ACE Membership Referral Campaign

Calling on ALL ACE Members to help build a bigger, stronger, more diverse ACE community. The ACE Membership Referral campaign is underway and we are asking ALL ACE members to refer two (2) colleagues to join the College before the end of 2018. In return for helping us build the ACE Community both you and your colleagues will receive the following:

- As a referral CHAMPION you will receive 25% off your 2019/20 ACE membership subscription when you successfully refer two new financial members to the College
- Your colleagues who join the College will receive 25% off the pro-rata membership fee for the remainder of 2018/2019
- The more members you refer the bigger your discount for next year’s membership subscription - refer five (5) new financial members and your 2019/2020 membership subscription will be free!

To participate in the ACE Membership Referral Campaign please forward your colleagues these simple instructions:

1. Sign up as member of the Australian College of Educators
2. Please select yearly to receive the biggest discount
3. Enter the following coupon code before proceeding to checkout:
   - Ref25

Make sure you provide the name of the member that referred you in the **Referred by ACE Member** section so that you both receive the discount.

ACE Membership Referral Campaign Terms & Conditions:

1. Membership referrals must be for ACE paid membership and does not include referrals for Associate or free membership
2. ACE members will have the 25% discount for their 2019/20 membership subscription applied once the referred members have joined and paid their subscription fee
3. If referrals do not include the name of the ACE member who has referred them, the application of the 25% discount for the ACE member cannot be applied
4. The Australian College of Educators reserves the right to make amendments to or cease the Membership referral campaign at any time without notice.

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Introduction to the Great Literacy Debate

Helen Jentz, Chief Executive Officer, Australian College of Educators

At the very outset it is important that a few caveats are stated about this special edition of Professional Educator and for this somewhat unusual editorial.

Firstly, as most of the College members will know, having met me or had some form of contact with me over the course of the last two years, I am not an educator. But like approximately 100% of the Australian adult population, I have an opinion on education because, let’s face it, we have all been to school so we all must know how teachers should teach!

Secondly, not being an educator puts me in a really good position to write the introduction / editorial for this edition of Professional Educator. My rationale for this is that the great reading wars are all new to me. I don’t have an ingrained or supposedly irrefutable position to uphold and this means I have read with great interest the passionate and firmly held views of many of the contributors.

The genesis of this special edition of the magazine came from the ‘Great Literacy Debate’ held on 31 July in Sydney. In the audience of nearly 500, the proposition ‘Phonics in context is not enough: Synthetic phonics and learning to read’, put forward an argument for reasoned discussion between the various stakeholders with an interest in literacy education.

Paul Gardner raises a series of extremely pertinent questions in his article ‘What Counts as Common Ground in the Current Debate About Literacy?’ putting forward an argument for reasoned discussion between the various stakeholders with an interest in literacy education.

Pamela Snow highlights the long held and deeply committed views on children’s literacy that have driven literacy gains in the Northern Territory all along.

Finally, we have strong supporters of synthetic phonics including the proposed phonics check from both the education and psychology space. Samantha-Kay Johnson’s, The phonics check, checks more than phonics, Lyle D. What’s A personal journey with phonics and Jacelyn Seamer’s Phonics driving literacy gains in the Northern Territory all provide interesting and personal perspectives on this incredibly challenging topic.

Having read all the articles and held numerous discussions with members of the ACE Publications Working Group (all of whom are educators in their own right) it is clear that the ‘reading war’ still rages with seemingly very little middle ground on which a ‘truce’ can be brokered.

The Phonics Debate and this special edition of Professional Educator were never designed to pit one side against the other or to favour one ‘camp’ over the other. Rather, the purpose of these activities (and I would argue of the College more broadly) is to invoke informed discussion amongst our membership. To provide educators with information on issues that have the potential to have an impact on their professional practice and to allow them, as professionals, to critically assess, evaluate and discuss the issues and to draw their own conclusions about what is most suitable in their individual classrooms and schools.

In most professions there is rarely one ‘right’ way to do something and the education profession is no different in that teachers adapt their strategies and methods based on the individual circumstances they are addressing.

What appears to be different, at least to me, is that the education profession has struggled to take ownership of their profession in the same way that other professions have. Educators continue to have various ‘other’ authorities and experts dictating the legislative and regulatory environments in which they operate. That is not to say that teachers, like other professions, don’t need to draw from the expertise of other disciplines (for example psychology) but rather that educators – from early childhood to primary and secondary classroom teachers, school leaders, principals, academics and vocational education and training educators should ultimately be the drivers of and leaders in their profession. Educators need to be informed, vocal and well represented (by their professional association, namely ACE). Ultimately educators must be willing to stand collectively (across all sectors, systems, subjects and levels) through the Australian College of Educators and constructively inform and drive their profession and ultimately education in Australia.

So, on that note, let the debate continue.
For the affirmative
Australian College of Educators and the Centre for Independent Studies Debate
Phonics in context is not enough: Synthetic phonics & learning to read

I would like to set the scene by making two points right at the outset. The first is that no-one, on either side of this debate, is proposing that teaching phonics is all there is to teaching children to read. To claim that anyone is suggesting this would be to set up a straw man. On the contrary, our argument is that phonics is an essential foundation to learning to read, and should be taught systematically, but not that it’s sufficient on its own.

The second point is that it is incorrect to assume that children can learn to read in the same way that they learn to speak and understand. Children are born with the ability to acquire spoken language, simply through interactions with their environment. But we have no such predisposition for learning to read. Presented with a library of books, a child will not usually begin to derive meaning from the sets of curves, lines, and dots that make up the writing they see. Instead, reading is a learned skill that typically requires instruction – and my argument is that this instruction should include systematic phonics.

So, what do we mean by phonics? As most people would be aware, phonics is a teaching method. It involves explicitly teaching students the relationship between graphemes (or letters) and phonemes (or sounds) in an alphabetic writing system. Phonics programs are systematic when they teach these relationships in a structured and ordered manner, usually commencing with the simplest and most frequent mappings and progressing to the more difficult ones. Phonics taught in context, by most frequent mappings and progressing to the most rapid progress possible towards becoming an expert. Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 19, 5-51.

My points above are supported by all of the major cognitive theories of reading. Without exception, these theories propose two mechanisms by which skilled readers can go from print to meaning: one indirectly via the word’s sound and one directly from print to meaning. These two mechanisms are also represented in two distinct neural pathways in the brain. And, most importantly, research shows that, when printed words are first encountered (even by adults), they are read and understood via the indirect pathway that is, via their sound. As familiarity increases, the words begin to be recognised and understood directly. So, teaching phonics supports the development of the very cognitive and neural processes that we know underpin skilled reading.

In summary, the evidence base is clear in showing that the journey towards children forming strong links between print and meaning starts with them having to guess it. As well, the knowledge phonics taught in context, by most frequent mappings and progressing to the most rapid progress possible towards becoming an expert. Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 19, 5-51.

 transcripts from the affirmative team
Macquarie University’s Distinguished Professor Anne Castles BSc (Hons) ANU, PhD Macq, FASSA, FRSN

Further reading
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There is clear consensus and abundant evidence that teaching children to decode fluently using phonics is the path to comprehension, and proficient phonological awareness is fundamental to reading development. From the outset I reiterate the proposition that phonics is not the only essential skill for reading.

Phonics — the relationship between the sounds in spoken words and the letters that represent them in writing — is fundamental to reading development. An analysis conducted in England after synthetic phonics was mandated in 2005 found the adoption of synthetic phonics had led to significant improvements in reading, particularly among children with the greatest risk of reading difficulty, even though the quality of instruction was variable (Machin, McKain & Vierang 2018). Studies of high performing primary schools have found that high quality synthetic phonics was a common factor (Ofsted 2010; Louden 2015).

This evidence comes from research with sound empirical or experimental methodologies that use valid measures of reading ability (Ehri 2005, Taylor, Davis & Rastle 2017).

However, phonics and the the best way to teach it is highly contested.

Effective instruction is systematic and explicit. Teaching phonics ‘in context’ — that is, in a way that is not sequential, systematic and explicit — is not enough to ensure all children gain this fundamental skill.

Accurate and fluent word reading is the only route to comprehension, and proficient phonological decoding (using phonics to read words) is the path to fluent word reading. Teaching phonics ‘in context’ — that is, in a way that is not sequential, systematic and explicit — is not enough to ensure all children gain this fundamental skill.

Longitudinal studies have repeatedly found that a child’s ability to decode is a strong predictor of their reading level. One recent study found that decoding (using phonics to read words) is the path to comprehension, and proficient phonological awareness is fundamental to reading development.

This evidence comes from research with sound empirical or experimental methodologies that use valid measures of reading ability (Ehri 2005, Taylor, Davis & Rastle 2017).

Children who have learned how to unlock the alphabetic code early can read independently more quickly, are more likely to enjoy reading, and therefore read a greater number and variety of texts, increasing their vocabulary and comprehension.

Written English is a more complex code than other alphabetic languages. Many children will not work it out without effective instruction.

Effective instruction is systematic and explicit. Teaching phonics ‘in context’ is not.

The basis for teaching phonics in context is the notion that students can only learn phonics well if teachers start with meaningful text rather than isolated letters or sounds (Emmitt, Hornsby & Wilson 2013).

The phonics in context approach is based on the disproven theory that novice readers are making direct connections between print and meaning in the same way that skilled readers do. This is not the case (Castles, Basta & Nation 2018).

The phonics in context approach is based on the disproven theory that novice readers are making direct connections between print and meaning in the same way that skilled readers do. This is not the case (Castles, Rastle & Nation 2018).

The meaning of a word is of course dependent on the context in which it is used. However, knowing what that word is in the first place requires adept phonological decoding.

Some people offer heteronyms — words that are spelled the same but have different pronunciation and meaning — as proof that context is the primary cue for word reading, and therefore phonics should only be taught in context. However, this is not the case.

For example, a document published by the Australian Literacy Educators Association asks: How does one know how to read the word spelled ‘w-i-n-d’ without the context of the sentence? Is it wind or wind?

Clearly, context is important here to apply the correct pronunciation and meaning but phonics allows the reader to narrow down the possible options to just two among many thousands of four letter words. Without knowing phonics, it could be almost anything at all.

International literature reviews have found systematic, explicit phonics instruction to be more effective than non-systematic methods such as whole language, which spawned the phonics in context approach (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2000). Expert reviews in Australia and in England considered evidence from a wide range of research, and concluded that synthetic phonics — a highly explicit and systematic form of phonics instruction — was very effective (Department of Education, Science and Training 2005; Rose 2006).

A British research team that has undertaken several meta-analyses of reading instruction recently wrote that putting semantic and syntactic cues on par with phonics for word reading is ‘little better than guessing since they often lead to learners producing words other than the target’ (Torgerson et al. 2018).

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Clearly, context is important here to apply the correct pronunciation and meaning but phonics allows the reader to narrow down the possible options to just two among many thousands of four letter words. Without knowing phonics, it could be almost anything at all.
Teaching synthetic phonics does not necessarily mean buying a program and it does not mean that teachers’ professional judgement is side-lined.

Phonics instruction is sometimes referred to as a ‘back to basics’ approach. This is an unfortunate mischaracterisation. The last forty years has produced an enormously complex yet remarkably simple teaching and validating methods of reading instruction using behavioural and neural findings in an artificial Orthography. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, vol. 146, pp. 826-858.


Biography

Dr Jennifer Buckingham.

Jennifer is a senior research fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies and Director of the FIVE from FIVE reading project. She has published widely on education and issues, Scientific Studies of Reading, vol. 9, pp167–188.


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For the affirmative

Australian College of Educators and the Centre for Independent Studies Debate

Phonics in context is not enough: Synthetic phonics & learning to read

There is an extensive body of research (e.g. Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2017, National Research Council 1998, National Reading Panel 2000; Ruedley, Blar & Nichols 2009) about learning to read that confirms the premise that children need explicit instruction in the five essential components of reading – in every classroom, every day:

1. phonological awareness
2. phonics
3. fluency
4. vocabulary and
5. comprehension

Teachers must use instruction methods that are explicit, systematic and sequential. This is especially important for teaching phonics, which unlocks the alphabetic code. Such teaching sets a strong foundation for future reading success. As a nation we cannot afford to let children drift along using invented strategies to learn to read. Stated in the simplest form, please don’t leave reading to chance.

Safely for me, my teacher training about reading did leave me instructional strategies in reading to chance. Until recently, the teaching of reading in my school also left reading to chance. The reality was, that as teachers, we didn’t know very much about the science behind reading. However, with key changes to our teaching practice, we now make sure every child at our school, irrespective of their background, culture, or economic status, will be highly likely to achieve reading success. We now stand by the statement: ‘We don’t leave reading to chance’.

I spent four years at university during my initial teacher education. Of the thirty-two subjects I studied, only three of them were about reading. A mere three subjects! This leads me to ask the question: how could reading the basis of all learning and a predictor of future health, career and welfare, be such a small part of initial teacher education?

Within those three subjects, I was taught one main thing. I was led to believe that the optimal conditions for reading simply involved learners being in an active social role, in a similar fashion to the way in which children learn to speak. Put simply, I was taught very little about the science of reading and a vast amount about the philosophical beliefs of reading.

It was then later, by chance, that I learned about the place of synthetic phonics in learning to read. In 2009, fresh out of university, I taught in London. At that time, the BlairLabour government was determined to raise the standard of reading in the first years of primary school. To achieve this, the Government introduced the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics in the first years of schooling. Giving children the key building blocks they need to understand and read. It was held that this would lead to better fluency and comprehension success.

It was in this setting that I began learning about and teaching systematic synthetic phonics and I haven’t looked back. I’ve put in many hours to develop my understanding of the science behind reading. Surely this best practice for reading should have been developed during my initial teacher training. I now know and have substantial evidence (e.g. Foorman et al. 1998; Johnston and Watson 2003) to support the notion that if novice readers are explicitly and systematically taught synthetic phonics they are most likely to achieve reading success. For my students, I no longer leave reading to chance.

As of today, seven-out-of ten 15-year-old Australians are unable to read at an age appropriate level (ACARA 2017). This statistic alone caused me to question how it is that we continue to teach using whole language philosophical programs which are
These statistics challenged our teaching, our ideologies and left us with many questions. To answer these questions, our principal directed us towards the research about reading and we engaged with an expert literacy consultant who knew about the science of reading. We learnt that if our students gain the alphabetic code early through systematic synthetic phonics, they can become fluent, accurate and independent readers earlier, increasing reading volume and in turn improving vocabulary and comprehension. We learnt to understand and use the science of reading so that you don’t leave reading to chance.

So, how does my school abide by the philosophy of not leaving reading to chance?

The teaching of reading begins on day one of kindergarten. Our students engage in explicit phonological awareness learning. Once they have a strong foundation of phonological awareness, they begin to engage with the basic aspects of the alphabetic code. Every day, for thirty minutes, they are explicitly taught synthetic systematic phonics.

Once students have an initial understanding of the taught phonics, we introduce decodable books. Once they demonstrate sufficient skills in these decodable books, they read more challenging books appropriate to their progress in learning to read. This process is repeated with increasing complexity and sophistication from kindergarten to Year 2. Each set of taught phonemes builds upon the students’ current schema of the alphabetic principle. In three years our students learn to decode the English language. They learn the A, W phonemes and the 200 most common graphemes.

You may be wondering, when does ‘real reading’ happen? When do the students gain meaning from reading?

Because we teach the five essential components of reading – phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension – the reality is that it happens all the time.

In the early years of school, instead of overloading our students with learning to read and reading to learn at the same time, we do the heavy lifting and read to the children. They learn how to improve fluency. We explicitly teach vocabulary and develop strategies for comprehension. In the later years, most of our students have learnt to use the alphabetic code and we can spend more time on reading to learn. They build their academic vocabulary through reading, comprehend what they read and are less likely to encounter texts that are challenging to decode. Again, at all levels, we don’t leave reading to chance.

There continues to be calls on teachers to teach phonics in context. The rationale is that phonics in context is enough. But my position is not what is enough. I’m not talking about leaving things to chance. I’m talking about something more substantial and purposeful. I’m talking about children needing explicit instruction in the five essential components of reading - phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension – in every classroom, every day. My plea is to use instruction methods that are systematic and sequential. This is especially important for teaching phonics to unlock the alphabetic code. We cannot let children drift along using invented strategies to learn to read. The cost to us all is too great to leave reading to chance.

References


Biography

Mr Troy Verey

Troy is currently a literacy and numeracy instructional leader at Marsden Road Public School. He has had teaching and leadership experience in English and Australian schools for over 10 years. A strong advocate for using evidence-based teaching and a knowledge-specific curriculum to overcome social inequities, Troy involves his students in the five elements of effective reading instruction, explicit teaching of writing and relational mathematics activities that aim to develop sophisticated academic schema and vocabulary.

Troy is a current member of the Liverpool Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. In 2009, Troy was awarded the University of Wollongong Faculty of Education Alumni Award for Innovation in IT for his work in creating a web-based resource for Wollongong Botanic Gardens Education. Most recently, he was honoured with a 2016 Liverpool Principal’s Network Director’s Award for his contributions as a teacher in an executive role at Marsden Road Public School.
Defining reading as meaning making is widely supported (ACARA 2018; DEST 2005; EYLF 2009; National Reading Panel 2000; Rose 2006) and indeed it is common sense. Alice, quoted above, also asks the rhetorical question as she reflects on reading: “What is the use of a book, without pictures or conversations?” (Carroll 1865 / Browne 1988). Indeed, there is no point in reading if there is no meaning-making happening. Most teachers have encountered students who could recode text (translate sounds to letters) without understanding what is meant, either literally or on a deeper level. But recoding is not reading. Rather it is part of the process and what teachers often refer to as ‘barking at print’. Meaning-making is central to the very nature of literature and art.

Literature is an art form. It has the potential to move us, to challenge us to respond to new ideas, to help us question the taken for granted – to change our lives. Authentic, quality literature has the greatest power to achieve these things. As Margaret Meek (1988 p. 40) comments, ‘It is hard for anyone whose life has been enriched by books to exclude the young from this source of pleasure and serious reflection’. Using authentic literature from the outset in the reading process is therefore critical in enabling all children to understand that reading is about meaning-making.

Every child comes to school with their own, individual orientation to text (used here in its broadest sense) and reading developed from the experiences they have had from birth to the moment they enter the educational system. If they have experienced rich conversations, if they have played with language, if they have enjoyed storying and shared many books in a caring, secure context, they are more likely to find the transition to school and to learning to read an easy one (Bowers & Bowers 2017). Indeed, longitudinal studies have shown that wide experience with literature at home and opportunities to select books is one of the most important predictors in a child’s future success as a reader (for example, Evans 2010). Evans’ twenty year study showed that children who had grown up with books, regardless of nationality and parents’ level of education or socioeconomic status, reached a higher level of education than those who did not have such access. Evans emphasises the importance of home-school partnerships. Using a series of Theory of Mind assessments, Kidd and Castano (2013) demonstrated that students who read fiction were more likely to display empathy due to what they described as ‘the social experience’ of reading imaginative texts. Further, Saxby (1997) asserts, imaginative fiction is critically important for our cognitive development and all children must have that right.

Teachers should use real stories, expertly crafted by authors and illustrators to engage and inspire their students as well as to develop their vocabulary and knowledge about sentence structure, phonic knowledge and other aspects of texts.

As Margaret Meek (2006) says, children who build a repertoire of oral language through rhymes, songs,
very simple sentences like
While developing sound/letter correspondence is a
that they can tell themselves how to see what
verses and stories explore the phonology of our
"y
alone. For instance, the vowels in
which demonstrate the connection of the words.
can both hear and see the borrowings which we now
problems for those children experiencing
taught first. Retailers claim that such programmes
"tricky", very quickly. As Adoniou (2016 p.75) suggests:
you to read or write as everything gets a lot more
"the cat sitting on the mat",
"er
was just
My broth
Australian English (SAE) this is the sound underlined
phonological strategies (Mann and Singson 2003)'.
phonological consistency of only 12 percent. By Year
languages (Devonshire and Fluck 2010) with a
sounds. Rather, as Adoniou (2014 p.2) points out,
sounding out: there are too many
students who are underperforming in spelling are
you have walked past
sitting on the sofa doing nothing.”
and bolded in this example: “
er
Devonshire and Fluck 2010) available and to group children in such a way that
they are able to develop both reading and writing with excellent models. The only way to do this is
to develop language and literacy in context so that
children make meaning as they develop their skills
and understandings. In contrast the phonics first
advocates mandate that blending sounds should be
followed by drill and practice with contrived texts.
For example, consider the paucity of the first few lines of the so-called ‘decodeable text’ below
The Tot and the Pot
The tot is on the mat.
The Tot and the Pot
and genre. This is vital in the case of students
comprehend does not need work with phonics or
and across settings. A child who can recode but not
the specific needs of the individual children in their
teachers need to differentiate within classroom and across settings. A child who can recode but
comprehend does not need work with phonics or phonemic awareness but with vocabulary, grammar
and genre. This is vital in the case of students
Learning English as an Additional Language or Dialect (AALD) who may be ‘barking at print’ and need oral
language and vocabulary development as a priority, not phonological knowledge.
Phonic knowledge alone is insufficient. English is a language which has always borrowed and
adapted from other languages, and the spelling and pronunciation of English words reflects its origins.
Old English continued to develop from the beginning into Early Modern English as we know it today. Even today we
can both hear and see the borrowings which we now consider to be English words. We have kept spellings
which different people have used to represent the pronunciation of words.
Rather than being overwhelming, however, the
English language is a rich resource for expression.
To read and write English well, the reader should be able to call on all possible sources of information with a focus on semantic information (meaning).
These sources of information include context (structure/grammar) and orthography (visual information) as well as phonological information. If words and phrases are read and phrases are read in context familiarity with the genre and vocabulary related to the topic will also support literacy development as will
teaching phonics in a meaningful way.

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Biography
Professor Robin Ewing AM
Robin initially a primary teacher, Robin Ewing AM is currently Professor of Teacher Education and the Arts, Sydney School of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney. She lectures in curriculum, English, children’s literature, early literacy and drama across pre-service and postgraduate teacher education programs. She is passionate about the role that the Arts can play in transitioning learning and has a commitment to innovative teaching and learning at all levels of education.
Currently Robin is Chair of the Academic Board, Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTERS) and a board member of SecondWorlds. Robin is also a past President of the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association and the Primary English Teachers Association Australia.

Dr Kathy Rushton
Kathy is interested in the development of language and literacy, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged communities and with students learning English as an additional language or dialect. She is an experienced EAL/D and classroom teacher having worked in primary and secondary settings and with adults learning English. She is a lecturer in the Sydney School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney and she also provides professional learning for teachers, especially in the areas of literacy and language development. Her current research projects are on the impact that teacher professional learning has on students’ literacy and language development and on the confirmation of student identity and the impact this has on wellbeing, literacy and language.

Mr Mark Diamond
Mark is the proud principal of Lansvale Public School and community leader. He is an educator of thirty plus years and has previously been the Principal of Green Valley and Ashcroft Public Schools. He was an active partner and co-researcher in the Western Sydney University Fair Go Project since its inception.

He was acknowledged by Western Sydney University as a Lead Learner for his contribution to the field of pre-service teaching and as a long-term participant in the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: an evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on teaching and its implications for teaching instruction. Reports of the subgroups, NICHD Clearinghouse, Rockville.


Some of the important issues related to the current phonics debate

David Hornsby, Literacy Consultant

The current phonics debate makes me think that those pushing for a synthetic phonics approach are talking about another language, not English. Either they don’t understand the nature of the English orthography, or they do understand but have a political agenda, or a commercial interest, or both. There are some key points that need to be addressed.

1. Phonemes and graphemes do not exist outside morphemes

It’s a simple, irrefutable fact that phonemes and graphemes don’t exist outside morphemes (Bowers & Bowers 2018, Chomsky 1970; Cooke 2016). For example, on its own, the grapheme <a> represents the shorter /ă/. In ‘cat’ the grapheme <a> represents the shorter /ă/ (at least for most Australians). In ‘father’ the grapheme <a> represents the longer /ă/ taught in most traditional phonics programs. Traditional phonocentric programs confuse young learners, who learn that <a> represents /ă/ and <e> represents /e/…’ Clearly, a synthetic phonics approach, with its focus on teaching letter-sound relationships, provides opportunities to attend to so much of a child’s learning…’

2. Learning skills like phonics

Many different disciplines (including education, psychology, linguistics, sociology, philosophy) have informed our understanding of important conditions for learning skills such as phonics. We will consider two conditions here, but readers are reminded of the important work of Brian Cambourne in this area.

a) Learning is affective as well as cognitive. To put it more simply, learning goes from the heart to the head. Unless we engage young children’s feelings and emotions, our teaching will be ineffective as well as inefficient. The examples below show that the simplest and most effective way of engaging young readers is to start with rich, meaningful texts. These texts then provide the meaning required for graphemes and phonemes to express themselves. More simply, meaning allows phonics to work.

b) We move from the meaningful to the abstract when learning skills. For example, in mathematics we might start with concrete, manipulable materials like unifix cubes. The children are ‘doing, thinking, talking, doing, thinking, talking’ as they make groups, count them, put groups together, and so on. They learn concepts such as ‘addition and multiplication’ and ‘talk out’ sums (two plus two equals four) before they learn the abstract symbols (the numerals and symbols such as + x = ). Starting with the abstract mathematical symbols in early numeracy lessons is inconceivable – indeed, it’s unheard of. So why would we think that starting with abstract symbols (individual graphemes and phonemes) is appropriate for early literacy learning? Yet we start with a meaningful text (a story like Our Daft Dog Danny) and move to the abstract symbols (the phoneme /d/ and the grapheme <d>).

Synthetic phonics programs and other decontextualised phonics programs are robotic and mechanical. Because they lack humanity, they often employ gimmicks or “cutesy” things to counteract the meaningless, mind-numbing skill and driller – gimmicks that very quickly have to be dropped. If I were speaking on the phone with someone wanting to check the spelling of my surname, imagine if I said, “Harry Hat Man, Oscar Orange, …” I wouldn’t get much further before they sent an ambulance! A relevant question would be, Why spend so much time teaching things that children later have to drop?

Synthetic phonics programs start with abstract symbols (individual letters), assume they represent only one sound, and teach them in a set sequence despite the fact that different programs have different sequences. They are built on a one-size-fits-all approach, but the Australian Curriculum refers to diversity when it addresses their individual learning needs. ‘All students are entitled to rigorous, relevant and engaging learning programs drawn from a challenging curriculum that addresses their individual learning needs’ (http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/student-diversity), accessed 2-9-18, emphasis added.)

Ewing (2018) quotes extensive research on the need to tailor reading pedagogy to individual student needs, and Mackay (2018) writes that ‘educational leaders need to design personalised learning environments in which a broader set of measures constitute ‘new success’ is promoted, recognised and accounted for with multiple pathways for ongoing learning.’ Clearly, a synthetic phonics approach, with a set sequence for teaching letter-sound relationships outside meaningful context, cannot meet individual learners’ needs.

3. Three confusions from the phonocentric camp

a) Decoding and Recoding are confused

The Australian Curriculum required for phonics to work. For example, the phoneme represented by the grapheme <d> in ‘wind’ can only be determined when the word is in meaningful context, such as ‘Please wind up the blind before the wind gets too strong. It represents the longer /i/ in the first instance, and the short /i/ in the second. Without the meaning provided by the sentence, the phonics can’t work without ambiguity.

The term ‘phonics’ is an educational term rather than a linguistic term. To understand our writing system, we need to talk about orthographic phonology. We need to recognise that English is a morphophonemic system in which spellings have evolved to represent sound (phonemes), meaning (morphemes) and history (etymology) in an orderly way (Bowers & Bowers 2017). Venezy (1999) put it this way, ‘English orthography is not a failed phonetic transcription system, invented out of madness or perversity. Instead, it is a more complex system that preserves bits of history (i.e. etymology), facilitates understanding, and also translates into sound.’

Children love Our Daft Dog Danny (Allen 2011) and during shared reading, it’s easy to engage them with the playful antics of the dog at the beach. Through shared reading, they experience and learn about many of the skills, strategies, behaviours and attitudes embedded in the ‘content descriptions’ in the English curriculum (including those related to plot, setting, character, social context, text structure, features of literary text, literature response, etc.). Rich, authentic text provides opportunities to attend to so much of the English curriculum! But it is also a simple matter to direct children’s attention to aspects of phonics, spelling and word knowledge. We could start with the alliterative title Our Daft Dog Danny to highlight the initial /d/ phoneme, to list the words starting with the grapheme <d> and to teach, very explicitly, the /d/-<d> phoneme-phonographeme relationship.

We could use Gorilla (Anthony Browne) to teach the /g/-<g> relationship, or Groffes Can’t Dance (Giles & Parker-Rees) to teach the /g/-<h> relationship, or ChicoChic Boom Boom (Martin & Archambault) to teach the /ch/-<ch> relationship. We have checklists of all the phoneme-grapheme relationships we need to teach the children, and so on.

In contrast, recoding is going from the printed code to the oral code. Meaning may be accessed as a result of decoding (morphemes and history (etymology)) and move to the phoneme /d/ and the grapheme <d>.

3. Difficulties from the phonocentric camp

One of the important issues related to the current phonics debate was that phonics is a one-size-fits-all approach, not what is needed. There is no set order or sequence for teaching letter-sound relationships, except for the most frequently used words, grapheme <a> more commonly represents the shorter /ă/ phoneme than the longer /ă/ taught in most traditional phonics programs. Traditional phonocentric programs confuse young learners, who learn that <a> represents /ă/ and <e> represents /e/…’ Clearly, a synthetic phonics approach, with its focus on teaching letter-sound relationships, provides opportunities to attend to so much of a child’s learning…’

We start with a meaningful approach. A growing body of research tells us that young literacy learners who are taught about the interrelationships between morphology, etymology and phonology are scoring significantly higher on standardised measures of reading and spelling than those who receive only phonocentric, synthetic phonics-based instruction (Devoshire et al. 2013). Since phoneme-grapheme relationships operate within the constraints of morphology and etymology, they must be taught in a meaningful context. Anything else is a fabrication dreamed up by those who do not understand English and how its orthography works.

b) We move from the meaningful to the abstract when learning skills. For example, in mathematics we might start with concrete, manipulable materials like unifix cubes. The children are ‘doing, thinking, talking, doing, thinking, talking’ as they make groups, count them, put groups together, and so on. They learn concepts such as ‘addition and multiplication’ and ‘talk out’ sums (two plus two equals four) before...
The basic morphemic units (do, go) and the
irreflexional endings or bound morphemes (-ing, -es, -re) remain intact. However, consider the changes in sound represented by the grapheme -s:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>do</th>
<th>go</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>/əʊ/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>done</td>
<td>/dəʊ/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gone</td>
<td>/ɡəʊ/ (British)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gone</td>
<td>/ɡəʊ/ (American)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These words are not tone-rare—they are common, high frequency words. The sounds change, but the morphemic units are consistent. It’s a case of conformity, rather than irregularity, but only when you understand that our spelling is morphophonemic and not just about sound.

Now consider the word have. The final e has no phonological function and it does not indicate that the previous vowel should be pronounced with its longer sound /æ/.

The ay diphthong in 'pay' is pronounced as a monophthong. I repeat, the alphabet has limitations regarding the representation of sounds in written form. Children in Australian classrooms come from many different cultural and language backgrounds. They do not all pronounce words in the same way and children from non-English-speaking backgrounds hear and pronounce vowel sounds very differently.

When I was teaching in Oklahoma, the best demonstration of this for the teachers observing me was that I pronounced ‘cat’ as /kæt/ (κ e t) but the teachers and children pronounced it as /kət/ (κ e t). As a monophthong, shorter vowels like /i/ become gliding vowels or diphthongs. Short syllable words like ‘cap’ and ‘pit’ sound like /kæp/ and /pɪt/ since phonics is the relationship between the sounds of our language and the patterns of letters used to represent those sounds. What one phonics program for all because (b ə k ŏ z OR b ē k ŏ z). Both words in Colour

The great literacy debate • Opinion papers
5. Proposed Year 1 phonics check

Two recent publications edited by Prof Margaret Clark (see references) include chapters by highly respected and published academics in the United Kingdom and Australia. The chapters critique the test and comment on the subjective, non-representative research on which it is based to recommend it. Prof Robyn Ewing AM has also written an excellent review of the relevant research and concludes that ‘the costly introduction of a “phonics check” for all Australian six-year-old children is not supported by research’ (2018 p. 4).

One of the hardest things to understand is the recommendation of the synthetic phonics advocates to use this test at the end of Year 1 (Why?) As principal of a school, I insisted that assessment was a continuous process, not an event held on one day. If teachers wait until the end of Year 1, they have just wasted two years! Teachers test phonics knowledge daily, from very early in the Prep year. If proponents of the phonics test would also like continuous assessment of phonics knowledge, why would they still insist on the test being used on one day toward the end of Year 1? It would only tell teachers what they already know from two years of testing.

Our good teachers are constantly testing young children’s understanding of graphophonemic relationships in many different contexts, but especially through their writing. A child’s spellings (both temporary and conventional) give teachers absolute evidence of what graphophonemic relationships are known and used conventionally, and which need to be taught or revised.

6. Programs don’t teach; teachers teach!

This year is my 52nd year in education. I could write a book, ‘The Programs I’ve Seen’; and because I recall Words in Colour and IA (Initial Teaching Alphabet). Both started with abstract letters and sounds and were based on a phonocentric view of English orthography. Both were dropped because they didn’t work. (Teachers are very pragmatic people. If those programs had worked, teachers would have kept them?) A phonocentric approach might have been understandable back in the 60s, but pushing such an approach today is to ignore the bulk of the research evidence and to ignore history. If some teachers proclaim that a synthetic phonics approach works for them today, I want to ask them, “What were you doing before?”

There is no program, no recipe, and no prescription that will ever supersede the power of a well-informed and caring teacher’ (Keene and Zimmerman 2017, p. 31).

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Keene, E & Zimmerman, S 2007, Mozart of Thought: The power of comprehension strategy instruction, 2nd edn, Heinemann, Portsmouth NH.


Children’s Books


Biography

Mr David Hornsby. David has been a teacher, principal, university lecturer, author and literacy consultant for 55 years and still loves working in classrooms with teachers and students. He is passionate about early childhood education and ensuring that young students experience the joy of learning. He is disturbed by the current push, mostly by non-educators, who have never taught a class of children to read and write, towards robotic, mechanical, ‘joyless’ methodologies which are one-size-fits-all recipes for turning kids off learning.

David@hornsby.com.au
Teaching the teachers to teach phonics: Voices from teacher education

Not teaching phonics is not an option

Not teaching pre-service teachers how to teach phonics is not an option. English Curriculum and Literacy Teacher Educators teaching within Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs accredited in Australia are required by the Australian Institute of Teaching and Leadership (AITSL 2015) Program Standard 4.2 to ensure the ITE program prepares pre-service teachers for the school curriculum. Pre-service teachers must demonstrate evidence that they have met AITSL Professional Standard 21 for content and teaching strategies of the teaching areas and Professional Standard 2.3 for curriculum, assessment and reporting (AITSL 2015).

The "Australian Curriculum: English" and the Teaching of Phonics

The "Australian Curriculum: English" provides clear knowledge of the teaching of phonics as noted in Content Descriptors in the left-hand column of Table 1. This approach does not align with the Synthetic Phonics movement. One website promoting Synthetic Phonics is "Five from Five" (CIS 2018). We draw attention to this website as the chair of the Birmingham convened Expert Advisory Panel for the proposed National Year 1 Literacy and Numeracy Check was Dr Jennifer Buckingham. At the time of the panel's consultation period, Dr Buckingham was listed as the head of "Five from Five" (see Exley 2018). At the time of writing this paper, the "Five from Five" website no longer identifies the head.

The website is structured with a tab called "The Five Keys to Reading" which includes another tab for "Phonics". This page opens to show Candace Glass’ video. In reference to the syllables, and blending and segmenting to fluently read and write

Table 1: Comparison between the teaching of phonics in the "Australian Curriculum: English" and statements from the "Five from Five" website.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian Curriculum: English</th>
<th>Language Strand</th>
<th>Contradictory Statements from Candace Glass’ video</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1 - Understand that a letter can represent more than one sound and that a syllable must contain a vowel sound (ACELA1459)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Syllables and onset and rime, as used by other methods of phonics, are NOT used in synthetic phonics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2 - Understand how to use knowledge of letters and sounds including onset and rime to spell words (ACELA1460)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation - Recognise and name all upper and lower case letters (graphemes) and know the most common sound that each letter represents (ACELA1440)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other information provided by Glass directly contradicts Content Descriptors in the “Australian Curriculum: English” (ACARA 2018), as can be seen in the right-hand column of Table 1.

Pre-service Teachers Taught to Teach Phonics in Pre-service Teacher Education

One textbook used in undergraduate and postgraduate ITE programs for the teaching of phonics is “Literacy in Australia: Pedagogies for Engagement” (Seely-Flint et al. 2014; Seely Flint et al. 2016). Both editions, in 2017, had 40% of the Preschool to Year 6 Teacher Education market, with the first and second edition having been adopted by the University of Southern Queensland, Charles Sturt University, Australian Catholic University, Griffith University, Open Universities (Curtin), Murdoch University and University of Queensland, University of South Australia, the University of Newcastle, Victoria University, Notre Dame, Australian National University and Federation University. The textbook uses a model of reading put forward by eminent literacy theorists, Professor Allan Luke and Professor Peter Freebody.

This model is called the "Four Resources Model" (Luke & Freebody 1999) in the text book, Seely-Flint et al. (2016, p. 224) state, “it is critical that beginning readers understand from the outset that texts make sense”. Whilst codebreaking is paramount to learning to read, proficient reading is an incorporation of all four practices of the Four Resource Model: codebreaking, meaning making, text user, and text analyst.

Rather than leaving phonics to commercially produced programs, the Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA 2018) foregrounds teachers' professionalism to facilitate literacy learning and teaching that promotes literacy development, and considers the diversity of individual needs to be readily accommodated in a classroom (Seely Flint et al. 2016). “Literacy learning does not exist as a set of discrete skills to be mastered in hierarchical order according to a specific year level” (Seely Flint et al. 2014, p. 222). Central to this notion is that individual students do not come to school with the same literacy skills and knowledge, and as Seely Flint et al. (2016, p. 224) emphasise, many children come to school with knowledge of the code and that a teaching “a sound per week is a disservice” to these students.

Exley (2014) highlights that when teachers institute a phonics program based on a letter a week, phonics teaching is reduced to the mantra that each letter of the alphabet has a single sound. English sounds and symbols do not have this level of fidelity.

Instead, we charge our pre-service teachers with the responsibility of finding out what their students know about learning to read, and use this data to inform their classroom practice. Pre-service teachers are taught to apply this data to develop the students’ phonics knowledge through an integrated approach, with code-breaking taught and applied in context, rather than in isolation or as decontextualized synthetic practice. From an integrated perspective, learning about phonics is a combination of pedagogical approaches which are not only explicit and purposeful, but also allow for independent exploration and inquiry contextualized within rich and authentic texts (O’Hear et al. 2001).

Such an approach is supported in the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association (ALEA) Literacy Declaration which clearly states “there is a need for explicit instruction in letter sound correspondences (phonics) and word analysis skills; this should always occur within genuine literacy events in contexts meaningful to the student” (ALEA 2018). ALEA has publicly advertised this position in open access publications and statements on its website since 2013. Despite the clarity of the position, the Buckingham (2016, p. 8) report mistakenly claimed that “ALEA actually endorses incidental phonics instruction – painting out letter-sound correspondences on an alphabet in the process of connected text reading.”

Pre-service Teachers’ Confidence for Teaching Phonics

A recent national survey of 2% final year Australian pre-service teachers (Exley et al. 2018) found that 85% of pre-service teacher participants agreed that they had in-depth content knowledge of phonics, including phonemic awareness and phonological knowledge. Eighty-three percent of the same group also agreed that they had in-depth pedagogical content knowledge to provide systematic direct and explicit phonics instruction. Whilst these findings should be treated with caution because of the small sample size, these findings are instructive for showing that a majority of the pre-service teacher participants communicated confidence about their content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge for teaching phonics.

These findings have implications beyond pre-service teacher education, with the need for transition arrangements for early career teachers, in particular their ongoing professional learning requirements and the interrelated role of pre-service teacher mentors, teaching peers and teacher educators. If nothing else, for the sake of consistency, professional learning on the teaching of phonics both within and outside teacher education should continue to
align with the Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA 2018), a knee jerk reaction to teaching and privileging synthetic phonics through high-stakes standardised testing is, according to the research coming out of Australia (Adoniu 2017), and the United Kingdom (Clark 2017; Gardner 2017), not only unnecessary, but down right problematic.

References


Buckingham, J 2016, Focus on phonics: Why Australia should adopt the Year 1 phonics screening check, Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney.


Biography

Professor Beryl Exley.

Beryl has been a registered primary school classroom teacher for 33 years, a Literacy Teacher Educator for 17 years and is the current National President of the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association (ALEA). She is a Professor of English Curriculum and Literacies Education with the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, Queensland.

Dr Lisbeth Kitson.

Lisbeth has been a registered primary school classroom teacher for 14 years, a Literacy Teacher Educator for 10 years and currently is the President of the Meanjin (Brisbane) Local Council of ALEA. She is a Lecturer of English Curriculum and Literacies Education with the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, Queensland.

Getting creative with tax and super

Australian kids can get creative and win big with the ATO’s Tax, Super + You Competition

The Australian Taxation Office (ATO) has launched the 2018 Tax, Super + You competition, which aims to encourage high school students to think outside the box and develop creative ideas on how they think tax and/or super contributes to the community.

There are two categories – Junior Secondary (Years 7-9) and Senior Secondary (Years 10-12) with a total cash prize pool of $6,200 to be won. Students have until 2 November 2018 to enter the competition, with the top 10 finalists to be announced in November 2018.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st prize winner</th>
<th>Junior Secondary Category Year 7 to 9 students</th>
<th>Senior Secondary Category Year 10 to 12 students</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$400 cash prize</td>
<td>$600 for their school or community organisation</td>
<td>$400 cash prize</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One-week work placement within the ATO’s Marketing &amp; Communications team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$250 cash prize</td>
<td>$400 for their school or community organisation</td>
<td>$250 cash prize</td>
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<td>$400 for their school or community organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>$150 cash prize</td>
<td>$300 for their school or community organisation</td>
<td>$150 cash prize</td>
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<td>$300 for their school or community organisation</td>
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People’s Choice Award

<table>
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<tr>
<th>$400 cash prize</th>
<th>$600 for their school or community organisation</th>
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To help students learn about tax and super, the ATO has also published teaching resources in line with the Australian curriculum, which school teachers can incorporate into their lesson plans. The materials are available for download at https://www.taxsuperandyou.gov.au

ATO Assistant Commissioner Sally Bektas, who is part of the judging panel, said: “We were delighted with the creativity and quality of the competition entries from students in 2017 and we are looking forward to seeing what this year’s entries have in store.”

Other members of the judging panel include electronic house music duo and hosts of Triple J’s popular Friday Night Shuffe, Vance Musgrove and Mikeah Freeman, from the Aston Shuffle.

Short stories, animation videos and drawings are just some of the creative ideas from 2017. One of last year’s winning entries was a tax rap from Year 10 students Jordan Donohue and Cabe Barrett from Singleton in New South Wales.

For more information about the 2018 Tax, Super + You competition, visit taxsuperandyou.gov.au/competition-about
Why was the word wrong? Because ‘there is more to reading than just phonics’ (UK Literacy Association n.d. p1).

There is no escaping the need for a wide and flexible range of strategies when teaching young students to read (among other skills). These strategies do not materialise from commercial reading packages aimed at one specific aspect of reading instruction such as synthetic phonics, nor from repetition of catchy educational jargon such as ‘explicit and systematic’.

The above claim is predicated on almost twenty years’ experience teaching young students to read in various New South Wales public schools, as well as over four years in educational research. This article reflects on those years which include three years on Year 1, two years on Reception and kindergarten, two on Reading Recovery and four in special education.

These reflections are offered to explain why an overemphasis on synthetic phonics as the basis of reading instruction and assessment, particularly assessment in the form of a national phonics test, is both unsatisfactory in relation to the reality of highly diverse and often idiosyncratic learning modes in our student groups and untenable in terms of implementing another layer of national testing. The discussion also explains why a Year 1 phonics test and associated teaching emphases would be contrary to student outcomes in our English curriculum.

Why is an emphasis on synthetic phonics instruction and assessment unsatisfactory for our students?

When students begin Kindergarten in New South Wales, they are around four and a half years old, or just about to turn six. They may come from backgrounds where there is little involvement in reading and writing, or from highly literate families. Students in a class group can be developmentally, socially, temperamentally and culturally diverse, not to mention the further diversification and stratification within a student group where students have specific disabilities or learning difficulties.

Teachers have learnt to accommodate this diversity in their classes through differentiated programming for individuals and groups of students with similar learning profiles. I believe that teachers do this responsibly and responsively as students develop and progress. One of our professional standards is to know our students and how they learn (AITSL 2017). This is important, because without that knowledge, we would fail to differentiate for diverse students in our planning, programming, expectations and yes, assessment.

When we know our students and how they learn, we know whether 90 percent or two percent of the class need explicit phonics instruction outside the context of real texts or readers, that is, synthetic phonics. We know this by hearing children read out loud in small groups of similar reading ability every week. We also know this by regularly hearing individuals read and taking a running record that identifies not only an instructional reading level but also the strategies each child uses to navigate unfamiliar text — meaning, grammatical structure and visual information. Are they drawing on all sources of information or over-relying on one?

It is immediately evident in this procedure whether a child has grasped the relationship between letters and sounds or needs explicit consolidation of letters and corresponding speech sounds in their literacy group activities to help them interpret and discriminate visual information in the words; that is, the letter sequence. The letter sequence of a word is not as obvious as experienced readers might assume. That for beginning readers supporting information is required to discriminate the many similar-looking and similar-sounding words they encounter, e.g. lots and lost. In a real text with a story, there is the meaning and structure of the sentence and whole text to fall back on, as well as the supporting illustrations.

It is also evident whether students are applying various strategies and achieving fluency through automatic sight word recognition. Because some students rely on decoding by breaking up words phonetically, they are often stopped by the non-phonetic words our language is riddled with. These students who ‘know their sounds’ in isolation may be disadvantaged and very slow when reading text if they do not have strong recall of high frequency words that are not phonetic — for instance ‘was’, ‘they’, ‘are’ — which cannot be avoided in any meaningful sentence. I have seen students stumped by ‘so’ — sounded out as sos — or (short vowel sound). Offering a rule for the correct sound such as go, no, so, does not help. There is ‘to’ and ‘do’ to contend with, which look similar but sound different, and ‘low’ and ‘mow’, which sound similar but look different.

It might also be noted that taking individual running records is but one of the many individual assessments teachers already implement in the early years; Best Start, SENA, letter recognition (letter names and sounds), BORT reading, South Australian Spelling and so on. These all provide detailed learning profiles for each child as recorded in the PLAN data collection and reported on to parents, as well as providing a formative assessment basis for ongoing learning.

This comprehensive assessment profile is one aspect of knowing our students and how they learn, which covers all reading strategies and other literacy skills, including their application of phonics. “Teaching phonics is embedded in the teaching practices of Australian teachers and is required by the Australian Curriculum. Where is the evidence that they are not using these strategies?” (Ewing 2018)

Why an emphasis on synthetic phonics leading to a national assessment is untenable

Further to the previous reflection on student diversity, it needs to be stated that over emphasising synthetic phonics is more than inadequate, it is totally untenable as the foundation of reading instruction and assessment in the form of a national test. This is a strong claim, but it does not dispute the probability that there are some classes where systematic phonics instruction could be appropriate for the majority of students at a particular point in their reading development.

The claim is based on two important lessons we have learnt from the years of implementing NAPLAN One is that national assessment programs drive programming and teaching. The other is that schools must make extensive and sometimes expensive accommodations to administer the tests.

NAPLAN consumes teachers, beginning with Year 3 teachers, and it consumes their precious time for quality learning. Instead, time is spent preparing students for the tests, marking selected multiple-choice answers and in some cases learning the skills needed to use the online version. Of course, they must do this preparation because students cannot show what they know if they use the forms incorrectly.

NAPLAN also consumes conscientious parents who have fallen prey to companies that publish test- formatted practice books. This focus from important adults of course teaches a child that their NAPLAN performance is very important. One child, on returning to school after the summer holidays to start year three told me, not who her new teacher was or what she did in the holidays, but that it was her first NAPLAN test year and she would be okay because her mum had bought a test practice book.

Then there are the school accomplishments. NAPLAN impacts on teaching programs across the school for two weeks while rooms and staff are taken up with administering the tests. Nearby spaces in the grounds may also be unavailable for sport or other activities in case of noise and distractions. Maximising test performance is top priority and has an impact on the whole school.

A Year 1 national phonics test carries the same implications. It will drive teaching priorities and it will drive parent perceptions about what is important in a child’s early reading skills. I can say this unequivocally because that has been the outcome in the UK since the test was introduced. While on school visits there for a Premier’s Teacher Scholarship, I observed Kindergarten children sitting down for phonics practice, morning and afternoon. This was delivered to them via a colourful, entertaining digital program which made no connections to sentence or text level reading and which needed no teacher input. It provided lots of practice in the sort of non-sense words which make up half the test of forty words.

Adoniou (2017, p3) warns that the phonics test has failed in England and that “the phonics frenzy of testing and practicing nonsense words...appears to be narrowing classroom practice and damaging literacy standards”. Research by the UK Literacy Association which surveyed 494 teachers who had implemented the test concluded that it had been ‘costly, time-consuming and unnecessary’ and recommends that it is only ‘implemented at teachers’ discretion to identify specific developmental difficulties or particular children for whom it is appropriate’ (UKLA n.d. p5).

A decontextualized national phonics test for all Australian students which does not provide formative data would be a redundant, expensive erosion of teaching time and a further administrative and organisational load on teachers and schools, respectively.

Why is an emphasis on synthetic phonics contrary to the Australian Curriculum: English?

An overemphasis on synthetic phonics in beginning reading programs caused by a national test looming in year one is also contrary to both the spirit and the letter of the English curriculum.

The English curriculum is built around the three interrelated strands of language, literature and literacy. Teaching and learning programs should balance and integrate all three strands. Together, the strands focus on developing students’ knowledge, understanding and skills in reading, listening, viewing, speaking, writing and creating. At last we have a syllabus which recognises the
No teacher should feel compelled to over-emphasize and adapt phonics instruction among other and no set of readers or interactive programs can There is no simple, formulaic method to teach reading and know and the appropriate learning content for those their professional judgement about the students they instruction is another imposition on teachers and debate about how much focus is needed on phonics and accountability measures. In an educational events serving public relations purposes appropriating maintaining focus on curriculum content with school regimes appropriating learning time; the demands of maintaining interpreting that content with innovative pedagogy excessive curriculum content; the demands of an essential skill for teachers – the demands of prioritise conflicting demands is knowledge (NSWDET 2009, p. 13). successful they will be in applying and transferring this authentic reading and writing contexts, the more meaning that connects texts with other learning or texts and make connections with other reading and their own experience, which is the aim of curriculum-based teaching. For those students with specific disabilities and learning difficulties, the test will also be disadvantageous where they are unable to meet the expected standard.

For students at either end of the learning spectrum, a uniform approach to reading focused on phonics can be a waste of learning time, especially if directed towards a spurious national test adopted from the already discredited UK model (UKLA, n.d.). Let us instead use the immense funds that would flow into implementing this test to provide more learning support and special needs teachers to further differentiate class programs for students working either beyond or towards grade standards.

Conclusions

A capacity to prioritise conflicting demands is an essential skill for teachers – the demands of excessive curriculum content; the demands of interpreting that content with innovative pedagogy and new technologies; the demands of maintaining focus on curriculum content with school events serving public relations purposes appropriating learning time and the demands of accreditation and accountability measures. In an educational system riddled with conflicting agendas, the ongoing debate about how much focus is needed on phonics instruction is another imposition on teachers and their professional judgement about the students they know and the appropriate learning content for these students.

There is no simple, formulaic method to teach reading and no set of readers or interactive programs can engage all students and motivate their journey into the abstract forms of communication in the written word. Teachers with experience in early literacy can and do adapt phonics instruction among other components of a comprehensive literacy program to accommodate the specific students in each class. No teacher should feel compelled to over-emphasize phonics for the purpose of preparing students for a rational test, some of whom will already be competent readers able to combine information sources in new tests and make connections with other reading and their own experience, which is the aim of curriculum-based teaching. For those students with specific disabilities and learning difficulties, the test will also be disadvantageous where they are unable to meet the expected standard.

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Teaching letter sound relationships in context is systematic.

Dr Jessica Manet, Dr Lisa Kerwin and Associate Professor Pauline Jones

While it is acknowledged that mastery of constrained literacy skills is a predictor of later literacy proficiency, Paris (2005) observes that no research has found it to be a causal relationship. That is, no correlation exists between early mastery of skills such as phonics knowledge and later literacy achievement. Of course, mastery of the constrained skills is necessary, but only in that it allows us to develop increasingly unconstrained, complex and contextualised skills for living rich literate lives.

We address the topic of teaching letter sound knowledge as experienced teachers and teacher educators have observed complex and systematic processes for literacy teaching informed by deep pedagogical knowledge, subject knowledge, curriculum knowledge and expert understandings about the ways children learn. To articulate how it is that teachers systematically teach letter sound relationships in context, we draw on our own knowledge and the survey responses of accomplished teachers that share the knowledge, understandings and beliefs that inform their own systematic approaches to literacy teaching across Government, Catholic and Independent education sectors.

It is well established that the development of children's knowledge about letter sound relationships – phonics – is one important component of any literacy program. Taught alongside this focus on sounds and their graphic representations are skills related to phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, comprehension, fluency and critical thinking to name a few. Dougherty (2011) identifies some of these skills are fixed. They remain consistent in their usage and are relatively easy to learn. Others are unfixed and highly dependent on context. The fixed or constrained skills (Paris, 2005) include name writing, alphabet knowledge, concepts about print, grammatical accuracy, and phonics. The volume of unconstrained skills that can be taught and therefore, mastery occurs quite early. Unfixed or unconstrained skills (Paris, 2005) will develop throughout a lifetime of literate activity. They include skills like knowledge about language, vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, and reading critically. It is these unconstrained skills that empower us to be subjects and creators of increasingly sophisticated texts that are conceptually and structurally complex and academically demanding.

While it is clear that educators must support their learners to master phonics and the other constrained literacy skills, national and international studies indicate there is no 'best' phonics teaching method as long as that method is explicit and systematic (National Reading Panel (NRP) 2000; The Australian Expert Advisory Panel for the National Year 1 Literacy and Numeracy Check (AEP 2017; Torgerson, Brooks, & Hall 2006). Methods identified by the NRP (2000) as 'explicit and systematic' are: analogy phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, onset-rime phonics, synthetic phonics and phonics through spelling. In their evidence-based assessment of the literature, the NRP (2000) found there is no statistical significance in rating one method over another, but that they were all better than literacy programs with ad hoc approaches or that didn’t teach phonics at all.

As educators, then, we can embrace the pedagogical message that it is explicit and systematic teaching rather than a single method that produces knowledge and understanding. One teacher about letter sound relationships (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2017; EAP 2017; NRP 2000).

In contrast, some have observed that explicit and systematic teaching of phonics is the most effective ‘way in’ for that student to progress and include phonics in their teaching of phonics in context.

Principle 1: Systematic teaching of phonics in context is grounded in the curriculum and organised through scope and sequences.

Literacy teachers in Australia are mandated to teach the content of the Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA 2016). Evidence of learning must be provided against each of the outcomes, which are further articulated through elaborations and scope and sequence frameworks offering direction for classroom teaching.

The teachers we surveyed reported whole school approaches underpinned by scope and sequence documents that inform a systematic phonics teaching approach. Examples included ACARA’s National Literacy Learning Progression, and the NSW Education Standards Authority’s (NESA) Scope and sequence framework for phonological and graphophonological processing skills K–4, both of which advocate careful tracking of students’ knowledge about letter sound relationships.

Principle 2: Systematic teaching of phonics in context is informed by ongoing assessment.

Afflerbach (2016) argues that ongoing and up-to-date formative assessment is key to teachers ability to make critical decisions about what to teach, when and how to best approach this new information.

It is these ongoing assessments that allow a teacher to ascertain that which a child can acquire independently and what could be achieved with support. Importantly, it means teachers can avoid wasting time teaching something already known, and instead, build on that mastery to reach out to new knowledge.

The teachers we surveyed used a range of assessments - running records, phonics samples, word tests and Clay’s (2002) Letter Identification test. These were considered valid, reliable and easily administered with minimal training. They could be aligned within the curriculum scope and sequence framework, and could inform next teaching steps that could build on existing knowledge without repeated teaching of something already mastered.

Principle 3: Systematic teaching of phonics in context is differentiated in response to formative assessment data and in line with curriculum learning outcomes.

Teachers use whole class, small group and individual groupings to attend to their learners’ diverse needs. Informed by assessment data, teachers deliver planned, intentional and explicit teaching aligned with curriculum learning outcomes (ACARA 2014) and informed by the ‘next place’ a student must move on. Small group opportunities are sometimes guided reading groups or guided reading which allows teachers to further differentiate their teaching related to specific students’ needs. Within these episodes, teachers adopt explicit phonics teaching, underpinned by scope and sequence frameworks that align to the purpose of the task rather than adhering to any single method (Dombey 2017; Ewing 2018).

Teaching phonics in context is not a ‘whole language’ approach. The teachers we surveyed explained that classroom-based literacy assessments were “ongoing” and used to inform weekly teaching programs, particularly small group episodes of explicit teaching. They also reported using a range of approaches to teaching letter sound relationships. Sometimes they used a whole-to-part (analytic) approach, taking the opportunity to take a word from whole text and analysing its parts. At other times, teachers move from the part-to-whole (synthetic), starting with sounds and blending them before recording (or reading) the required word in isolation and then replaced in the whole text. The teachers reported using synthetic (part-to-whole) approaches more commonly when teaching writing.

The teachers talked, too, about children having time to work with and develop their own understandings about letter sound relationships. One teacher explained that independent reading and writing time afforded children opportunities to “generalise and transfer graphophonological knowledge” across different tasks and texts. It is these independently created texts that offer new opportunities for assessment and analysis that informs future teaching context and approaches.
Principle 4: Systematic teaching of phonics in context requires the careful selection of texts that showcase the learning focus

Like many educators, Palincsar and SchieplegPELL (2014 p. 416) argue that rich and complex texts offer opportunities to learn about how language works, to hear sophisticated vocabulary used in creative ways, and to ‘nourish students’ interests and motivation to read. Rasinski, Zimmerman and Bigler (2015) argue that poetry promotes, among other things, awareness of rhyme, rhythm and repetition, important components of developing understandings about sounds and the ways these are recorded. Contrived texts such as basal readers are also considered useful because they can be read in a single sitting and they offer opportunities for working with selected words in controlled settings where the teacher can focus on teaching about specific letter sound relationships (Fountas and Pinnell 2012).

The teachers we surveyed talked about using a range of texts to suit the different purposes of their teaching. Rich texts were used to showcase language at work, to immerse children in rich vocabulary and syntax, to develop opportunities for writing, and to draw out words with the purpose of studying letter sound relationships. Basal readers were more closely connected with small group explicit instruction where “short, focused interventions” could support a close focus on mastery of clearly identified phonic knowledge. Regardless of the experience, the teachers we surveyed insisted that texts should make sense and be of interest to the children.

Principle 5: Systematic teaching of phonics in context requires careful record keeping, reflection and professional learning that focuses on both the teaching and the learning.

Key to teachers’ work is keeping accurate, detailed teaching and the learning. A systematic approach to teaching phonics in context, as shown in Aflerbach’s (2016 p. 416) observation that teachers who implement literacy lessons that are not informed by formative assessment are in fact ‘informed by guesswork’, and therefore unable to meet the needs of all learners. Packages and programs, while attractive in their promise to meet the needs of all students, advocate a single approach to teaching for meeting individual needs. It is the analysis of students’ work samples that guide future learning experiences. A teacher who has intimate assessment knowledge of their learners is driven by this in deciding what experiences children need (and don’t need).

Critical reflection enables teachers to explore their practice as they become more aware of the decisions they make, the root of those decisions and directions for further investigation. Reflective practice is even more powerful when it’s done collaboratively with colleagues because professional dialogue promotes interdependence, collective commitment, shared responsibility, review and critique (Agrius & Schon 1978).

The teachers we surveyed emphasised teacher expertise in pedagogy, content knowledge, and of course knowledge about their own students in understanding what has been learned, how that learning relates to the mandated syllabus, and what teaching needs to occur next. One teacher described a combined school approach where teachers brought evidence of teaching and learning to their “consistent teacher judgement sessions” where students’ learning is plotted on the (ACARA) Learning Progressions. All teachers spoke about the need for a focus not only on children’s learning, but also on the impact of their teaching emphasising commitment to ongoing professional learning.

Lessons Learned: Teaching phonics in context is systematic

Formative assessment is the starting point for a systematic approach to teaching phonics in context. Aflerbach (2016 p. 416) observes that teachers who implement literacy lessons that are not informed by formative assessment are in fact ‘informed by guesswork’, and therefore unable to meet the needs of all learners. Packages and programs, while attractive in their promise to meet the needs of all students, advocate a single approach to teaching letter sound relationships under the assumption that students have a common point of need. They are systematic only in their lock-step delivery of content, not in the process of meeting the diverse needs of learners, nor empowering the pedagogical expertise of teachers.

It is well known that nothing replaces good pedagogy nor teachers’ knowledge of content and curriculum. To promote one systematic method of teaching phonics over another creates a false dichotomy that misrepresents the nature of teaching and learning with real children who come to school with diverse experiences, understandings, beliefs and abilities (Esling 2018). Good teachers already know what their children know and are yet to do because they are experts in assessment, teaching and learning. Teachers know how to be explicit and systematic and they have clear guidance in government mandates and support documents for teaching phonics in context. They are well positioned to make decisions about what a learner needs and does not need at a certain time and the way they will best learn it. And they should be trusted to do so.

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Biography

Dr Jessica Mantor

Jessica is a Senior Lecturer in Language and Literacy and Academic Program Director of the Bachelor of Primary Education in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong. Jessica’s current research interests examine teacher pedagogies for literacy learning, literacy transitions for children across and within the years of school, children as consumers and creators of text, and their engagement with technology for literacy learning.

Dr Lisa Kervin

Lisa is an Associate Professor in Language and Literacy in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong, Australia where she also serves as the Associate Dean Research for the Faculty of Social Science. Her current research interests are focused on young children and how they engage with written and production practices and she is currently involved in research projects focused on young children and writing, digital play, literacy pedagogies and transition.

Associate Professor Pauline Jones

Pauline is a researcher and teacher educator in the School of Education at the University of Wollongong. Her research interests include educational linguistics/semiotics, literacy development and disciplinary dialogue. She is currently team leader of the Transforming Literacy Outcomes (TRANSLIT) project, an empirical study of literacy development from preschool to junior secondary in 3 communities. She is also chief investigator on an ARC grant investigating the use of multimodal texts in tertiary science classrooms.
About Literacy?

The current literacy debate is one-sided, in that writing is not considered. It is not even that reading per se is privileged, but rather that one small aspect is the prime focus of contention. The debate is dominated by arguments about the best possible means of teaching early reading, a debate largely played out in the mainstream, and social, media, rather than academic and professional journals.

According to Snyder (2008), it all began when the Weekend Australian of 23 September 2006, published an article signalling a crisis in literacy education. As we know, contributors to the media are not bound by research ethics or issues of validity. There is no requirement for robust evidence. It is an arena in which opinion is presented as fact, an increasingly problematic phenomenon in an era of Alt. Truth. D’Ancena (2017 4:2) has suggested the propagation of ‘falsehoods’ is coordinated and strategically designed to confuse the public and construct controversy where none previously existed. Driven by right-wing and commercial interest groups, much of the ‘literacy debate’ has taken place in a milieu of obfuscation, misrepresentation and adversarial claims. One falsehood is that teachers and teacher educators have been resistant to using phonics as a method of teaching early reading, even though it has always been a key part of reading strategy.

An opportunity for reasoned discussion may provide an opportunity for common ground to be unearthed. Surely we can all agree that education should be an institution premised on social justice. Given that literacy is a foundation of our education system, every child must be supported to become an effective life-long writer, but that is a subject for another article.

Aspects of the recently published, ‘Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert’, by Castles, Rastle and Nation (2018), provides areas of common agreement. We can agree that phonological awareness and phonemic knowledge are essential elements in the individual’s repertoire of skills. However, as Castles et al (2018) state, reading involves more than alphabetic knowledge and phonics programs are easier in languages with shallow orthographies than those, such as English, that have deep orthographies. For this reason, phonics, in isolation, does not provide sufficient scope to develop full efficacy for the reader and reading non phonically decodable words, by sight, is necessary in a systematic approach to reading.

We can also agree when Castles et al. (2018) assert that decodable readers in phonics programs have restricted word choices and are inferior to real books, in terms of reader motivation and vocabulary extension. They note that more proficient readers rely less on alphabetic decoding skills and focus more on the relationship of spelling and meaning. One aspect of this relationship is morphological awareness. Recognising the importance of wide exposure to texts, the authors state ‘...the single most effective pathway to fluent word reading is print experience. Sharing a wide range of books with children is recognised as a means of extending vocabulary and syntactic knowledge’, (Castles et al. 2018: 31).

So, why is it that those who dominate the current debate fail to recognise teachers’ expertise? Why do they insist on endorsing a single approach to early reading in the form of synthetic phonics, even when there is only one study, conducted in the Scottish county of Clackmannanshire, which actually advocates it? Not only has the study been critiqued as methodologically flawed (Ellis 2007; Wyse and Styles 2007), Clackmannanshire has had to implement a rigorous ameliorative program to rectify problems in its students’ abilities to comprehend written texts (Clackmannanshire Council 2015). Summarising the broad agreement, Castles et al (2018: 13) state, ‘...the evidence is not yet sufficient to conclude that a synthetic phonics approach should be preferred over an analytic one.’ Clearly, these authors recognise, in keeping with most of the teaching profession, that reading involves a systematic and integrated program of synthetic and analytic phonics, combined with sight reading of non-decodable words. In addition, as educators in Clackmannanshire have learned reading is also about processing meaning and, therefore, comprehension cannot be divorced from decoding.

Given that the evidence does not support the
exclusive use of synthetic phonics as the means to teach reading, why do those who dominate the current debate wish to impose on teachers and students in Year 1, a test that relies solely on knowledge of synthetic phonics? They cite the Phonics Screening Check (PSC), currently used in England, as a reliable means of diagnosing reading ability. However, the test was premised upon the flawed findings of the Clackmannanshire study and was advocated by a report (Rose 2006) that was biased in favour of synthetic phonics (Gardner 2017). Furthermore, there is no substantial evidence the PSC improves reading (Walker et al. 2017). As Castles et al. (2018: 38) state, children need a solid grounding in spoken language as preparation for learning to read but that language proficiency varies enormously on entry to school, with the result some students need ‘extended language support’. Clearly these students may not be ready for a standardised test in Year 1. We already know that rates of ‘failure’ on the PSC are higher among the younger students than their older counterparts, some of whom may be almost a year older (Clark 2017). In addition, the PSC is not necessary for students who can already read.

The current reading debate is skewed, on the one hand, by people with little classroom experience and vested interests, and on the other by one disciplinary perspective: cognitive psychology. The ‘science of reading’ is mainly conducted by means of decontextualised experiments, often involving single word items. As a consequence, reading as social practice in classrooms and communities is absent from the discussion. Future research must take account of what effective teachers of reading actually do in real classrooms. It must look at the efficacy of their approach in terms of written language that is vibrant and meaningful rather than stilted and prosaic, as is the case in most deadbolks. Books we need to bear in mind is the impact on higher order reading of using polysemic, multimodal texts that encourage students to engage with metaphor and symbolism.

Like most experienced teachers, I have learned that we need to have an armory of strategies to meet the varied needs of our students. Making skilled judgements about what will work best with specific students is an essential feature of professional agency. There is no point in teaching reading and should be suspicious of those who then wish to impose that approach as an exclusive panacea.

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Biography

Dr Paul Gardner

Paul is a Senior Lecturer in Primary English (Teaching and Research) in the School of Education at Curtin University. He has previously taught at several universities in the UK, and draws on extensive experience of teaching English in various contexts, ranging from early years, through primary to secondary/high school. He has also been an advisory teacher of multicultural education and ESL/TVI provision. Whilst teaching in England, Paul had direct experience of the statutory implementation of synthetic phonics in the Phonics Screening Check, which he recounts in a chapter of ‘Reading the Evidence: Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning’, published in 2007.

His most recent publications include:

Gardner, P. 2018 NAPLAN. The Writing is on the Wall but Who is Actually Reading it? English in Australia, 33(1) 20-23

Gardner, P. 2018 ‘Wiring the Writer Identity: the poor relation and the search for voice in ‘personal literacy’’ Literacy 52(3) 11-19


Paul is a keen writer of poetry and has had his work published in English in Australia.

The recent Phonics Debate (Sydney, July 31) has acted as a crucible in which long-held and deeply committed views and antipathies have been exposed and stirred, possibly heralding a new chapter in a long-running, corrosive debate about early reading instruction.

Against a background of a widening gulf in Australia between the reading “haves” and “have nots”, there is cold comfort in knowing that people on both sides of this debate place a premium on the importance early literacy attainment as a life-long asset. If this widening gulf did not exist, there would be no “Reading Wars”. The Reading Wars draw their oxygen, not from ongoing debate, but from ongoing under-performance of Australian children, particularly those who start from behind and are doomed by a fatal mix of education nihilism and suboptimal instructions, to stay that way. There is also an increasingly widening gulf between the cognitive scientists, speech pathologists, and educational psychologists on the one hand, who make it their business to understand all aspects of human learning, including the acquisition of reading, and education academics on the other, whose self-selected remit in recent years, has largely been to promote in pre-service teacher, a simplistic (at best) view of the process of learning to read. This sits alongside a misplaced belief that so-called authentic children’s literature and immersion in text and spoken language works is under-done, and teachers do not feel well-prepared by their initial teacher education (ITE) for these tasks (Meeks et al., 2018).

Education academics have wilfully ignored the body of scientific knowledge (derived mainly from cognitive psychology research) about how children learn to read, and in so-doing, have robbed their graduates of their rightful status as well-informed, evidence-based practitioners. True professionals uphold high ethical standards by having the tools to question assumptions and maintain up-to-date practice in line with the best available evidence about what works in the majority of cases. Instead of commitment to scientific rigour and accountability, however, we see a “choose your own adventure” approach to implicit reading instruction, such that it is possible to visit two adjacent Foundation (“Reception” in some states) year classrooms in the one school, and observe vastly different approaches to reading instruction, both technically aligned to the accommodatingly elastic curriculum. Imagine the corollary in a hospital, where staff in two adjacent wards did their own thing with respect to hand-washing, or in the airline industry where pilots who give free-reign out a few ideas of their own when landing Boeing 747.

There is a science to effective reading instruction, in the same way that there is a science to infection control, or to airline safety. All interface with human judgement and the vagaries of human behaviour, but these take their place behind scientific rigour and logic. Education, however, has been allowed to thumb its nose at science and go its own way, engaging with jingoistic time and resource-wasting fads in the process (learning styles, Brain Gym, multiple intelligences, coloured overlays, growth mindset, brain-based learning, to name a few), instead of bearing down and doing the necessary, though sometimes difficult job of understanding and applying cognitive and linguistic science evidence as this pertains to early reading instruction. Children and their parents engage with school on the implicit assumption that the best available evidence is going
It is not acceptable to engage in parent-blame regarding early oral language exposure, to "explain" the poor reading achievement of some children. That is, it is neither the responsibility of, nor is it something that can be explained by, parents. By extension, it is no longer excusable that teachers who are themselves parents of young readers, and a blatant disregard for the instructional design, we must grapple with a wasteful knowledge-translation crisis. Such waste of educational funds is unforgivable and would not be tolerated in other fields, where reliably-established changes in knowledge transform into changes in practice as a matter of course. There is abundant evidence to show that teachers (and in many cases their educators) in western nations such as Australia, the UK, and the US, are well aware of the linguistic basis of learning to read, and the evidence also includes the reading instruction that teachers use to teach reading. Teachers tend to play it safe, and base their instruction on the limited evidence that reading children turn themselves into good readers who are able to understanding of the nuanced relationship between oral language and early literacy, but it also displaces responsibility for poor reading outcomes to children and their parents. It is not the job of parents to teach children how to read. That is the job of teachers. I wonder how teachers who are themselves parents of struggling readers interpret this message?

Ironically, if there is any message at all in the fact that some children start from behind with respect to literacy knowledge, it is not that their poor reading outcomes can be dismissed and explained away on the basis of the sub-standard genetic and/or environmental endowment parents have bestowed on them. Rather, it is that teachers need to engage in instructional practices that accelerate the progress of their students relative to their more advantaged peers. However, teachers who are ill-equipped to understand the science of learning, working memory, and the brain's plasticity, do not have access to the tools that are needed to help children learn to read. This is a waste of tax payers' money, and a result of years of poorly-funded and ineffective reading instruction that is no longer excusable in 2018. Sustained failure to adopt new scientific knowledge and transmit it to its rightful custodians and beneficiaries is simply cosying up with pseudoscience. It's time to move from the Reading Dark Ages to a Renaissance.

References


Socioeconomic status affects early vocabulary development via maternal speech...
What is the phonics check? 

The phonics check is based on a reading assessment method used in England among students in Year 1 (Standards and Testing Agency 2018). It involves teachers asking children (individually) to read aloud about 40 single words, including 20 real words and 20 non-sense (e.g., rird, phope, stribe) words. All words are able to be read using a sub-lexical (phonics decoding) method. More critically, the non-sense words are included because, unlike the real words, children are unable to read them from memory. This makes the non-sense words an even more appropriate check of a child’s ability to decode. It is expected that a child with age-appropriate decoding skills would be able to read correctly at least 32 out of the 40 words.

How the phonics check checks more than phonics

Through the requirement to decode, the phonics check checks for students who could go on to have a reading disability if appropriate reading intervention is not provided (Stanovich 2009). Thus, the phonics check provides the opportunity for early identification of reading difficulties and therefore earlier opportunities for appropriate and systematic intervention. Opponents of the phonics check have argued that it is a waste of money and creates additional, unnecessary work for teachers. These critics have suggested that instead of the check, the money should be directed to useful interventions (Adoniu 2016). But, how can it be logical to implement effective reading interventions if we do not know exactly why that intervention is necessary and what type of intervention is needed? Proponents argue that a phonics check would provide a rational, evidence-based framework from which to develop more effective and individualized reading interventions.

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Instructing children how to decode involves teaching them how sounds correspond to a specific letter or groups of letters. Understanding the processes involved in how children learn to read is important because it guides how we assess their difficulty with learning to decode. It also guides our approach to reading instruction. In Australia, methods of reading instruction and reading assessment have been hotly debated. Currently it is the debate on the implementation of a mandatory phonics check in primary schools (e.g., South Australia Department for Education 2017) that has seized attention.

One of the most classic debates in reading development research is how children learn to read. There is extensive research on the processes in reading acquisition and the most effective ways to teach children how to read. Over 30 years of research, based on rigorously implemented methods, has consistently identified that effective reading instruction is underpinned by helping children to decode words using phonics (Castles et al. 2018).

Samantha-Kaye Johnston, PhD Candidate, School of Psychology, Curtin University
they determined had otherwise good reading abilities by the poor results obtained by their students who being used may not be effective. For example, the trial showed that the reading assessments currently findings from the South Australian phonics check Australian teachers provide an accurate and realistic reading assessment methods used in Australian teachers.

of the need to tailor more informative reading effective. This could then inform education boards if their approach to reading instruction has been concerned. The phonics check allows teachers to recognize those who have difficulties with decoding, then it is logical that all parties invested in a child’s reading success would support a phonics check. Despite the well-supported research for the fundamental role of phonics in permitting children to learn how to read (Castles et al. 2018) and the extensive calls to implement the phonics check, the translation of theory into practice has been too slow. Moreover, one of the main concerns is that although the phonics check helps to identify children at risk of reading failure, it does not prescribe how to remediate the problem with these children. Some may even argue that it is unethical to offer such a screening without a prescribed solution. But, although the check does not explicitly tell you what to do after identifying a student with poor decoding ability, previous reading research does. That is, the extant research has been clear and consistent on the finding that classroom reading programs that include a component of explicit, systematic (synthetic) phonics instruction are more fruitful compared with programs without this fundamental component (Castles et al. 2018; Ehri et al. 2001; Johnston et al. 2012). This involves explicitly teaching children, for example, that the letter “c” relates to the k sound and that when you blend the letters k, a, p, it makes the word GAP.

Therefore, despite the critics, the priority needs to be placed on the needs of children. It cannot be denied that the proposed phonics check forms a key element of any process that aims to improve reading outcomes, as it predominantly checks for students at risk of a reading difficulty. In addition, it potentially gives some indications about the effectiveness of reading instruction and reading assessments and will potentially keep the teachers workload in check. Despite these advantages and although a large majority of Australian teachers have begun to accept the importance of explicit phonics teaching, and by extension the phonics check, there is still much convincing to be done before the phonics check is accepted.

References


Biography

SamanthaKay Johnston. Samantha’s research examines the differences in how visual and auditory attention networks relate to phonological processing and reading, in early and later stage primary school aged children, including those with dyslexia. She is also the founder and director of Project Capability, an initiative which provides tertiary scholarships for Jamaican students with dyslexia.
A Personal Journey with Phonics

Dr Lyle D Whan

The Australian College of Educators and Centre for Independent Studies Debate in July provided the impetus to write an article for publication stimulated by reflection on a lifetime of my own learning. Beginning as a pupil in a one teacher school in 1948, starting teaching in a small rural timber mill town in 1961, to becoming a school executive in 1972, a principal of three large primary schools for over 20 years and then a part-time casual school counsellor for the past 17 years amounts to a grand total of 58 years as teacher. I have experienced the fads and fashions in education that have come and gone and seen a lot of babies - phonics, fluent handwriting, automaticity of number facts and accurate spelling and grammar - thrown out with the bath waters of educational change.

A Pupil Learns

I started as a pupil at a one teacher school at Skeleton Creek, outside of Glen Innes. My parents rarely read to me because there were only two Golden Books in the house and the cows had to be milked and the calves and pigs fed. The Salvation Army papers, Wot Cry, were used to paste over the wooden slabs to seal out the freezing winter winds. The school had a graded series of Readers, Red, Blue, Green and Brown and several other books, including Dot and the Kangaroo and Peter Rabbit. No rich literacy environment here.

There was one chart on the wall beside a picture of the King. It had pictures of an apple with an Aa, a baby with a Bb, a cat with a Cc and so on. The 18-year-old teacher on his first day of teaching took up his ruler, pointed to the chart and we had to say "Apple a, Apple a, a a a Baby b, Baby b, b b b. It made sense to me. A few days later I got to point to the sound chart and that afternoon, I told mum and dad that I didn’t need to learn to milk cows because I was going to be a teacher when I grew up. Nothing changed my mind. Because there was nothing else to read, I would tear the paper off all the jam and fruit tins to take to school to read to the teacher, Mr Farnsworth.

I learned the sounds and how to blend them, and within a few days of school I had learned to read. While having a rich supply of books, being exposed to different texts and being read to is important and worthwhile, it is not necessarily the sine qua non of learning to read. My own personal experience as a learner taught me that a motivated learner just needs to be given explicit teaching in how reading, spelling and writing works.

First Appointment Teaching

My first class was a composite of 47 students in Years 2, 3 and 4 and they were taught in the local ‘village hall’. No classroom, two chalkboards and a reader, Seaside Story, and the monthly supply of the School Magazine. Molly McKenzie, the K/1 teacher advised me that when teaching a story such as By the Sea I should teach them all the words where y said I such as by, my, fly, try, sky, etc. and where the ‘ea’ said E such as beach, teach, reach, feature, etc. We went through all the consonant and vowel digraphs. Every child could read. Many of these children were from isolated rural properties or from very socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

First Principalship

My principal, John Hamilton, assigned me a composite of 24 students in years 3, 4 and 5. All were at least one year behind in their expected level of achievement in reading. He gave me a maximum of six months to ensure that each child could read to their intellectual potential. We went back to phonological and phonemic awareness. Some ‘got it’ within 6 weeks and moved back to main stream classes. Some children who knew only a few words to begin with were soon reading with confidence. We used the 3 “R’s” of Rhyme, Rhythm and Repetition until each child could read with accuracy (defined as less than 2 errors in 100 words) and automatically (defined as a response under 3 seconds). As each child reached the goal he/she returned to main stream class and would be replaced by another struggling student.

In that year 40 children enjoyed success and went on to higher achievements in higher grades and secondary schools. It causes me to wonder why if one classroom teacher can ‘recover’ 40 children into ongoing reading success in one year, why are we still having children fall through the gaps? The structured remediation program ensured that all children in grades 4, 5 and 6 spent the following year(s) reading to learn rather than learning to read. Principals have the authority to group students as they see fit. Rather than grouping students according to age or stage, grouping them according to learning needs has the potential for beneficial results. After data collection and evidence from the four pillars of assessment, an innovative planned re-organisation of classes can be undertaken. It takes courageous and creative leadership.

After the curriculum was changed in 1978 and the ‘Whole Language’ model became entrenched, the sound charts disappeared, assigned to gathering dust on top of cupboards and advocates of phonics were considered out-of-touch, not with-it, and were often without support from other executives or educational leaders. But after some years, the reading failures began to emerge and in response, the Government and Education Departments introduced programs from other countries such as New Zealand, the USA and England. Some expensive programs continued far decades with little or no evidence of lasting success. Diligent teachers seemed to work harder than the ‘learned helplessness’ of students they were trying trying to teach! Some principals who were trying...
to help classroom teachers to see the advantages of good phonics instruction, were hampered by the fact that many teachers had no personal experience of phonics, had no pre-service teacher training in it, and were unwilling to be seen as ‘old fashioned’. There are still principals and executives who support the whole language model, despite evidence that it does not work for all children and is not supported by neurological evidence about reading in the brain.

In the Counsellor’s Office

Having retired from the Principalship, I reinvented myself and after years of study and supervision became a registered psychologist and school counsellor. I have since worked part-time in 27 different schools in South-West Sydney. From my experience over the last 17 years observing students in classrooms, in my office and talking with teachers and parents, there are 4 major inter-related concerns:

1. Failing readers often in years 1, 2 and 3
2. Attention and behaviour issues and learning difficulties
3. Disabilities including autism, and intellectual functioning
4. Sometime around years 5 and 6 ‘I’m no good at maths/writing’ – ‘I am dumb’ / ‘I have no hope’ syndrome.

During my years using the four pillars of assessment, namely observation, interview, teacher set tests and norm referenced tests (Sattler 1998), it has become quite clear that children who are not given explicit, sequential instruction in phonics have a greater risk of reading failure. Without explicit teaching of the alphabetic code, conscious manipulation of phonemes does not emerge. Until we have every early childhood educator, and indeed every teacher, effectively trained in systematically teaching what the children need to know to become effective, efficient readers, spellers and writers, we will continue to be dogged by declining performance levels across the country.

The last few years have seen an explosion of research into how the brain functions and what pedagogy makes it more or less receptive to learning. My last battles in the reading wars will only be won when:

a. We have no child left lying educationally and academically wounded on the battlefield because they weren’t given a fair go in a school
b. All teachers are properly trained to teach phonics with confidence, knowing that their work is underpinned by recent research.

Conclusion

My personal experience of phonics is now supported by the research of what happens in the brain when we are learning to read. My last battles in the reading wars will only be won when:

1. Attention and behaviour issues and learning difficulties
2. Disabilities including autism, and intellectual functioning
3. Sometime around years 5 and 6
4. Failing readers often in years 1, 2 and 3

References


Biography

Dr Lyle Whan AM, FACE.

Lyle has six academic degrees and extensive experience in government and non-government school systems, from pre-school to university teaching, and has been involved in classroom and teaching for fifty years. He is still active as a counsellor, diagnosing and treating reading difficulties in children.

As noted by Dehaene (2009 p.104) Marinkovic, Dale and Halgen et al used magnetoencephalography to time the reactionary process. The film showed that activation started at the occipital pole which is associated with early visual processing. Roughly 170 milliseconds later, it became strongly lateralised to the left hemisphere and focused precisely on the letterbox area. The conversion of letter into sound starts only 225 milliseconds after the letter first appears in the retina and its compatibility with a spoken sound is recognised after about 400 milliseconds (Staj, Uutela & Hari 2000 in Dehaene 2009). When a beginner learns to decode the letters “b” and “a” into “ba” the planum temporale receives both the letters and the speech inputs and can thus establish the relationships between them. Later on, the links between the graphemes and the phonemes become automatic (Dehaene 2010 p.195).

The debate may continue but neither educators nor psychologists can continue to ignore these recent findings by neuroscience which are shedding light on how reading occurs in the brain and what pedagogy makes it more or less receptive to learning.

Visit oup.com.au/ace-rwi to learn more
If you drive five hours north of Alice Springs you will find yourself in the town of Tennant Creek. A brief walk around our local primary school will reveal children from a range of backgrounds and levels of achievement. Some sit quietly in their classrooms ready to learn, some need to be encouraged to enter the classroom, and others openly refuse to participate, sitting outside or walking around the school. Off-task behaviour is a daily challenge to manage across all year levels, but conversations with our teachers reveal an interesting fact:

“Nobody leaves the classroom during Read Write Inc. lessons. They don’t even ask to go to the toilet!” remarks a teacher. When prompted for more information she responds, “It’s because they are all learning and feel successful”.

In the years preceding this conversation, Tennant Creek Primary School had adopted a number of reading programs. One long-term staff member talks about a phonics program that the school designed.

“When we taught kids phonics, they learned to read. Even the Year 6 boys who couldn’t do anything were starting to read and spell,” the staff member recalls. This growth was short-lived however; a whole language program replaced the phonics program the school had developed.

It is 2018 and the Northern Territory Department of Education (NT DoE) is making great strides in putting evidence into practice in literacy instruction. In 2016, after six months of researching the evidence of reading instruction, the NT DoE decided on a shortlist of resources for teachers that supported systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) instruction. Each resource went through a rigorous auditing process using the Evidence Based Practices Framework (EBP7) to grade each product against a range of criteria.

At the end of the process, Read Write Inc. Phonics was selected as the program to be implemented across the five regions of the Northern Territory (NT). To date, 60 remote schools have been trained in the use of Read Write Inc. Phonics, with another 10 coming on board by the end of the year.

Hundreds of children are now receiving evidence-based instruction for the first time and the encouraging experiences of Tennant Creek Primary School are replicated across a range of schools. Children are learning to read in exciting numbers. Before the introduction of SSP, many children had spent six years at school and were still unable to read the most basic content. A short, intensive period of instruction in the alphabetic code, however, has resulted in student growth that is encouraging and indicative of what is possible when departments of education choose to honour the aims of their strategic plans.

Systematic phonics has been proven to be the most effective method of teaching children to read. The 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy recommended that “teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency” it found that “there is a strong body of evidence that whole language approaches are not in the best interests of children experiencing learning difficulties.” The panel also found that “being taught under constructivist modes has the effect of compounding their (students’) disadvantage once they begin school. This is particularly the case for children from non-English speaking backgrounds, including Indigenous children where English may be their second or third language” (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 28). The children of Tennant Creek Primary and the other remote schools in the NT can ill afford whole language teaching. In 2017, 26% of Year 3 students in the NT achieved below the National Minimum Standard in the NAPLAN reading assessment.

In the two years since the NT introduced SSP instruction, a visible shift has occurred. Children who were not reading are now reading. Scores in the Progressivive Achievement Test (PAT-R) have shown that children in schools teaching SSP are performing better than their non-SSP counterparts. After five weeks of phonics, children at Tennant Creek Primary School are delighting their families with their new ability to sound out words and their teachers are thrilled that they are willingly participating in writing lessons for the first time this year.

Evidence based practice enables. It empowers children to understand how words work and apply that knowledge to their reading and writing. It also empowers teachers, support staff and families by providing methodology that is accessible to all. In the homelands school of Mungkarta, 80 kilometres outside of Tennant Creek, Indigenous assistant teachers and volunteer parents actively participate in teaching phonics alongside a classroom teacher to build the skills of the children of the community.

“We want our kids to be strong in culture and lead their community,” an assistant teacher asserts.

Staff and families recognise that the ability to read is a key component of a bright future. Back at Tennant Creek Primary School, it is no accident that the most disruptive of our students are usually those with the poorest reading skills. This week, years 5 and 6 students have just begun their journey with SSP. The first lesson was well received with one group asking their teacher, “two more words Miss, please, two more words!” as their lesson came to a close.

When asked how he feels about reading the Read Write Inc. Phonics decodable books, a Year 4 student who is frequently in trouble for disruptive behaviour responded, “Happy.” This is a big step for a young person who often experiences school as a series of disciplinary interactions.

At Tennant Creek Primary School, there is a tangible
feeling of hope. Our teachers eagerly collect resources for their next phonics and reading lessons. They plan rich literature-based language and writing units collaboratively, knowing that through their SSP lessons they are equipping their students with the skills to participate in deeper learning. Our school recognises the necessity of the ‘Big 6’ of literacy instruction: oral language, phonological and phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, phonics and comprehension all play a vital role in building strong literacy skills. Children are read to daily with opportunities for dialogue embraced. Our minimum standard is now ‘growth for all’.

And what about the children sitting outside the classroom? In short, we have looked them in the eye and told them that it’s going to be okay. We have promised them that they aren’t dumb, that they can learn to read and spell. We have committed to changing their futures. It’s a big challenge, but it’s one that we feel confident that we can meet head on. Evidence-based practice in literacy instruction changes lives. We see it in our classrooms, the research affirms our observations and we are so very pleased to have the opportunity to do good work in the NT. We refuse to allow our students to be written off and discounted. Watch this space. Big changes are here.

References

Biography
Jocelyn Seamer
Jocelyn is Assistant Principal (Curriculum) at Tennant Creek Primary School in the Northern Territory. Jocelyn is a dedicated and professional educator who is determined to prove that all children can learn through evidence based instruction. She works to actively to promote systematic synthetic phonics, explicit teaching and high expectations for all children, regardless of background or disability. The core of her practice is achieving growth for all children using inclusive methodology that meets the need of the most vulnerable.

Read Write Inc. Programs are developed by Ruth Miskin Training. Read Write Inc. resources are available through Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand.
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