

# From the President

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

This problem is not unique to Australia.

Robert Sweet, President of the National Right to Read Foundation, in his 2013 Annual Letter, drew attention to the continuing failure in the United States to teach children to read, resulting in one third of the American public being unable to read proficiently. He argues that there is no excuse for this problem, that we have the tools and the knowledge to teach children to read, and that if taught correctly all children can learn to read. Some children may take longer than others to learn, and there are a few, a small fraction of the total population, who have some kind of neurological

dysfunction that prevents them from learning to read. The challenge is in waking up the public to the fact that there is a solution to this problem, and so to bring about change.

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

What can we in LDA do about this? As Robert Sweet points out, it is a David and Goliath struggle, where it is up to "ordinary, unknown folks like you and me" to challenge the educational establishment, and to overcome the influences of an entrenched ideology that has dominated reading instruction in Australia over the past 20 to 30 years.

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



maximum of four stars. Similarly, the Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in 2005 found that less than 10 per cent of time in compulsory units of primary teaching degrees was devoted to reading instruction, with less than 5 per cent of time in half of the courses surveyed. As Buckingham et al. note, subsequent surveys and inquiries have found that not much has changed, a view supported by recent teacher graduate Johanna O'Farrell in an article published in *The Age* in December last year, who, based on her own experiences, expressed the view that "teaching courses around the country have tossed aside any sort of rigour, routine and repetition when it comes to classroom learning, especially in the junior years".

In this context the announcement on 19 February 2014 of the establishment of a Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group to provide advice on how teacher education programmes could be improved to better prepare new teachers with the practical skills needed for the classroom is of particular significance. We hope that this will lead to the kind of change that is essential to bring about fundamental changes in ideology and practice relating to the teaching of reading in Australian schools.

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