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EDITION**



**Australian
College of
Educators**

professional

EDUCATOR

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2018**

**THE GREAT
LITERACY
DEBATE**



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Editorial

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', had its supporters and detractors. It is necessary to acknowledge, irrespective of which side of the 'battleground' you currently stand on, and applaud the incredible voluntary contributions of all the debaters who took to the stage that evening with such passion and commitment to their 'cause'.

This special edition of Professional Educator contains transcripts from the affirmative team in Phonics Debate namely Jennifer Buckingham's Phonics: A contested space, and Anne Castles and Troy Verey's debate presentations. The members of the negative team, Robyn Ewing, Kathy Rushton and Mark Diamond have contributed an article based on the negative team's position entitled 'It would be so nice if something made sense for a change'. Why

real stories matter in learning to read.

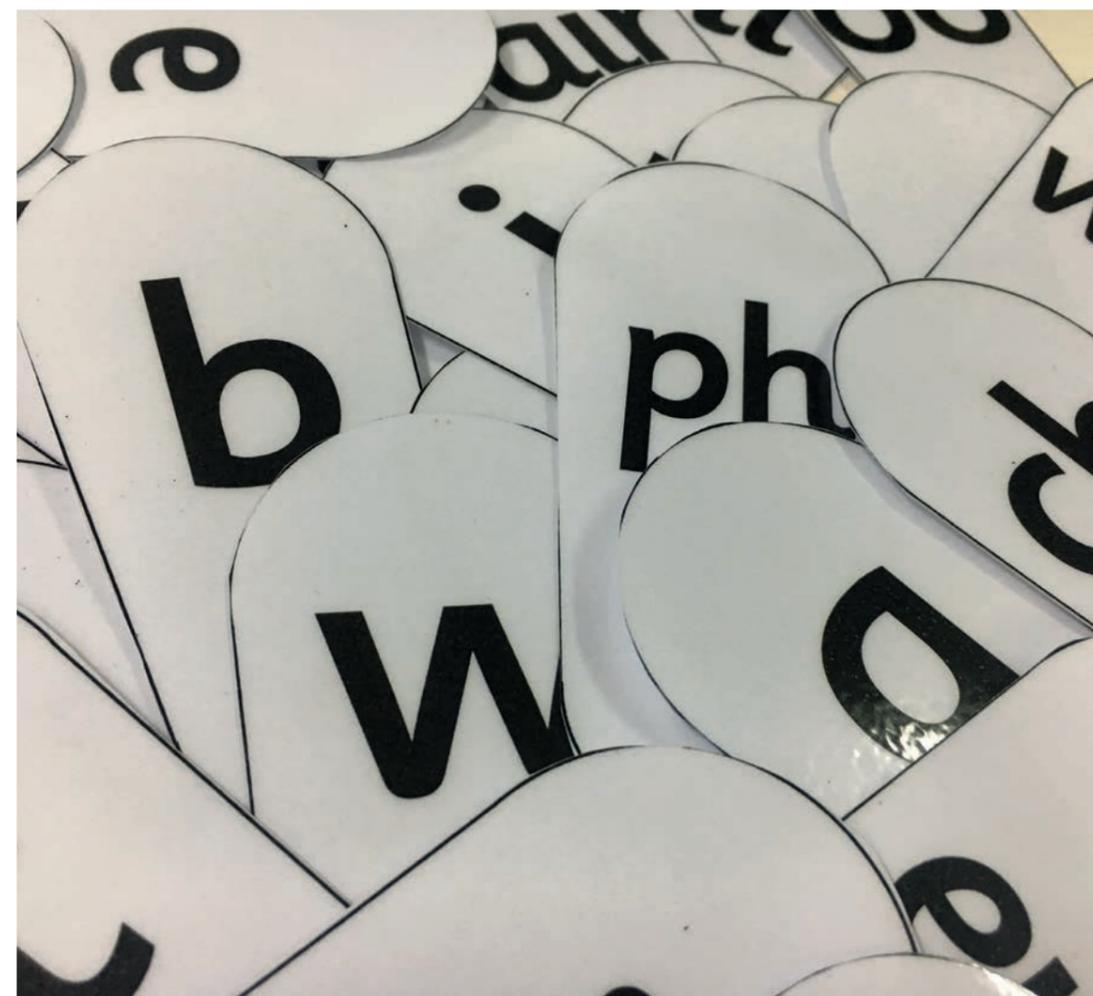
We have also been fortunate to secure articles from an incredible cross-section of stakeholders in the great literacy debate.

David Hornsby's *Some of the important issues related to the current phonics debate*, provides an in-depth investigation into the foundations of the English language and its complexities. The contribution from Beryl Exley and Lisbeth Kitson explores *Teaching the teachers to teach phonics* from a teacher education perspective whilst Katrina Kemp's article *Why is the word wrong?* puts forward the need for flexible and wide-ranging strategies to be utilised when teaching children to read. Jessica Mantei, Lisa Kervin and Pauline Jones in their article, *Teaching letter sound relationships in context IS systematic* present their knowledge and experience in literacy teaching across Government, Catholic and Independent education systems.

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 the long-running debate and argues that it is time for a *Reading Renaissance*.

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. Whan's *A personal journey with phonics* and Jocelyn 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 educators, 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

Reading fluency built through systematic phonics

Transcripts from the affirmative team:
Macquarie University's Distinguished **Professor Anne Castles** BSc (Hons.) ANU, PhD Macq, FASSA, FRSN

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.

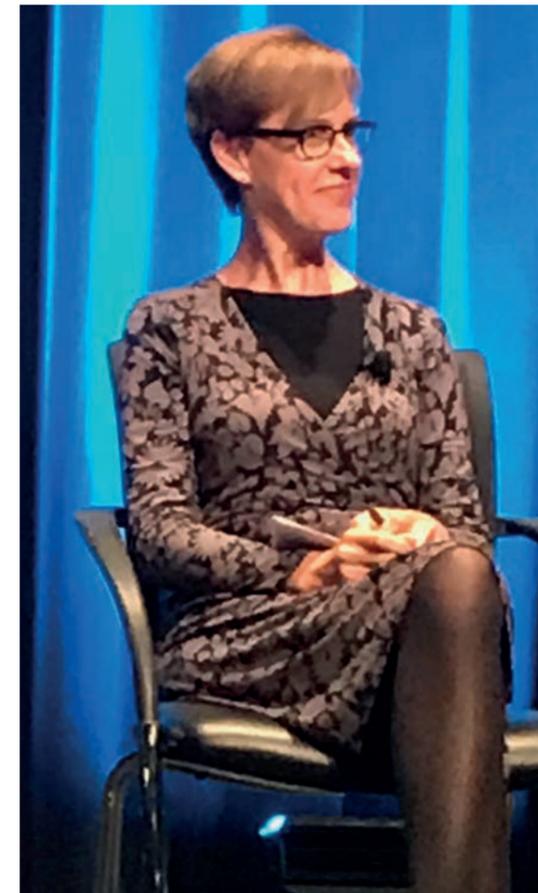
The second point is that it is incorrect to assume that children can learn to read in the same way that they learn to speak and understand. Children are born with the ability to acquire spoken language, simply through interactions with their environment. But we have no such predisposition for learning 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 definition, cannot be systematic, as there is little or no opportunity to control the nature, extent or sequence of the mappings being taught.

Why, fundamentally, do we argue that systematic teaching of phonics is important? The answer here is quite simple: because it falls out of the nature of our English writing system. Our alphabetic writing system is a code for sound. The letters on the page

represent the sounds of spoken language. So, if we teach children phonics, we teach them how to crack the code. They can go from the squiggles and lines they see to a spoken word: W-E-N-T – “went”. And, if that word is in their oral vocabulary, they can then get from the sound of the word to its meaning – which is of course the most important thing. And, if they have the code, they can do this independently, without a teacher having to tell them what the word is, or them having to guess it. As well, the knowledge they have will generalise beyond individual words – the child with the phonics knowledge to read WENT will also be able to read ten, wet and net. Of course, not all words in English follow standard mappings, but basic phonics will get a child a long way.

In contrast, our English writing system is not primarily a code for meaning: there is no systematic link between the squiggles and lines the child sees in words and their meanings. Consider the words cat and cow – a child trying to figure out a systematic relationship between printed words and their meanings might first deduce that all words that begin with the visual form “c” must be animals. But then they would see cup and can and cot and realise that they were wrong – there is no code that links print and meaning. What this means is that teaching children to go directly from printed words to their meanings effectively requires them to engage an arbitrary paired associate learning task, with no opportunity for generalisation beyond any particular word. So, our argument is that it makes sense to



explicitly teach children the code that our writing system actually represents – that between print and sound – rather than expecting them to figure it out for themselves, or having them try and deduce some other code.

Of course, you and I – as skilled readers – don't need to translate printed words into their sounds in order to understand them. We CAN go directly from print to meaning, as is evident when we fluently read and understand texts with seemingly no effort, and without laboriously sounding words out as do young children. But we can do this precisely because we are expert readers – we have built up detailed memories over an extended period of the written forms of words we are familiar with, and we've linked those memories with knowledge about the words' pronunciations and meanings. And indeed, research we have conducted shows that having children initially sound words out via phonics supports this process of building word reading fluency.

To state this differently, going directly from print to meaning is the end-point of learning to read and, although we want all children to get there, it doesn't make sense to start with the end-point. An analogy would be to propose that we teach children to play piano by putting them in front of a Tchaikovsky score. On the contrary, we need to teach children the foundational skills that will allow them to make the most rapid progress possible towards becoming expert readers – and that includes teaching phonics.

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 forming strong links between print and sound. So let's ensure all children get the best possible start in this journey and open up the world of books to them – by teaching them phonics explicitly and systematically.

Biography

Professor Anne Castles.

Anne is Distinguished Professor of Cognitive Science at Macquarie University, as well as Deputy Director and Reading Program Leader of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders. Her research spans skilled reading, reading development, and reading disorders, with a particular focus on the mechanisms by which word recognition skills are acquired by children learning to read. She is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (FASSA) and a Steering Committee Member of the Australian Brain Alliance. She has served on a number of Editorial Boards including Cortex, Scientific Studies of Reading, and the Journal of Experimental Child Psychology. In 2017, she received the Eminent Researcher Award from Learning Difficulties Australia.

Further reading

For further reading and details of the theories and evidence underlying the points made here, please refer to the following paper (open access):
Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the “Reading Wars”: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19, 5-51.

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

Phonics – A contested space

Transcripts from the affirmative team:
Dr Jennifer Buckingham

Phonics – the relationship between the sounds in spoken words and the letters that represent them in writing – is fundamental to reading development. From the outset I reiterate the proposition that phonics is not the only essential skill for reading.

Indeed, the project I run is called FIVE from FIVE because it emphasises the five essential components of reading instruction:

1. phonemic awareness
2. phonics
3. fluency
4. vocabulary (and oral language), and
5. comprehension.

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

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 and listening comprehension together accounted for 96% of variation in reading comprehension. Lervag, Hulme & Melby-Lervag (2017) stated ‘Without adequate levels of decoding, oral language comprehension skills cannot be engaged to allow the comprehension of a written text.’

Teaching children to decode fluently using phonics is not teaching them to ‘bark at print’. In a journal article last year, Professor Kate Nation (2017) wrote: ‘There is clear consensus and abundant evidence that in alphabetic languages, phonological decoding is at the core of learning to read words’.

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 difficulty 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, Rastle & Nation 2018).

Because of its flawed understanding of reading development, phonics in context promotes flawed models of teaching.

Children are encouraged to use ‘multi-cueing’ strategies to identify unknown words. They are



told to use the context of the sentence and the grammatical position of the word as the first cues to what the word might be. Multi-cueing guidelines often encourage children to look at the pictures in a story book to help read the words. Only as a final strategy is it suggested children look at all of the letters in the word (Hempenstall 2003). Unsurprisingly, studies have found this to be an inefficient way of reading. Good readers use phonological decoding, struggling readers use other cues to try to eventually arrive at the correct word (Seidenberg 2017).

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).

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.

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).

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, McNally & Viarengo 2018). Studies of high performing primary schools have found that high quality synthetic phonics was a common factor (Ofsted 2010; Loudon 2015).

There is a lot of ‘fake news’ about synthetic phonics. So what exactly is it?

Synthetic phonics is so-called because teachers build up phonic knowledge from the smallest units – letters and sounds – which are taught in a direct and carefully planned sequence to help them come to grips with the alphabetic code. This is not an understanding children are born with (Wheldall, Snow & Graham 2016).

This new phonics knowledge is then embedded in the context of meaningful words and sentences.

There is regular revision, practice and assessment. This pedagogical approach methodically develops and fortifies the neurological connections necessary for fluent decoding.

Making and reading nonsense or ‘pseudo’ words is sometimes included in synthetic phonics programs for valid instructional and assessment reasons.

Nonsense words are often unfairly derided – many wonderful books and poems are full of made-up words – think Spike Milligan, Dr Seuss, JK Rowling, and CS Lewis for a start. These words will not usually be part of a child’s lexicon and can only be read by phonological decoding. The author’s intended meaning can then be inferred from the context.

Synthetic phonics instruction does not restrict children to their phonics sequence. It is complemented by the words children see in their environment and in books, and adjusted for students with different levels of reading ability

(Buckingham 2018).

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 consistent volume of research on how children learn to read, from all over the world, and it is continually evolving.

Synthetic phonics instruction reflects the cutting edge of our knowledge of how children learn to read and how to ensure that all do. Too many children have missed out on learning to read because of the rejection of that knowledge.

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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 policy, including school funding and performance, school choice, literacy and numeracy testing and reporting, teacher education, teacher employment, class size, and boys' education. Her current area of focus stems from her PhD research on effective, evidence-based reading instruction. Jennifer is a board member of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), and chaired the expert panel appointed to provide advice to the Australian Government on a Year 1 literacy and numeracy assessment.

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

Don't leave reading to chance

Transcripts from the affirmative team:
Mr **Troy Verey**

My aim this evening is to affirm that phonics in context is not enough for our students to learn to read because, phonics in context leaves reading success to chance.

There is an extensive body of research (e.g. Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2017; National Research Council 1998; National Reading Panel 2000; Rupley, Blair & 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.

Sadly for me, my teacher training about reading did leave 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 Blair Labour 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 2005) 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 systematic synthetic phonics.

Once students have an initial understanding of the taught phonics, we introduce decodable books. Once they demonstrate sufficient skills in those 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 44 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.

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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.

meant to improve reading, and believe it is best for our students. Of the 30% of these students who are literate, how many accessed private agencies, such as tutoring centres, from as early as kindergarten, to achieve reading success? How can we continue to leave reading to chance?

There is one school, of many, that has bucked the politically popular trends and ideologies of reading. It's a school like many others in NSW that has a diverse range of cultures, backgrounds and life experiences. That school is my school, Marsden Road Public School.

We are situated in Liverpool, South West Sydney. In our school community:

- we have 57 different cultural backgrounds
- 89% of the community comes from a language background other than English
- one-in-five students have been through the refugee experience and
- 76% of the community are identified as coming from households of low socio-economic status.

For the children at Marsden Road Public School, more so perhaps than for other children, reading cannot be left to chance.

Up until recently, we had used reading programs that involved teaching phonics in context. And what were we seeing? Most of our students could read simple and predictable texts but most hit the Year 4 reading slump. Most of our students could achieve proficiency in Year 3 NAPLAN but could not maintain that status in Year 5. Our data showed that we were leaving reading to chance.

For the negative

Australian College of Educators and the Centre for Independent Studies Debate
Phonics in context is not enough: Synthetic phonics & learning to read

*'It would be so nice if something made sense for a change,'
(Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll).*

Why real stories matter in learning to read

Dr Kathy Rushton, Professor Robyn Ewing AM and Mr Mark Diamond

Dr Rushton, Professor Ewing AM and Mr Diamond were participants at the recent Phonics Debate held in Sydney and represented the opposing proposition.

"Reading is defined as a process of bringing meaning to and constructing meaning from texts...It is not merely about deciphering a written code: it is about understanding the world and opening up new possibilities for being in the world." (Ewing 2018, p. 9)

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. Renowned author Libby Gleeson (2008) discusses the importance of students playing, questioning and imagining as they engage in real stories.

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,



verses and stories explore the phonology of our sound system and learn to read by discovering that they can tell themselves how to see what they say. Unfortunately, not all children come to school with these early experiences. Teachers must design shared book opportunities to support those who have not experienced these early reading opportunities to enable them to build such orientations to the reading process.

While developing sound/letter correspondence is a very important component of learning to read, write and spell, developing phonic knowledge must happen in meaningful contexts rather than in isolation. Even very simple sentences like “*I wish you were here*” cannot be read or written using phonic knowledge alone. For instance, the vowels in “**you**”, “**were**” and “**here**” cannot be sounded out: there are too many options of letter combinations that make those sounds. Rather, as Adoniou (2014 p.2) points out, developing vocabulary and phonological knowledge in context is the only way to teach English because, ‘English is the most irregular of the alphabetic languages (Devonshire and Fluck 2010) with a phonological consistency of only 12 percent. By Year 5 (10 - 11 year-olds), children encounter more than 27 new words each day that cannot be decoded using phonological strategies (Mann and Singson 2003)’.

There are 26 letters which combine to make 44 sounds in English one of which is **schwa**. In Standard Australian English (SAE) this is the sound underlined and bolded in this example: “*My **brother** was just sitting on the sofa doing nothing.*” In short after you have walked past “*the cat sitting on the mat*”, sounding out will not be a strategy that helps you to read or write as everything gets a lot more “tricky”, very quickly. As Adoniou (2016 p.75) suggests: ‘Students who are underperforming in spelling are usually over relying on their phonological strategies; that is, when in doubt they sound out, and this inevitably leads them to the wrong spelling’.

Many commercial programmes (for example, *Hay Wingo*, *Open Court*, *Jolly Phonics*, *Ants in the Apple*, *Multilit*) advocate that intensive phonics must be taught first. Retailers claim that such programmes will solve problems for those children experiencing difficulty. Yet these programs have been available since the last century and have not been the answer for every child. Further, those children who are already reading when they arrive at school should not have to endure synthetic phonics programs – such experiences may well lead to their disengagement.

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 their origins. Old English continued to develop from the beginning into what is now known as English. Even today we can both hear and see the borrowings which we now consider to be English words. We have kept spellings which demonstrate the connection of the 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 also include syntax (structure/grammar) and orthography (visual information) as well as phonological information. If words and phrases are read or written in context a familiarity with the genre and vocabulary related to the topic will also support literacy development as will prior oral language development.

In most classrooms there is not enough time to model reading, read with and listen to children read let alone discuss their reading. For instance, in the average school day one and a half hours will be devoted to literacy which includes reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing. On average in a class of approximately 20 children a teacher would have less than five minutes available for each child during this timeframe. Teachers therefore need to use only the best and most effective strategies and resources 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 ‘decodable text’ below:

The Tot and the Pot

The tot is on the mat.
The tot can see a pot.
The tot is not on the mat.

Such controlled texts have no meaning beyond the sentence level. There is no point in re-coding such texts. Compare them to real texts which engage the reader from the outset. Consider for example *Pea pod lullaby* (Millard & King 2017) which begins: *I am the lullaby, you are the melody, sing with me.*

Most teachers of reading introduce all the cues children need to make sense of text. They use their repertoire of strategies (Louden et al. 2005) to meet the specific needs of the individual children in their class. Teachers need to differentiate within classes and across settings. A child who can recode but not 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 (EAL/D) who may be ‘barking at print’ and need oral language and vocabulary development as a priority, not phonological knowledge.

Reading is comprehension, making meaning. Engagement is key to developing young readers. When students come to school with little or no English there is much to be learnt from authentic texts which support the development of all reader roles and motivate students to **want to read**. Quality children’s literature provides the third voice in the

classroom (Saxby 1999) so that teachers can use the expertise of authors and illustrators to engage and inspire as well as develop vocabulary and knowledge about all aspects of text. Real stories matter!

Biography

Professor Robyn Ewing AM.

Robyn initially a primary teacher, Robyn 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 transforming learning and has a commitment to innovative teaching and learning at all levels of education.

Currently Robyn is Chair of the Academic Board, Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) and a board member of WestWords. Robyn 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 learning community. 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 on its External Advisory Board. Mark has also held the position of Instructional Leader – Mentor, through the Early Action for Success Program in NSW. He performed this role across five schools in South Western Sydney. Mark was also a Principal Education Officer in the Priority Action Schools Program.

Kathy Rushton, Prof Robyn Ewing are at the University of Sydney and Mark Diamond is Principal at Lansvale Public School.

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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 no phoneme. In 'cat' the grapheme <a> represents the shorter /ă/ (at least for most Australians). In *father* the grapheme <a> represents /ar/, in *was* it represents shorter /ɔ/, in *about* it's /ə/, and so on. It's interesting to note that in the 100 most frequently used words, grapheme <a> more commonly represents the shorter /ɔ/ phoneme than the shorter /ă/ taught in most traditional phonics programs. Traditional phonocentric programs confuse young learners, who learn that <a> is /ă/ but then they come across words such as *ball*, *small*, *Pa*, *want*, *fast* and so on. Clearly, morphemes (units of meaning) are required for phonemes and graphemes to express themselves.

Sometimes, we need even more than a word to establish the meaning required for phonics to work. For example, the phoneme represented by the grapheme <i> 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 /ī/ 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). Venezky (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.' The madness or perversity today stems from the phonocentric view behind the push for a synthetic phonics 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 (Devonshire 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.

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.

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-grapheme relationship.

We could use *Gorilla* (Anthony Browne) to teach the /g/-<g> relationship, or *Giraffes Can't Dance* (Giles & Parker-Rees) to teach the /j/-<g> relationship, or *Chicka Chick Boom Boom* (Martin & Archambault) to teach the /t/-<ch> relationship. We have checklists of all the phoneme-grapheme relationships in Standard Australian English and we systematically work through every one of them several times during the first year of school.

We teach the phoneme-grapheme relationships **explicitly** and **systematically** within **meaningful contexts**. However, there is no set order or sequence in which the relationships should be taught. If there were, all commercial phonics programs and materials would have the same sequence. Clearly, that's not the case. There can't be a one-size-fits-all program. Context determines when phoneme-grapheme relationships are taught, but there are also some useful guidelines about which relationships may be easier to learn than others (see Hornsby & Wilson 2011, Ch. 5).

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? 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 skilling and drilling – 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 that 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 and teachers are required to cater for individual differences. '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 meet individual student needs, and Mackay (2018) writes that 'educational leaders need to design personalised learning environments in which a broader set of measures that 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: English* defines decoding as 'A process of working out a meaning of words in a text. In decoding, readers draw on contextual, vocabulary, grammatical and phonic knowledge'. So decoding is accessing the meaning of words in a text. In contrast, recoding is going from the printed code to the oral code. Meaning may be accessed as a result of recoding, but the inclusion of nonsense words by those with a phonocentric view of our orthography demonstrates that they don't care so much about meaning-making, as long as a child can sound out.

Too bad if what they say doesn't make sense to them.

b) Misunderstanding of how sounds 'map' on to letters.

The alphabet has limitations regarding the representation of sounds in written form. The word 'aunt' is generally pronounced as /arnt/ (a:nt) by most Australians, but as /änt/ (ænt) by most Americans. I asked for a glass of water in an American restaurant but the waiter didn't know what I meant. My pronunciation has a clear /t/ sound in the second syllable and ends with a schwa (w ɔ : t ə). My American waiter pronounces the word with something close to a /d/ sound in the second syllable, and ends it with ə rather than ə. To me, his pronunciation sounded like /w ɔ : d ə r/. And in Southern States, *Do you want to pay?* sounds like, *Do you wanna pie?* 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 for the teachers observing me was that I pronounced 'cat' as /cät/ (c æ t) but the teachers and children pronounced it as /c a-y t/. As a result of the southern vowel shift, shorter vowels like /ä/ become gliding vowels or diphthongs. Single syllable words like 'cat' and 'pit' sound as if they might have two syllables, /ca-yt/ and /pee-it/. Since phonics is the relationship between the sounds of our language and the patterns of letters used to represent those sounds, we can't have one phonics program for all because (b ē k ö z OR b ē k ɔ : z) we pronounce words differently. The differences are not just among different countries, but among different regions and even within regions (because of our multicultural population of speakers).

Many common, high frequency words contain sounds that are not represented by letters at all. Consider the words *chew* and *blew* where <ew> represents the longer /ōō/ sound: /ch ōō/ and /b l ōō/. So how do we pronounce (sound out) *new* and *few*? Do we say /n ōō/ and /f ōō/? No. We say /n y ōō/ and /f y ōō/. So we often have sounds in words without letters to represent them.

c) Regular and Irregular Words are confused. Words such as *done*, *was*, *said*, *have* and *gone* are considered to be irregular words by those with a phonocentric view who don't understand the significant interaction between morphology, phonology and etymology. Consider 'word sums' related to the words *done* and *gone*:

do	go
do + ing → doing	go + ing → going
do + es → does	go + es → goes
do + ne → done	go + ne → gone

The basic morphemic units (do, go) and the

inflectional endings or bound morphemes (-ing, -es, -ne) remain intact. However, consider the changes in sound represented by the grapheme <o>:

do	o = /ōō/
go	o = /ō/
done	o = /ū/
gone	o = /ō/ (British)
gone	o = /ɔ/ (American)

These words are not 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 /ā/. It's there because, in English, no word can end with the letter 'v'. The only exceptions are abbreviations such as *gov* and *rev*. So the final e of *have* has no phonological function. Those who think that English orthography is all about letter-sound relationships, and who push synthetic phonics programs, need to re-think.

4. The Australian Curriculum: English

The English curriculum has some major strengths, two of them being that it is meaning-centred and literature-based. Certainly, literature has been elevated to its rightful place. We are required to use texts of 'personal, cultural, social and aesthetic value,' and texts that have 'enduring social and artistic value.' And further, 'texts are chosen because they are judged to have potential for enriching the lives of students, expanding the scope of their experience, and because they represent effective and interesting features of form and style' (<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/>, accessed 2-9-18). The tragic texts produced by synthetic phonics advocates have none of the textual characteristics required by the *Australian Curriculum: English*.

Consider a few content descriptions: ACELY1649 - *Read decodable and predictable texts ... and monitor meaning using concepts about print and emerging contextual, semantic, grammatical and phonic knowledge.* We need to remember that decodable text means text that can be read for meaning, not just for sounding out or recoding. ACELY 1679 - *Read an increasing range of different types of text, combining contextual, semantic, grammatical and phonic knowledge.*

The important point to note is that the English curriculum continually refers to **combining** contextual, semantic, grammatical and phonic knowledge. Nowhere in the English curriculum does it say *teach phonics in isolation or abandon meaning by using nonsense words*. Synthetic phonics programs actually require teachers to ignore the Australian Curriculum.

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 selective, non-representative research used 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 the 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 graphophonic relationships in many different contexts, but especially through their writing. A child's spellings (both temporary and conventional) give teachers absolute evidence of which graphophonic 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 Come and Go*. I recall *Words in Colour* and *ITA (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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Biography

Mr David Hornsby.

David has been a teacher, principal, university lecturer, author and literacy consultant for 52 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. www.davidhornsby.com.au

Teaching the teachers to teach phonics: Voices from teacher education

Professor Beryl Exley (National President ALEA) & Dr Lisbeth Kitson (President Meanjin Local Council ALEA), School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Queensland

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 School 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 2.1 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 guidance on 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 (<http://www.fivefromfive.org.au/phonics/>), an editor and teacher, incorrectly declaring that “Synthetic Phonics is the method for teaching reading by the Governments of the USA, Great Britain and Australia” (Glass 2018). This is not the situation in Australia, and has never been, even at the time of Glass’ statement.

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, The 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.

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

“Australian Curriculum: English” Language Strand	Contradictory Statements from Candace Glass’ video
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foundation - Recognise and name all upper and lower case letters (graphemes) and know the most common sound that each letter represents (ACELA1440) Year 2 - Understand that a sound can be represented by various letter combinations (ACELA1825) 	In synthetic phonics students learn the sounds that the letters make, not the names of the letters.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foundation - Understand how to use knowledge of letters and sounds including onset and rime to spell words (ACELA1438) Foundation - Segment sentences into individual words and orally blend and segment onset and rime in single syllable spoken words, and isolate, blend and manipulate phonemes in single syllable words (ACELA1819) Year 1 - Understand that a letter can represent more than one sound and that a syllable must contain a vowel sound (ACELA1459) Year 3 - Understand how to apply knowledge of letter-sound relationships, syllables, and blending and segmenting to fluently read and write multisyllabic words with more complex letter patterns (ACELA1826) 	Syllables and onset and rime, as used by other methods of phonics, are NOT used in synthetic phonics

(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 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 contextualised within rich and authentic texts (Dahl 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 connections (phonics) and word analysis skills; this should always occur within genuine literacy events and 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 this declaration, the Buckingham (2016, p.8) report mistakenly claimed that “ALEA actually endorses incidental phonics instruction – pointing out letter-sound correspondences on an ad-hoc basis in the process of connected text reading...”.

Pre-Service Teachers’ Confidence for Teaching Phonics

A recent national survey of 274 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 employing authorities, 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 (Adoniou 2017), and the United Kingdom (Clark 2017; Gardner 2017), not only unnecessary, but down right problematic.

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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.

GRANTS ON OFFER

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.

	Junior Secondary Category Year 7 to 9 students	Senior Secondary Category Year 10 to 12 students
1st prize winner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$400 cash prize \$600 for their school or community organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$400 cash prize One-week work placement within the ATO's Marketing & Communications team \$600 for their school or community organisation
2nd prize winner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$250 cash prize \$400 for their school or community organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$250 cash prize \$400 for their school or community organisation
3rd Prize winner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$150 cash prize \$300 for their school or community organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$150 cash prize \$300 for their school or community organisation
People's Choice Award	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$400 cash prize \$600 for their school or community organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$400 cash prize \$600 for their school or community organisation

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 Shuffle*, Vance Musgrove and Mikah 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](https://www.taxsuperandyou.gov.au/competition-about)



Why was the word wrong?

Katrina Kemp

Why was the word wrong? Because 'there is more to reading than just phonics' (UK Literacy Association n.d. p.1)

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 on Year 2, six on 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 may be 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 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 some 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 sss – o (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), BURT 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 as a precursor to 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 accommodations. 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 no-sense words which make up half the test of forty words.

Adoniou (2017, p.1) 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 needs in particular children for whom it is appropriate' (UKLA n.d., p. 5). 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 listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating (ACARA n.d.). At last we have a syllabus which recognises the

importance of rich literary experiences; of reading and writing that stems from quality children's literature and meaningful themes; of substantive communication as part of the meaning – making processes in reading and writing; which honours (and indeed mandates in the outcomes) creativity, imagination and critical thinking while also addressing grammatical and other technical aspects of our language.

This curriculum recognises something fundamental about the nexus between literacy and learning: that engagement and enjoyment when learning to read and write stems from meaning-based activities; meaning that connects personal and literary experiences; meaning that connects texts with other learning or other texts. Connections build comprehension and connections build the desire to read and continue learning, thus promoting growth in reading skills.

Focussing research, policy attention and teaching time on one narrow aspect of literacy in the search for a cure – all formula for reading instruction belies the potential richness of English teaching and learning formalised in our national curriculum; that potential richness being a point well – understood before the advent of the latest syllabus.

...phonics needs to be integrated into other parts of a literacy session and into learning in other learning areas. The more students are provided with scaffolded opportunities to practise their phonics learning in authentic reading and writing contexts, the more successful they will be in applying and transferring this knowledge (NSWDET 2009, p. 13).

Conclusion

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 data collection regimes appropriating learning time; 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 those 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 national test, some of whom will already be competent readers able to combine information sources in new 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.

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Biography

Katrina Kemp.

Katrina teaches children and pre-service teachers in Sydney. Following a Master of Education degree about the potential for creative and imaginative learning embodied in the current English syllabus, she is now working on a PhD about teacher beliefs and practices when teaching creative writing from that syllabus. She is the President of the Australian Literacy Educators Association, Sydney North.



Teaching letter sound relationships in context *is* systematic.

Dr Jessica Mantei, Dr Lisa Kervin 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 phonic 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 who utilise 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 sector.

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 Stahl (2011) argues 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 items or concepts to be learned are finite 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 readers 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 (EAP) 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 about letter sound relationships (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2017; EAP 2017; NRP 2000). Indeed, it could be said that no effective and informed teacher would use a single approach to teaching anything. Teachers respond to the needs, strengths, abilities and interests of their students in all areas of their teaching. They systematically and

explicitly teach concepts and skills within the contexts within which they are required. And they engage with extended professional learning to ensure their expertise in just that – knowing their content and how to teach it.

But what does it mean to be 'systematic'? Searches of key literacy and pedagogy texts revealed few definitions of what it means to be systematic either in delivery of content or pedagogical approaches. It appears an assumption exists in the literature that teachers know and agree on what it means to be 'systematic'. Fellowes and Oakley (2014 p. 228) define systematic phonics as 'a planned scope and sequence to the teaching of letter sound relationships'. Applying this definition, we found some scope and sequence documents to be simple and others complex. For example, some prescribe a particular order for teaching letters based on their prevalence in CVC words, while others take a richer approach, focusing on the knowledge required for reading and writing commonly occurring words (such as 'the', 'I', 'was' and so on). Can there be different ways to be 'systematic'? We think so.

The teachers who responded to our survey teach phonics in context. They didn't identify one golden approach nor adopt a single method of teaching phonics. Instead their responses harness what they know to be the most effective 'way in' for that student at that time, which will include a range of approaches to teaching letter sound relationships. As we looked across the responses, we could clearly identify five key principles that underpin how these teachers are systematic 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 2014). 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 of phonological and graphological processing skills K-6, 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 and 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 achieve 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, writing samples, word tests and Clay's (2002) Letter Identification test. These were considered valid, reliable and easily administered within classroom routines. They could be analysed 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 the scope and sequence. Small group episodes (also called guided reading or writing) allow teachers to further differentiate their teaching related to specific students' needs. Within these episodes, teachers adopt explicit phonics teaching approaches suitable for 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 graphophonic knowledge" across different tasks and texts. It is these independently created texts that offer new opportunities for assessment and analysis that informs future teaching content 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 Schleppegrell (2014 p. 616) 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 Bagert (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 dialogue that focuses on both the teaching and the learning.

Key to teachers' work is keeping accurate, detailed and current records about what their learners can and can't do as well as reflections on their teaching. These records guide teachers as they plan pedagogical interventions (classroom lessons)

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 (Agyris & 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. Afflerbach (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 (Ewing 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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Acknowledgements

Experienced and specialised educators and literacy leaders from across public, independent and religious sectors responded to our survey. We are grateful for the time these expert educators spent sharing their pedagogies for systematic teaching of phonics in context, and, as such, we wanted to include a public acknowledgement of their generosity. However, we were unsettled and saddened when most indicated a preference for remaining anonymous for fear of reprisals and criticism simply for holding a certain professional view. We have decided regretfully to keep all contributors' names confidential.

Biography

Dr Jessica Mantei.

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.

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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.

What Counts as Common Ground in the Current Debate About Literacy?

Dr Paul Gardner

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 main-stream, 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'Ancona (2017 p.42) 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 reader, capable of comprehending a variety of texts, as a pre-requisite to being an actively aware citizen. It follows then that the teaching and assessment of reading must be systematic to ensure no child falls through the 'safety-net'. I would also add that 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 phonic 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 phonic 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). Passing reference is made to small group work involving talk and directed activities related to texts (DARTs), as a means of encouraging comprehension.

Experienced teachers of English will recognise all of the above items in their repertoire of reading knowledge. They know that reading to, and with, children extensively from a wide range of quality texts fosters a love of reading, just as they know that children need varied opportunities to develop talk, as a precursor to learning to read. They know that a combination of explicit instruction; carefully planned group work; whole class teaching and individual study needs careful engineering to properly scaffold learning.

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 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. 2015). 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 'extensive 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 decontextualized 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 engaging students with written language that is vibrant and meaningful rather than stilted and prosaic, as is the case in most decodable books. We need to be investigating 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 armoury 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 and effective teaching. I therefore think we should be very wary of those who privilege a particular approach to 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 EAL/D provision. Whilst teaching in England, Paul had direct experience of the statutory implementation of synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check, which he recounts in a chapter of, 'Reading the Evidence: Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning, published in 2017.

His most recent publications include:

Gardner, P. 2018 NAPLAN: The Writing is on the Wall but Who is Actually Reading It? *English in Australia*. 53(1) 15-23

Gardner, P. 2018 "Writing and Writer Identity: the poor relation and the search for voice in 'personal literacy' *Literacy* 52(1) 11-19

Gardner, P. and Kuzich, S. 2018 Green Writing: the influence of natural spaces on primary students' poetic writing in the UK and Australia, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 48(4) 427-443

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

It's time for a Reading Renaissance

Professor Pamela Snow, La Trobe University

The recent Phonics Debate (Sydney, July 31)¹ 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 dissent, but from ongoing under-performance of Australian children, particularly those who start from behind and are doomed by a fatal mix of edu-nihilism and suboptimal instruction, 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 teachers, 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, a smattering of sight (irregular/high-frequency) words, with some incidental, light-touch phonics sprinkled lightly on top will suffice to transform all young children into proficient readers. This belief is patently incorrect.

Teachers *should* be the most expert professionals in schools about the teaching of reading, the early identification of children who are falling behind, and optimal ways to support such students to steer them back on track. Evidence, however, indicates that this is not the case, because their core knowledge of how 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 early reading instruction, such that it is possible to visit two adjacent Foundations ("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 were given free-reign to try out a few ideas of their own when landing Boeing 747s.

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

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snUNsYfrxjY>

to underpin everyday instruction. Instead, parents unwittingly buy a ticket in a lottery when their children start school. That the rest of us look the other way when this basic contract of trust is violated, is no longer excusable.

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, however, the tactic employed by speakers for the negative in the recent Phonics Debate. This begs the question, then, as to exactly what the role of early years teachers is. According to the negative team’s argument, this role is to witness (and perhaps take credit for) the benefits of socio-economic status and the work done by parents in the pre-school years. This not only displays a fundamental lack of 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 their oral language skills, 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 their children. Rather, it is that teachers need to engage in instructional practices that *accelerate* the progress of such children relative to their more advantaged peers. However, teachers who are ill-equipped to understand the science of learning, working memory, linguistics, orthographic mapping, and explicit teaching, have insufficient tools in their teaching toolkits to meet the needs of the full-range of learners in their classrooms. This must be experienced as a demoralising, self-perpetuating cycle for early years teachers who approach reading instruction in line with the beliefs of the negative team.

Oral language skills (e.g., phonological and phonemic awareness, vocabulary, syntactic complexity, conversational and narrative language skills, in receptive and expressive domains) are undoubtedly the essential underpinning to the transition to literacy in the early years. However, while oral language may be natural in an *evolutionary* sense, it is no “set and forget” function in a *developmental* sense. It has long been known that children’s early oral language exposure sits on a social gradient, such that children of higher socio-economic status (SES) parents are typically significantly advantaged over their lower-SES peers with respect to the nature and amount of language spoken to them in the pre-school years (Hart & Risley 1995; Hoff 2003; Locke et al. 2002; Roy & Chiat 2013; Spencer et al. 2012; Weisleder & Fernald 2013). Put simply, oral language skills are the engine, and effective instruction is the fuel in the tank. The two are inter-dependent and the quality of one interacts with, and influences the quality of

the other. The engine can be made more powerful, but not without the fuel of high quality instruction, as evidenced by the fact that once children become readers, their own reading is a significant source of new vocabulary (Nippold 2007).

In and of themselves, however, oral language skills will not see children across the bridge from talking and listening in the pre-school years, to reading, writing, and spelling in the early years of school. As reading, writing, and spelling are biologically *unnatural* skills (Gough & Hillinger 1980), children require specific instruction in order to master their intricacies and inconsistencies. As noted recently by Treiman (2018) the uncritical perpetuation by education academics of the idea that reading to children turns them into good readers has blindsided many in education to the merits of explicit teaching. Explicit teaching, in turn, seems to be held back in reserve for students requiring Tier 2 (remedial) support, rather than being a front-line Tier 1 (universal) strategy designed to promote success for all children. This is a folly.

Literacy builds on oral language, but differs from it in a number of key ways. Oral language occurs in real time and typically (though not invariably) in the context of interactions with others. It contains pauses, hesitations, and false starts, and is generally less complex syntactically than written language, where the reader is able to run their eyes back over sections of text as many times as are needed in order to confirm understanding. In written language, punctuation is used to augment meaning and clues about emotion. A question mark implies a rising intonation, a full-stop signifies falling intonation, and an exclamation mark alerts the reader to surprise or alarm. In oral language, all of these phenomena are conveyed by speakers through intonation and prosodic contour. Written text is not simply oral language written down, and so familiarity with the spoken modality will only go so far in assisting children to succeed in a skill set that does not come naturally.

In spite of some education academics’ protestations to the contrary, 1970s Whole Language thinking is not buried deep in the ITE archive in Australia. It is alive and well and sees the light of day, every day in classrooms around Australia. While it may have a re-badged name, such as *Balanced Literacy*, scratch the surface, and you will find the ancestral instructional practices that were promulgated fifty years ago by the likes of Goodman (1967) and more recently by Smith (2004), through their phileat of the proposition that reading is a *psycholinguistic* guessing game. Three-cueing (also called multi-cueing, or “Searchlights”), levelled, predictable readers, and a blatant disregard for the instructional role of decodable texts for beginning readers are all hallmarks of this in-perpetuity legacy.

Rather than an education knowledge-gap being the biggest hindrance to progress in early reading instruction, we must grapple with a wasteful

knowledge-translation crisis. Such waste of knowledge 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 US, Canada, and the UK typically have limited and superficial knowledge of the linguistic basis of learning to read, and of the specific linguistic constructs that underpin this (Binks-Cantrell et al. 2012; Fielding-Barnsley 2010; Fielding-Barnsley & Purdie 2005; Hammond 2015; Joshi et al. 2009; Loudon & Rohl 2006; Mahar & Richdale 2008; Moats 2009; Piasta et al. 2009; Podhajski 2009; Reid Lyon & Weiser 2009; Stark et al. 2015; Tetley & Jones 2014; Washburn et al. 2011; Washburn & Mulcahy, 2014). Even more worryingly, there is evidence of an inverse relationship between teacher language knowledge and self-confidence with respect to this knowledge (Stark et al. 2015). This severely undermines the extent to which the community can be confident in teachers as experts and professionals. The persisting strong-hold of Whole Language-based ideologies and practices in ITE and classrooms, means that early years teachers are stuck in a 1970s time-warp, while practitioners in fields such as speech pathology and educational and developmental psychology have moved on, using twenty-first century knowledge in their everyday work. Many teachers eventually have their own epiphany about gaps in their understanding and practices, entering into long, expensive journeys of discovery to claim their rightful body of knowledge. It should not need to be so.

Is it time that we faced the sobering reality that in the main in Australia, neither classroom teachers nor education academics are sufficiently knowledgeable about the cognitive science underpinning effective reading instruction? That neither classroom teachers nor education academics have an in-depth understanding of how language works “under the bonnet”, in the same way that a mechanic needs to understand the inner workings of a car’s engine in order to be able to tune, maintain, and repair it? In so doing, do we also need to accept that the conflation of oral language with the acquisition of its biologically unnatural cousin, reading, betrays a serious lack of knowledge about the cognitive processes underpinning both oral language *and* early reading?

Falling ATARs for entry into teaching courses in recent years mean that pre-service and recently graduated teachers are less likely than ever before to have an explicit grasp of how language works, and they will find it harder to learn this information while at university (particularly if it is only alluded to in the most general, if not dismissive manner). Through a steady but insidious process of mutual attraction and dependence, attenuated ITE curricula and less-prepared students have been drawn to each other, ever more compellingly. Like the proverbial boiling frog, this has not been obvious to those within, but is painfully evident to observers.

Unfortunately, but inevitably, calls for effective reading instruction are political – in the sense that under-done reading skills are one of the surest paths to social marginalisation and economic disadvantage across the lifespan. Youth justice centres, adult prisons, public housing waiting lists, and mental health and substance abuse services all include an over-representation of citizens who did not learn to read in the early years of school (Snow 2016). This is a social justice issue and if that makes it political, then so be it. Decades of presenting evidence and advocating for its translation into ITE and classroom practice have not resulted in change in education faculties or classrooms. Hence, like climate change and marriage equality, equitable access to evidence-based reading instruction needs to be debated and resolved in the political and public arena.

Flat earth thinking about reading instruction is not excusable in 2018. Sustained failure to adopt scientific knowledge and transmit it to its rightful custodians and beneficiaries is simply cosy up with pseudoscience. It’s time to move from the Reading Dark Ages to a Reading Renaissance.

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Biography

Professor Pamela Snow .

Pamela is a registered psychologist, having qualified originally in speech pathology. Her research has been funded by nationally competitive schemes such as the ARC Discovery Program, ARC Linkage Program, and the Criminology Research Council, and spans various aspects of risk in childhood and adolescence, in particular: the oral language skills of high-risk young people (youth offenders and those in the state care system), and the role of oral language competence as an academic and mental health protective factor in childhood and adolescence; applying evidence in the language-to-literacy transition in the early years of school; and, linguistic aspects of investigative interviewing with children / adolescents as witnesses, suspects, victims in criminal investigations.

Pamela has taught a wide range of undergraduate health professionals, and also has experience in postgraduate teacher education. She has research links with the education, welfare and justice sectors, and her research has been published in a wide range of international journals. She is frequently called upon to address education, health, welfare, and forensic audiences. Pamela has over 120 publications, comprising refereed papers, book chapters, monographs and research reports.

The phonics check, checks more than phonics

Samantha-Kaye Johnston, PhD Candidate, School of Psychology, Curtin University

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).

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.

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 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 (Adoniou 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.

The phonics check potentially checks if the current method of reading instruction is effective (Western Australia Department of Education 2018). That is, if the teacher has used an effective teaching method for reading, then this should be reflected in the child's decoding ability. In lieu of this benefit, critics of the phonics check argue that teachers already know what their students' weaknesses entail, and have already developed effective strategies to rectify the reading difficulties of students (Connor 2017). The fundamental question remains, if current reading instruction is effective, then why did the results of the 2018 phonics test trial in South Australia find that only 15% of students were correctly reading at least 32 or more out of the 40 words, compared with 81% of children of similar age in the United Kingdom (Buckingham & Wheldall 2018; Hordacre et al 2017; Ward 2017). Against this background, a phonics check would therefore be important to inform teachers

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, *War 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.

Smaller classes, modern technology (we had no electricity!), rich literacy environments are welcome but can never take the place of systematic, expository phonics if we want to avoid reading failure. Extra funding, by itself, isn't the answer either unless it is matched with pedagogical change.

First Executive Experiences

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 automaticity (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.

First Principalship

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 for 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 and
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 happens when we read. It is time for all teachers, administrators, managers and leaders to be aware that ideology, beliefs and practices need to be supported by scientific evidence.

In the Study

Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) can locate the brain areas involved in reading. The 'brain's letterbox' where letters and words are processed, falls in the lateral occipito-temporal sulcus, a crack that runs along the fusiform region of the left hemisphere (Dehaene 2009). This location in the brain is common to all readers including those who read Chinese, Japanese or those who read from right to left. When a word is seen by the eye, a signal

is sent from the optic nerve via the cingulate gyrus to the hot spot 'letterbox area' in the brain.

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 (Raij, 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.109).

These results, although still preliminary, are rich in implications for education. Above all, we now understand why the whole-language method deluded so many psychologists and teachers, even though it does not fit with the architecture of our visual brain. (Dehaene 2009 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.

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:

- 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 and
- b. all teachers are properly trained to teach phonics with confidence, knowing that their work is underpinned by recent research.

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Biography

Dr Lyle Whan AM, FACE.

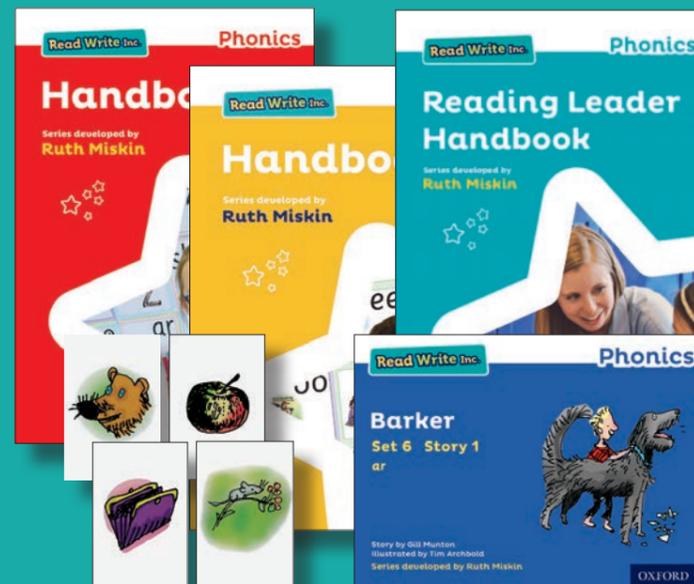
Lyle has six academic degrees and extensive experience in government and non government school systems, from pre-school to university teaching, and has been involved in classroom and teaching for fifty eight years. He is still active as a counsellor, diagnosing and treating reading difficulties in children.

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Phonics driving literacy gains in the Northern Territory

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Jocelyn Seamer

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 (EBPF) to grade each product on 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, from Darwin to Alice Springs. 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 and especially those experiencing reading 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 2005, 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 Progressive 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.

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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.

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