLit program has been making inroads into Pre-Primary and Year One classrooms as a Tier 2 program (MultiLit, 2011), and the PreLit program (MultiLit, 2012) is also generating interest in schools across the state.

A number of high-performing schools in Western Australia have also begun to

demonstrate the efficacy of systematic phonics instruction from the very beginning of schooling. These schools have achieved significant changes in the outcomes of all students, not just those with learning difficulties, by focusing on an explicit instruction approach. While across-the-board improvement is encouraging, it is the shortening of the tail of distribution that is so important to individuals and to schools. Fewer students requiring a separate curriculum or individual tuition means significantly reduced stress on teachers and on resourcing. Even more importantly, it means students who are able to access the same curriculum as their peers.

### Emerging changes in school culture

While the availability of appropriate instructional materials is important, it is nonetheless clear that improved outcomes require a school culture of high teacher engagement and motivation and well-developed teacher knowledge that goes beyond a particular program or set of techniques. Ray Boyd, Principal of West Beechboro Primary school, is determined to ensure that the teachers and students at his school have every opportunity to make the most of research-supported teaching and learning strategies. West Beechboro is part of an informal network of high-performing public schools which has recently achieved strong improvements in student outcomes despite the low average social demographic. Boyd's take on the systemic factors which paralyse progress in most schools in the Western Australian and the broader national context is telling.

Boyd suggests that policy directives like those emanating from the Department of Education will have little impact if schools are not provided with the guidelines required to implement them. Historically, schools have tended to interpret Department initiatives flexibly, seeking to avoid disruption. In practice, this has meant that decisions about the practical implementation of such system initiatives are left to the discretion of individual teachers. Boyd notes that "... if the teacher knowledge is not there, if teachers have not been provided with clear guidelines and clear prescriptive structures to work within and this is not supported by

continual monitoring through coaching, mentoring and ongoing professional development, then student achievement will never improve because essentially nothing changes".

Boyd argues for principals to be allowed to "take back their schools". He focuses on the idea that the link between policy and practice should be centred on clarity and accountability. The leadership team at West Beechboro decided to begin the process of encouraging the use of explicit instruction approaches because of the need to move away from emotional debates and towards practice supported by research. His teachers are supported to employ these strategies as part of their classroom teaching repertoire, and students who have difficulty making progress or who come into the school without functional literacy skills are supported by evidence-based pull-out programs such as MultiLit and *Spelling Mastery*. Improvement in literacy and numeracy outcomes across the school has been significant. Nonetheless, the school has encountered dismissive criticism from a number of quarters.

We have been criticised for using an explicit teaching model, we have been called a John Fleming School and many other things, but this only highlights for me an ignorance surrounding the pre-existing research that exists around successful teaching and student achievement... To me this is another way of demonising an approach that is highly effective, has considerable research behind it, worldwide, and in the case of our school and those that are using it, is getting wonderful results. In the end our students are the ones that benefit. (Boyd, 2014, personal communication)

The review branch of Department of Education will soon undertake an assessment of the progress being made in this school and a number of others in the network that have worked hard to achieve better than expected improvements in student outcomes.

Much of the movement occurring in high performing schools in Western Australia can be credited – at least in part – to the Independent Public Schools movement. This initiative, begun in the previous term of the current State Government, has allowed significantly enhanced school

autonomy in staffing and financial management. This has allowed school principals to implement school-wide programs that would not otherwise have been possible. The ongoing rollout of the IPS program (Collier, 2013) will continue to increase the desire of schools to identify the drivers of strong student outcomes and attempt to emulate them. The serendipitous alignment of the IPS movement with renewed awareness of the importance of effective instructional methods holds much promise. The popularity and increasing influence of John Hattie's work on effective teaching (Hattie, 2009), as well as advocacy by organisations such as LDA, will be likely to continue to drive innovation in Western Australian schools.

### Political and public interest

Meanwhile, political and public interest in education is strong. Parents are keen to ensure that their children are being taught effectively, and the publically available NAPLAN data means that parents are more actively seeking desirable school placements for their children. The types of advocacy for effective phonics-based instruction promoted nationally by the Centre for Independent Studies (e.g., Buckingham, Wheldall, and Beaman-Wheldall, 2013) and *The Australian* newspaper (Ferrari, 2012) have also been seen in the local media (e.g., 'Fight looms over reading lessons', *The West Australian*, October 28).

Alannah MacTiernan, the newly elected Federal Member for Perth and a veteran state Labor politician, used her maiden speech in Parliament to argue for effective early literacy instruction (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). She informed the House that:

Explicit instruction of these skills is not boring or cruel. I have seen classrooms of four- and five-year-olds totally engaged as they learn sounds, letters, blends and grammar. Not only do they learn to read, they learn to succeed. I have witnessed an incredible turnaround in test results in schools who have challenged the orthodoxy. We cannot keep talking about the value of education unless we address this basic building block. Literacy is the foundation stone of

Continued next page >

our transmission of knowledge.

Although these early signs of attention to the needs of students with poor literacy and academic outcomes are encouraging, they still represent only a scratching of the surface. The vast majority of Western Australian students with literacy and learning difficulties still face the prospect of many more days at school in which their needs go unmet, their self-concepts suffer, their literacy skills stagnate, and their teachers and parents struggle with frustration and guilt. It can only be hoped that in Western Australia, as in other states, the momentum for change continues, supported by an ongoing bipartisan effort to research and implement the most effective strategies for supporting our most vulnerable students.

## References

- Annandale, K., Bindon, R., Handley, K., Johnston, A., Lockett, L., & Lynch, P. (2003). *First Steps: Linking assessment, teaching and learning* (2nd ed.). Melbourne: Rigby Heinemann.
- Australian Council for Educational Research. (2013). Literacy and numeracy Interventions in the early years of schooling: A literature review. Report to the Ministerial Advisory Group on Literacy and Numeracy. Sydney: NSW Department of Education and Communities.
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2013a). *The Australian Curriculum* [online]. Retrieved from [www.australiancurriculum.edu.au](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au).
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2013b). *Preliminary results for achievement in Reading, Persuasive Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy*. Sydney: Author. Retrieved from [www.nap.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/NAPLAN\\_Summary\\_Report\\_2013\\_Final\\_100913.pdf](http://www.nap.edu.au/verve/_resources/NAPLAN_Summary_Report_2013_Final_100913.pdf).
- Australian Government. (2009). *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Retrieved from [http://foi.deewr.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/belonging\\_being\\_and\\_becoming\\_the\\_early\\_years\\_learning\\_framework\\_for\\_australia.pdf](http://foi.deewr.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/belonging_being_and_becoming_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia.pdf)
- Australian Government. (2013). *A snapshot of early childhood development in Australia 2012 - AEDI national report*. Canberra: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/aedi/Report\\_NationalReport\\_2012\\_1304\[1\]\(1\).pdf](http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/aedi/Report_NationalReport_2012_1304[1](1).pdf).
- Buckingham, J., Wheldall, K., & Beaman-Wheldall, R. (2013). Why Jaydon can't read: The triumph of ideology over evidence in teaching reading. *Policy*, 29(3), 21-32.
- Collier, P. (2013). WA public schools get a taste of independence [media release]. Perth: Government of Western Australia. Retrieved from [www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/pages/StatementDetails.aspx?listName=StateBarnett&StatId=7882](http://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/pages/StatementDetails.aspx?listName=StateBarnett&StatId=7882)
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Allanah MacTiernan MP. First Speech 20 November [Hansard transcript]. Canberra: House of Representatives, Government of Australia.
- Dalzell, S., O'Keefe, S., & Marti, L. (2013, 20 August). WA's State Government slashes 500 education jobs and proposes closing some high schools, ABC News [online]. Retrieved from [www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-20/collier-to-cut-jobs-in-education-with-assistants-to-go/4899782](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-20/collier-to-cut-jobs-in-education-with-assistants-to-go/4899782).
- Department of Education. (2012a). Phonics and phonological awareness for reading and spelling. Perth: Government of Western Australia. Retrieved from <http://ecm.det.wa.edu.au/connect/resolver/view/PDLP1001/latest/PDLP1001.pdf>.
- Department of Education. (2012b). Words, sounds and letters - Kindergarten. Perth: Government of Western Australia. Retrieved from <http://ecm.det.wa.edu.au/connect/resolver/view/PDLK001/latest/PDLK001.pdf>.
- Department of Education. (2013a). Focus 2014: Directions for schools. Perth, Australia: Government of Western Australia. Retrieved from [www.education.wa.edu.au/home/redirect/?oid=SiteProxy-id-14733718](http://www.education.wa.edu.au/home/redirect/?oid=SiteProxy-id-14733718).
- Department of Education. (2013b). Literacy and Numeracy Partnership Project [Powerpoint presentation] (K. Webster, Trans.). Perth, Western Australia: Government of Western Australia.
- Ferrari, J. (2012, 22 December). A decade of lost action on literacy, *The Australian*. Retrieved from [www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/a-decade-of-lost-action-on-literacy/story-fn59niix-1226542150781](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/a-decade-of-lost-action-on-literacy/story-fn59niix-1226542150781).
- Government of Western Australia. (2012). A child who is healthy, attends school, and is able to read will have better educational outcomes. Education and Health Standing Committee. Report 18. Perth, Australia: Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Western Australia.
- Hammond, L. (2013, November). From the President. *LDA Bulletin*, 45 (3), 1-3.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge.
- Lloyd, S. (1992). *The Jolly Phonics handbook*. Essex, UK: Jolly Learning.
- Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. (2008). Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. Canberra, Australia: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/National\\_Declaration\\_on\\_the\\_Educational\\_Goals\\_for\\_Young\\_Australians.pdf](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf).
- MultiLit. (2007). MultiLit Reading Tutor Program (revised). Sydney, Australia: MultiLit Pty Ltd.
- MultiLit. (2011). MiniLit early literacy intervention program. Sydney, Australia: MultiLit Pty Ltd.
- MultiLit. (2012). PreLit early literacy preparation program. Sydney, Australia: MultiLit Pty Ltd.
- Rees, D. (1994). *Reading developmental continuum*. Perth, Australia: Longman.
- Rose, J. (2006). *Independent review of the teaching of early reading*. Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills.
- School Curriculum and Standards Authority. (2013). About the School Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority. Retrieved 9 February 2014, 2014, from [www.scsa.wa.edu.au/internet/About\\_Us](http://www.scsa.wa.edu.au/internet/About_Us).

*Wendy Moore is a literacy specialist and outreach officer providing support for students with language impairments and their teachers in WA schools. Her research interests include the development and implementation of effective classroom instruction for students with learning difficulties. Email: wendy.m.moore@gmail.com*

# Read like a Demon: Milo and the Melbourne Football Club

Maureen Pollard

**W**hen I created *Milo's Birthday Surprise* and the *Little Learners Love Literacy*® program, I never imagined that Milo the monkey would one day be dressed in a footie beanie and scarf supporting the Melbourne Football Club. However, it seems that Milo and the Melbourne Football Club are a perfect match. Well, they both begin with the same sound /m/. That is a great start!

Apparently, every AFL club has a community focus and I was delighted to discover that the Melbourne Football Club are as passionate about teaching literacy as I am. Their Read Like a Demon (RLAD) program for older primary children is very active, but to really make a difference MFC realized that they needed to start an evidence-based program in kindergarten. This is when they approached me to support and assist them to introduce *Little Learners Love Literacy* as their preschool Read like a Demon program. MFC supports schools and kindergartens in the City of Casey, a large community that includes Narre Warren, Berwick, Cranbourne and Pearcedale in Melbourne's outer south-east suburbs.

Eighteen kindergartens, over 1000 children, have signed up to participate in the Read like a Demon project. Milo the monkey was introduced to the kindergartens participating in the program at the end of last year by Sarah Pederson, an experienced teacher and wife of a Melbourne footballer, with a session in each kindergarten demonstrating how the program is structured with explicit and sequential teaching. Teachers were able to experience personally the content, the multi-sensory activities and the



enjoyment experienced by the children as they develop important literacy skills. This was a pilot project, with the full program being introduced in February this year. *Little Learners Love Literacy* focuses on phonemic awareness and phonics and I know, through my own teaching, that with just one hour each week of explicit teaching, pre-school children can learn the alphabetic principle, and start on the road to reading.

This is important as many schools in Victoria are steeped

in the misguided concept that teaching literacy is about 'looking at the pictures' and guessing. So together, *Little Learners Love Literacy* and the Melbourne Football Club, will make a difference in the lives of these young children. The teachers will be trained how to teach 'phonemic awareness' – would Milo barrack for Hawthorn or Melbourne. Who would barrack for Hawthorn – of course, Harry the hippopotamus? What sound does Melbourne begin with? /m/. The important question

will be explaining 'why' this is so important and how to link it to the letters and use such activities as Chitter Chatter Chat and Speed Sounds. The characters, Milo and his friends, are the mnemonic and provide a story to link to the letters of the alphabet. They provide a scaffold for young children and older children who need extra support. However, the letter and sound are the most important.

Ally, the alligator, is always a hit with the children as Ally can only speak in sounds; we call it 'Ally talk'. Children blend the sounds together to make words and then later they hold the puppet Ally and segment words to speak in sounds.

The Melbourne Football Club will ensure that the parents fully understand the *Little Learners Love Literacy* program and how they can support it at home. This communication is vital for the success of the program. *Little Learners Love Literacy* has a letter on the Teacher Resource CD that is sent home each week outlining the session and giving ideas to follow up.

*Little Learners Love Literacy* is more than a pre-school literacy

Milo the monkey



© Learning Logic Pty Ltd 2010



Milo the monkey



© Learning Logic Pty Ltd 2010



program so we hope this is just the beginning. Our next move will be to extend *Little Learners Love Literacy* into the primary schools in Casey.

I now have a football team to support. I gave up when South Melbourne moved to Sydney and that was a long time ago!

*Maureen Pollard is a literacy consultant who works with teachers, schools and parents to help children learn to read and write with confidence. Her program Little Learners Love Literacy was developed in 2010 (www.learninglogic.com.au). Maureen was the recipient of 2012 LDA Bruce Wicking Award. Email: maureen@learninglogic.com.au*

## Advertise in LDA Bulletin

Would you like to promote your product or service to a targeted audience of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties?

In addition, your advertising will support LDA in continuing to produce high-quality publications.

Size	Cost	Specifications
1/4 page	\$150.00	90mm wide x 118mm deep
1/2 page	\$240.00	186mm wide x 118mm deep
Full page	\$320.00	Trim 210mm wide x 297mm deep Type 186mm wide x 273mm deep

(All prices exclude GST)

Advertisements in four consecutive issues – less 10%

To book your advertisement, contact Kerrie McMahon on [Idaquery@bigpond.net.au](mailto:Idaquery@bigpond.net.au).

# More than 'I do, we do, you do'

Lorraine Hammond

Twice in 2013, LDA offered professional learning in Sydney on the theme of explicit, direct instruction in the context of creating high performing schools. One of the speakers was Ray Boyd, the Principal of West Beechboro Primary School in Western Australia. Ray's school is part of a coalition of schools which has been identified by ACARA for significantly improving student achievement, and on some NAPLAN assessments outperforming all Australian schools in Years 3, 5 and 7. Each of these schools is committed to implementing evidence-based approaches and teachers' practice is grounded in explicit, direct instruction. West Beechboro PS combines daily explicit, direct classroom instruction in core literacy and numeracy skills with SRA Direct Instruction programmes such as *Spelling Mastery*, Rhonda Farkota's *Elementary Maths Mastery*, *Cars and Stars* and MultiLit.

If achieving a high performing school only involved the introduction of evidence-based approaches, this article would finish here, however achieving and sustaining high student achievement by implementing an explicit direct approach is far more complex. The components of introducing and sustaining teacher-led instruction are illustrated in the following model I conceptualised after supporting a number of schools in their endeavours to implement an explicit, direct approach.

The importance of a high level of motivation cannot be understated and is often the impetus that drives educational reform, but introducing this teacher-led approach to instruction demands more than 'will'. Without an understanding of the components of explicit, systematic, teacher-led instruction that comes from Englemann and Carnine's Theory of Instruction (1982), schools may be tempted to assume that adhering to the instructional sequence 'I do, we do, you do' is all that is required. This is not the case, and teachers need

knowledge, skill and considerable support to successfully implement explicit, direct instruction.

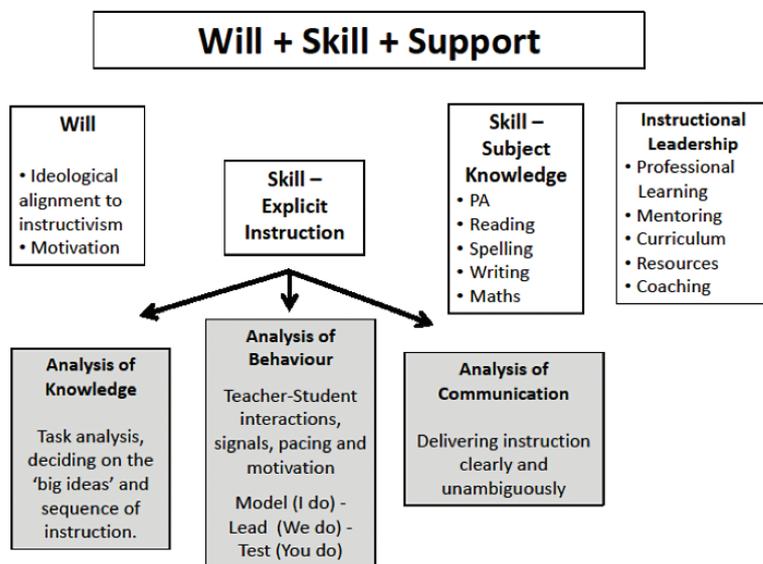
Despite the recent media interest in explicit, direct instruction, it is not new. It has its roots in behaviourism, Direct Instruction and 1970s teacher effects research that identified a set of variables found to be significantly related to student achievement (Englemann and Carnine, 1982; Rosenshine, 1976). This set of teacher-directed variables includes engaged time, proceeding in small steps, checking for student understanding, and achieving active and successful participation by all students (Rosenshine, 1997, p.34). When a teacher assumes that the environment is the primary variable accounting for what the learner learns, it can be manipulated to maximise learning experiences (Englemann & Carnine, 1982, p.1). This includes providing models, guiding student practice, maintaining a brisk pace and requiring and monitoring independent practice (Archer & Hughes; 2011, p.2; Rosenshine, 2012, p.1). Task analysis, or the ability to break down the strategy, rule or knowledge to be taught into its component parts before designing an instructional sequence, is a key element of explicit instruction.

For schools that choose to use commercially available Direct Instruction programs, such as *Reading*

*Mastery* (Englemann & Bruner, 1988) scripted materials are provided, however when implementing an explicit, direct approach teachers must write their own instructional sequences and manage a fast-paced learning environment that maximises practice and participation and ensures students learn more in less time. For those that can achieve this, positive results typically follow (Hattie, 2009). Indeed, the consistent pattern identified in the research literature "points to the effectiveness of Direct Instruction (DI), a specific teaching program, and of specific explicit instructional practices underpinning the program (e.g., guided practice, worked examples)" (Liem & Martin, 2013, p.368).

In my professional work with schools I have come to the conclusion that any educational theory or approach that is not well understood by teachers is in danger of being misunderstood and ultimately, implemented incompletely. Teaching explicitly involves much more than following a structured lesson plan, however 'I do, we do, you do' has become synonymous with explicit instruction in some classrooms as teachers cherry pick one element of this complex model.

For Ray Boyd and his colleagues in WA, introducing an explicit direct approach has taken time and a high level of instructional leadership driven by the understanding that



for most educators, teacher-led instruction is a significant departure from their university training and accrued classroom experience. As such, professional learning for staff in coalition schools has included an emphasis on how to teach in an explicit way as well as designing curriculum to support teachers on what to teach, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy. To ensure all staff have a thorough understanding of the precursor skills students require to learn to read, write and spell, sessions that focus on teacher knowledge are common during professional learning days. Further support in the form of regular coaching sessions with staff provides targeted feedback on their teaching and is supplemented with the opportunity to watch others in their school, and across the coalition of schools, teach.

While each principal prioritises the instructional support they provide to staff, Ray Boyd also writes a weekly newsletter (*The West Wind*) for his staff. In the edition that follows below you will see his reminder about 'checking for understanding' a key component of teaching explicitly. Ray also emphasises the importance of student bookwork and explains the research base for *Cars and Stars*, a reading comprehension resource. A colleague of mine who has had dual careers in retail and school administration has always maintained the importance of ongoing professional learning. He explains "when retail staff attend training, sales go up and the same principle applies to teaching. If schools decide to take up an initiative everyone needs a regular reminder to stay on course." Ray's edition of *The West Wind* exemplifies the quality of instructional leadership provided to staff at West Beechboro Primary School and demonstrates why administrators choosing to implement an explicit, direct approach must themselves have a thorough understanding of the educational model.

LDA plans to continue this series of 'how to' professional development sessions on explicit, direct instruction for teachers and administrators in 2014. Please contact Dr Lorraine Hammond by email at [l.hammond@ecu.edu.au](mailto:l.hammond@ecu.edu.au) if you are interested in hosting an event in your school.



## References

- Archer, A. L., & Hughes, C. A. (2011). *Explicit instruction: effective and efficient teaching*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Englemann, S., & Bruner, E. (1988). *Reading Mastery 1*. Chicago, IL: Science Research Associates.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Liem, G. A. D., & Martin, A. J. (2013). Direct Instruction. In J. Hattie, & E. M. Anderman (Eds.). *International Guide to Student Achievement*. London: Routledge.
- Rosenshine, B. (1976). Recent research on teaching behaviors and student achievement. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 27(1), 61-64.
- Rosenshine, B. (1997). Advances in research on instruction. In E. J. Lloyd, E. J. Kammeenui & D. Chard (Eds.), *Issues in Educating Students with Disabilities* (pp.197-221). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rosenshine, B. (2012). Principles of Instruction: Research-Based Strategies that all teachers should know. *American Educator*, Spring 2012 (36), 1, 12-39.

*Lorraine Hammond is a Senior Lecturer at Edith Cowan University, where she co-ordinates post graduate Special Education courses and the Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary). She is a former President of LDA. Her current research interests include the prevention of literacy difficulties, teaching vocabulary and evidence-based instruction.*  
Email: [l.hammond@ecu.edu.au](mailto:l.hammond@ecu.edu.au)

# The West Wind

Ray Boyd

## Principal's Pen

Archer & Hughes (2011, p.1) make the statement that, "In the quest to maximize (sic) students' academic growth, one of the best tools available to educators is explicit instruction, a structured, systematic, and effective methodology for teaching academic skills. It is called explicit because it is an unambiguous and direct approach to teaching that includes both instructional design and delivery procedures. Explicit instruction is characterized (sic) by a series of supports or scaffolds, whereby students are guided through the learning process with clear statements about the purpose and rationale for learning the new skill, clear explanations and demonstrations of the instructional target, and supported practice with feedback until independent mastery has been achieved." Rosenshine (1987) goes on to describe this form of instruction as "a systematic method of teaching with emphasis on proceeding in small steps, checking for student understanding, and achieving active and successful participation by all students" (p.34). (source: Exploring the Foundations of Explicit Instruction, Archer & Hughes)

Interestingly, all three authors refer to checking for understanding, (Assessment for learning), as an essential element of this methodology. This is not simply a serendipitous occurrence. It has transpired because, quite simply, it is not just an essential element but a critical element that moves what we do from simply being delivered, to being taught.

In the last two *West Winds*, I have referred to the need for teachers to continually check for understanding. The importance of this part of our teaching practice cannot be understated. All last week, I am pleased to say, I have observed

teachers doing this in their lessons. I watched Rob doing it during his numeracy warm-ups. I observed Kerry Forder doing it during her warm-up for vocabulary. I saw Anthony doing it while running through his classroom procedures. I noticed Stef doing it during *Spelling Mastery*, Samantha doing it while running through homework structures, Lisa did it during her spelling warm-ups and Kellie was doing it during her intervention *Spelling Mastery* group. Of more significance than seeing these staff checking for understanding, was observing them actually reacting and shaping their delivery and lesson pace to the feedback that the students were providing to them. This is the juncture at which checking for understanding becomes a powerful tool; the point at which it actually impacts on lesson delivery.

The WA food industry has a catch phrase, "Have you had your five fruit and veg today?" For the teaching profession, we should change this to "Have you checked for understanding today?"

### Cars and Stars

The CARS and STARS program, as you are all aware, targets the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies. It was introduced in 2011 and continued in 2012. In 2013, we removed the CARS element from the program and commenced with the STARS from the onset. This provides a lot more teaching time for the STARS and will allow teachers to really focus on developing the students' understandings of the identified comprehension strategies. Teachers will work students through CARS 11 during fourth term. This information can then be provided to teachers for the commencement of the following school year.

This program has a solid research base behind it and having considered the research myself, a considerable number of high-performing schools are using the same program. Below is an extract from research conducted by the Educational Research Institute of America:

The conclusion, substantiated by the data, is that students using the Comprehensive Assessment of

Reading Strategies and Strategies to Achieve Reading Success® 2010 made significant gains from pre-test to post test. These gains can, of course, in part be attributed to other external variables such as classroom instruction.

On the basis of this study, both research questions can be answered positively.

1. The Comprehensive Assessment of Reading Strategies and Strategies to Achieve Reading Success® 2010 program does improve the reading comprehension strategies of students at grades 3 and 7.
2. The Comprehensive Assessment of Reading Strategies and Strategies to Achieve Reading Success® 2010 program is effective in improving the reading comprehension strategies of both lower-performing students and higher-performing students at grades 3 and 7.

### Bookwork

Over the past few weeks, I have spent some time looking through both the Senior Phase and the Middle Phase student work books. There are still some students who I have not had a chance to see, and I will continue to work through classes to ensure that I see ALL work books. This is both exercise books and purchased work books.

I must congratulate all staff on the standards throughout the students' books. It is clearly evident that teachers are reinforcing the expected standards across the school. Students are ruling up accurately and neatly, as well as dating and heading work.

Feedback is also evident throughout the students' books. This is important for two reasons:

1. It indicates to the student that you actually think that what they are doing is important, and
2. It promotes and supports learning. Why? Because "feedback is a consequence of performance." (John Hattie and Helen Timperley DOI: 10.3102/003465430298487 REVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH 2007 77: 81).

Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning

*Through this process,  
you are not only  
able to monitor  
understanding, you  
are able to continue  
promoting the learning  
process.*

and achievement and we must never underestimate this power. The feedback in books should be something that is carried out, not just at the conclusion of the lesson, but during the course of the lesson. Teachers must ensure that they are moving around the room monitoring work, keeping students on task and correcting at the point of error. Through this process, you are not only able to monitor understanding, you are able to continue promoting the learning process.

I will continue to help promote standards in book work while I move through the rooms.

Fullen, Hill and Crevola state, "Focussed teaching implies an intimate knowledge of each student and his or her capacities at any moment in time, along with classroom organisational settings in which this knowledge can be put to use. Such knowledge and such settings rarely exist currently" (Breakthrough, 2006, p.35). They go on to say "...consist of finding ways to redesign classroom instruction so that focussed teaching can consistently take place and so that instruction can indeed become a more precise, validated, data driven, expert activity... the difficult part is making it happen on a large scale- every student, every teacher, every leader."

If we consider this statement and what it implies, I believe, we can actually start to feel like a very accomplished school. The work that you are doing in your rooms; the focus on centralising data and establishing monitoring tools that match assessment tools and the targeted curriculum, all point towards West Beechboro Primary School becoming a 'Breakthrough' school.

---

# PD Calendar

LDA organises several professional development events a year for members and non-members. Event details are posted on the LDA website as they become available.

## Upcoming LDA Professional Development Events

---

### Melbourne, Victoria

Beyond Spelling Basics – syllables, morphemes, lexemes and word origins

Presented by Alison Clarke

Saturday 14 June 2014, 2:00 – 4:30pm

Hawthorn Campus, University of Melbourne

Alison, an LDA Council Member and speech pathologist, will discuss the difference between a student with a Specific Language Impairment who doesn't use conventions such as suffixes correctly in their oral language, and a student with written language problems who has such forms in their oral language.

See LDA website at [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org) for further details.

---

### Sydney, NSW

The failure of an integrated system for preventing and remediating reading disabilities – a New Zealand perspective

A symposium presented by Professor Bill Tunmer and Professor James Chapman, Massey University, New Zealand (see below for description)

Wednesday 3 September 2014

Sydney University

This event will be hosted by LDA, Sydney University and SPELD NSW.

See LDA website at [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org) for further details.

---

### Melbourne, Victoria

The failure of an integrated system for preventing and remediating reading disabilities – a New Zealand perspective

A symposium presented by Professor Bill Tunmer and Professor James Chapman, Massey University, New Zealand

Friday 5 September 2014

Treacy Centre, Melbourne

New Zealand has a relatively uniform approach to literacy instruction and intervention. The central

government sets national reading standards, produces beginning reading materials and instructional guides for teachers, and funds and monitors two intervention programs for struggling readers: *Reading Recovery* for children struggling to learn to read after a year of schooling, and Resource Teachers – Literacy for children with persistent reading problems. In this symposium, the presenters will examine the effectiveness of New Zealand's three-tiered system. Analyses of three data sets are presented: PIRLS studies, Reading Recovery monitoring reports, and international adult literacy surveys. Contemporary theory and research on reading and the results of their analyses indicate that major changes are needed in preventing and remediating reading difficulties in New Zealand and possibly other countries, such as Australia.

See LDA website at [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org) for further details.

## Recent LDA Professional Development Events

---

### Gold Coast, Queensland

Leaving Nothing to Chance: how an explicit approach to early reading instruction can prevent literacy difficulties  
A Workshop on Explicit Instruction in Reading, presented by Dr Lorraine Hammond and Brooke Wardana  
20 May 2014

Coomera State School hosted an LDA workshop. LDA Past President and Senior Lecturer at Edith Cowan University, Dr Hammond, provided the theoretical background to explicit instruction and considered the practical implications and challenges teachers face as they adopt such an approach in their classrooms. Brooke Wardana, an experienced Early Years teacher, followed this up with a demonstration of how a literacy warm-up session might look in a real classroom using children from the school. Instructional sequences and lesson content, pace and structure were explained. This was an excellent session for those teaching in the early years up to Year 2.

See LDA website at [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org) for further details.

---

### Consultant PD

The LDA Consultant Committee is planning further PD sessions as well as a general meeting of Consultant members in May. This meeting was planned for earlier in the year but has now had to be deferred to second term. Further information will be available on the

---

website and members will be notified via email as details become available. Victorian members and non-members are welcome to attend the PD in Victoria unless it is noted that it is relevant to Consultants only.

---

### Advance Notice of AGM

The LDA AGM will be held at the Treacy Centre, Melbourne on Saturday 6 September 2014. All members are welcome to attend.

---

### Other Events

#### Melbourne Education Show

8-9 August 2014

Caulfield Racecourse, Melbourne

LDA will be presenting a display at the Melbourne Education Show. Now in its seventh year and attracting over 3400 educators each year, the Melbourne Education Show will provide a great opportunity for LDA to provide information about LDA and what it offers to its members and to students with learning difficulties. The display will feature copies of our publications and handouts of selected articles from the *LDA Bulletin*, as well as information on our Referral

Service and upcoming PD, including the 2015 visit of Dr Louisa Moats.

The display will be organised by the LDA Consultants Committee, with help from our Consultant members and Network Groups. Offers of assistance from our Victorian members in manning the display on the day will be much appreciated. Contact Diane Barwood at [barwoodpd@bigpond.com](mailto:barwoodpd@bigpond.com) for further information about the display.

---

### Sharing vision for future research impacts CCD Stakeholders Workshop

This Workshop, held on 29 April and organized by the ARC Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders (CCD) at Macquarie University, was designed to develop and enhance collaborative links between CCD researchers and the organisations that benefit from their work. LDA was invited to present along with other stakeholder organisations such as Alzheimer's Australia, Autism Spectrum Australia, Speech Pathology Australia, The Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW and Cochlear Ltd. It was a very worthwhile day allowing us to showcase the work of LDA as well as network with others.

## Consultant News

Since the elections at the October 2013 AGM there has been significant activity within the Consultant Committee. Many hours of meetings have addressed a multitude of issues of great concern to us all. This does not mean that everything can be resolved straight away but effort is ongoing.

At this time, parents are at a loss when schools appear to be dispensing with trained special educators, and indeed, whole special education departments, and the universities are seemingly not preparing generalist teachers to teach the underpinnings of literacy and/or numeracy. A quick internet search for local tutors will bring up a myriad of both private, and company providers with a variety of services and costs.

How does one know who to trust? Hopefully LDA should be able to offer families the best possible intervention for children (and adults) with LD. To do this, it must be able to offer families Consultants who are up to date with current research-based practice in assessment and teaching. One way this has been addressed is to request every Consultant to fulfill stringent annual PD requirements as a prerequisite to re-registration. It is seen that LDA Consultants require a specific training focus to deal with recent developments in the teaching of literacy and the co-morbidity that can be seen with many of the currently presented students.

In order to comply with new standards, all Consultants need to fulfill a total of 20 points to retain registration, with 10 points of this

to be specific research-based LDA approved PD. Obviously, anything provided by LDA or associated professional groups such as SPELD or TTR4L will usually be approved. However, it is very difficult to provide a comprehensive list of all approved programs, as there is a diversity of presentations throughout the year.

LDA Consultants cannot be complacent. They should access community contacts to spread the mission of LDA and the support that is offered to students by the Consultants. There is much competition in the world of specialist teaching, so we Consultants need to get out and promote ourselves and the skills we bring to the task.

*Diane Barwood  
Convenor, Consultants Committee*

# Letter to the Editors

## Further thoughts on Reading Recovery

I read, with interest, Kevin Wheldall's article on *Reading Recovery*, 'Small bangs for big bucks', published in the last issue of the *Bulletin* (Vol 45 No 2). There are some further points that I would like to make.

RR and ECAR reports are well known for their bias, not only in methodology, but also in reporting. 'Impressive results' for RR doesn't mean much. The scheme does not have high aspirations. It is only intended to bring the poorest readers up to 'average' for their class. In order to make the scheme look more effective than it is, in practice, the RR teacher in the UK does not select children for the scheme if they have any sort of learning difficulties and those who make no progress are discontinued from the scheme early and eliminated from the stats as if they never took part.

Moreover, the testing of children in the report was done by Reading Recovery teachers so was not blind and independent, meaning that there is much scope for bias in the report. Is this the way to get a clear picture of how effective RR is? Most children who receive RR go on to need more intervention, so how is it possible to say whether their 'long-term' improvement was related to RR or the other types of intervention they received in Years 2-6?

The problem with the teaching profession is that it is extremely political. People who are brain-washed from pre-service teacher training to believe that constructivism, RR etc. are synonymous with social justice and progressivism will find accepting direct instruction and systematic phonics a challenge to their whole identity, not just a change of opinion. Australia has to do what the US and UK did to override teacher objections and that is to legislate. We need to convince the politicians. It should not be too difficult to convince the O'Farrell Government (NSW) [Ed note: now led by Mike Baird] to cut funding to a scheme that is a total waste of money.

The Labour Government in the UK brought in Synthetic Phonics originally and made it statutory as part of the national curriculum. However, they did not really have the guts to follow through completely and ensure that schools were fully implementing the changes or that teacher education courses trained teachers to teach this way. Most teachers vote Labour in the UK so they did not really want to alienate their fan base. It took the conservatives to bring in the phonics test in Y1 to find out which schools were deliberately dragging their heels or defying directives on reading instruction. I can't say that I approve of many Liberal Party policies, but since

they are going to be in Federal Government for four years, we might as well see if we can work with them on updating the national curriculum to get rid of multi-cueing.

RR's hegemony spreads far and wide and they even have control over children's book publishers. Look at how all the children's books for teaching reading are labelled with RR book levels and all reading assessment in schools is done with PM Benchmarking, also based on RR book levels. RR criteria for levelling books is vague (Hiebert 2002) and consistent with whole word instructional methods. A better system of book levelling has to be developed that includes factors such as decode-ability, the ratio of monosyllabic to polysyllabic words and the proportion of literal versus inferential comprehension required to read it i.e., factors that can be defined and measured.

Early RR/PM readers repeat words over and over so that children will learn them by sight instead of sounding them out. Authors are instructed by publishers to write books in this way. When I did a creative writing course one summer for would-be authors of children's books, I was given an acceptable word list corresponding to RR reading levels and told to construct text with these words. After doing this course, I read an article about Dr Seuss who complained that he had to write books with these kind of word list restrictions set by publishers, rather than phonically (*Arizona Magazine*, June 1981).

It makes me wonder to what extent 'high frequency' words are an artificial construction by the publishing industry. I'm not in favour of teaching any words by sight whatsoever. Even words which are irregularly spelt (tricky words), usually only have one letter which is irregular e.g., 'want'. Sometimes tricky words have a common rime e.g., come, some and all, ball, call etc. I agree with Johnston and Watson (*Teaching Synthetic Phonics*, 2007) that teachers should point out the letter/rime that is irregular, rather than teaching the whole word as a 'sight word' with no reference to phonics whatsoever.

Kind regards,  
Karina McLachlain

Hiebert, E. (2002). Standards, Assessments, and Text Difficulty. In A. E. Farstrup, and S. Samuels (Eds.), *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction* (Third Edition) (pp.337-369). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

The Editors welcome letters from readers about articles published in the *Bulletin* or on any other topic of interest to LDA members.  
Please submit to [ldapublications@gmail.com](mailto:ldapublications@gmail.com)