

# BULLETIN

## From the President

**W**elcome everyone to LDA. In 2015 we will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of our organisation, which was initially started by Victorian remedial teachers as they were then known, with support from interested academics. Our *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties* has grown from its useful but humble beginnings to an international publication. The *Bulletin* continues to keep members in touch with events and ideas.

To launch our anniversary celebrations, LDA has invited Dr Louisa Moats to Australia next March when she will be presented with the Eminent Researcher Award, which is sponsored by Taylor and Francis, publishers of the Journal. Dr Moats, a renowned specialist in reading difficulties, will be providing professional learning for teachers, tutors and other professionals in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. This tour will be a tremendous opportunity for all those involved in teaching literacy to hear from a world-class researcher and practitioner. More details are on page 3, as well as on the LDA website at [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org). Further celebrations are planned during

the year.

Our official year began with quite a flourish. An LDA seminar made media news. James Chapman and Bill Tunmer, using New Zealand data, showed that Reading Recovery, which is used in so many schools in New Zealand, has had poor outcomes for the lowest achieving students because it does not focus on explicit phonic instruction to give children the best start in learning to read. This research evidence puts teachers employed within the Reading Recovery programs around Australia, and Consultants using the Reading Recovery approach in their clinics, in a difficult position. Media articles about this topic included one from Jewel Topsfield in *The Age* (3/9/14), Kevin Donnelly in *The Australian* (5/9/14) and a blog, *The Snow Report* (7/9/14), which we have had permission to print in this *Bulletin*. We can only hope the interest engendered will have some impact on future policy planning.

Over the last year, LDA has continued the development of its comprehensive website for professionals and anyone else interested in learning difficulties. One exciting new development has been the establishment of the Online Tutor Search facility. This is still in its infancy but we hope the consultancy network



will eventually expand, providing parents with greater access to LDA Consultants across Australia. Consultants are all experienced teachers who specialise in tutoring students with learning difficulties affecting literacy acquisition as well as other areas, such as maths, secondary English and study skills.

Please welcome your very hard-working members of Council, whose details are on page 6. We especially thank Molly de Lemos, outgoing President, for her hard work over the past year; we farewell Alison Madeleine and will miss her involvement with publications; and we welcome Sue Spencer, a Consultant from Victoria.

We are looking forward to a great celebratory year in 2015 and promoting the best ways possible to assist students with learning difficulties and their teachers.

*Jan Roberts*  
President

### LDA Mission Statement

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

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

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#### LDA Council 2014-15

##### OFFICE BEARERS

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

##### COUNCIL MEMBERS

Diane Barwood  
Professor Anne Castles  
Alison Clarke  
Pam Judge  
Dr Wendy Moore  
Dr Roslyn Neilson\*  
Sue Spencer\*  
Dr Nicole Todd  
Jo Whithear

*\*New members of Council, 2014-2015*

##### COMMITTEES AND CONVENORS

Executive/Management Group Convenor: Jan Roberts  
Administration Committee Convenor: Molly de Lemos  
Publications Committee Convenor: Wendy Moore  
Consultants' Committee Convenor: Diane Barwood  
Professional Development Committee Convenor: Lorraine Hammond

##### PUBLICATIONS

Executive Editor: Wendy Moore  
Journal Editor: Kevin Wheldall  
Bulletin Editor: Wendy Moore

##### WEBSITE

Website Editor: Pye Twaddell

##### LDA ONLINE TUTOR SEARCH SERVICE

See: [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org)

##### ADMINISTRATION

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**Find a tutor:**  
LDA Online Tutor Search Service  
[www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org)



# Dr Louisa Moats visits Australia in March 2015

Being inspired is important. It's great to listen to people who are engaging and energising and passionate and funny. Their words help us to clarify what we believe and want to achieve, and give us a burst of energy and the momentum that can sustain us through the frustrations and the hard slog of our daily work. But hearing about scientific research; about evidence; about the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions; about separating anecdote from valid findings: that is crucial. Being inspired is empty if we can't be assured that an idea is sound because it works, rather than because it seems like a good idea.

Hearing about the programs, approaches and resources developed and used in other places is important as well. Not only does it allow us to compare our own initiatives with those used elsewhere, it provides an opportunity to really think through what we are doing and why. We can question current approaches and explore new ones through a different lens. We can build on our current knowledge and expand our repertoires of practice. And we can have discussions with others that build professional networks and knowledge.

Learning Difficulties Australia is delighted to announce a speaking tour in celebration of our 50th anniversary that will allow us to

do all three of these things: to be inspired and entertained, to learn about important research, and to share knowledge about effective resources, programs and approaches. The Eminent Researcher Award for 2014 was awarded to Dr Louisa Moats, and we are delighted that she has accepted our invitation to undertake a national speaking tour in March 2015 to coincide with our 50th anniversary celebrations. We have partnered with SPELD NSW for the Sydney event, and DSF WA will be hosting the Perth event. We hope in this way to reach as many people as possible.

Louisa Moats has been a leading critic of the whole language approach to the teaching of reading. She has reviewed the essential characteristics of effective, scientifically-based reading programs and compared them with less effective programs based on whole language principles. This is very relevant when such approaches are still widely used in many countries, including Australia. Dr Moats points out that while 'balanced' programs make some attempt to incorporate phonics, they often fail to make use of the content and instructional methods proven to be most effective in teaching students to read. Several of her influential papers are available on the LDA website.

Dr Moats has also written extensively on the issue of teacher

preparation. Her important paper, *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science*, is also available on the LDA website. Her upcoming article, to be published in the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties* addresses the question of 'What Teachers Don't Know and Why They Aren't Learning It', and focuses on the knowledge base required to support students with reading difficulties. She stresses the importance of programs which improve teacher knowledge of basic reading psychology, language structure, and pedagogy. Her LETRS program, reviewed in this volume, is a practical resource designed to address this need.

Dr Moats' tour will be aimed at LDA and SPELD members, professionals who work with people with learning difficulties, teachers and school administrators, people with learning difficulties and their families as well as members of the wider educational community. It should be a very exciting and influential speaking tour, at a time when educational institutions and educational leaders are evaluating what they are providing to future generations of teachers in the area of literacy teaching.

Those who have heard Dr Moats speak will attest to her skill as an engaging and thought-provoking speaker, and would have been impressed by the amount of new and useful knowledge they gained from her presentations. We hope you will join us at one or more of the events that are planned. A provisional timetable of her tour is overleaf and registrations are now open.

In addition to these public workshops, Louisa will be given an opportunity to speak to students and staff at Macquarie University, the University of South Queensland and Edith Cowan University. Louisa will also meet with educational policymakers where possible.

## Dr Louisa Moats to receive LDA Eminent Researcher Award

The 2014 LDA Eminent Researcher Award, presented by the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties, has been awarded to Dr Louisa Moats, the distinguished United States expert in the field of learning and reading difficulties. Dr Moats is widely recognised as one of the world's leading advocates for the application of reading research in teacher preparation and classroom instruction. Her Award paper, *What Teachers Don't Know and Why They Aren't Learning It: Addressing the Need for Content and Pedagogy in Teacher Education*, will be published in the November issue of the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties* (Volume 19, No 2). Dr Moats will be presented with the Eminent Researcher Award during her visit to Melbourne in March 2015.

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## Provisional program of events

Dr Louisa Moats will present on the theoretical and practical knowledge needed to implement research-based literacy instruction. Her presentations will include insights into why learning to read is difficult, what factors are necessary for effective code-based instruction and how best to teach vocabulary and comprehension.

Topic	Location	
Language, learning and literacy: Improving practice, delivering results	Sydney: Friday 6 March hosted by LDA, partnered by SPELD, NSW and Sydney University Gold Coast: Monday 9 March Brisbane: Thursday 12 March Melbourne: Saturday 21 March	A full day of Professional Learning for teachers, specialist learning support teachers, reading specialists, school administrators and related professionals
Romance and Reality in the Treatment of Reading Disability (Dyslexia)	Melbourne: Monday 23 March	A half day of Professional Learning for teachers, specialist learning support teachers, reading specialists, school administrators and related professionals
Improving reading comprehension	Perth: Tuesday 17 March Hosted and organised by DSF, WA (see <a href="http://www.dsf.net.au">www.dsf.net.au</a> )	A full day of Professional Learning for teachers, specialist learning support teachers, reading specialists, school administrators and related professionals
Dyslexia – myths and successful intervention	Perth: Wednesday 18 March Hosted and organised by DSF, WA (see <a href="http://www.dsf.net.au">www.dsf.net.au</a> )	A half-day workshop aimed at parents

For further details of program content and how to register, visit [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org)  
Enquiries to [ldaquery@bigpond.net.au](mailto:ldaquery@bigpond.net.au)

## Recommended background reading

The following selected papers provide useful background reading for attendance at the Louisa Moats events:

**Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able To Do.** Moats, L.C. (1999) Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.

**Whole language lives on: The illusion of “balanced” reading instruction.** Moats, L.C. (2000). Washington, DC: Thomas Fordham Foundation.

**Improving the quality of teacher preparation in early literacy.** Moats, L.C. (2000). Washington, DC: National Governors Association

**Whole Language High Jinks.** Moats, L.C. (2007). Washington, DC: Thomas Fordham Foundation.

## About your Bulletin

Deadline for next issue of *LDA Bulletin*: 27 March 2015

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

Please send correspondence about the *Bulletin* or letters for publication to the Editor.

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

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

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# LDA Annual General Meeting and Awards Presentation

The Annual General Meeting for LDA was held on Saturday 6 September at the Treacy Conference Centre in Melbourne. We did not get the turnout we usually do at an AGM, but it was excellent to meet those members who did attend. The support of all our members is much appreciated.

LDA's outgoing president, Dr Molly de Lemos, provided a comprehensive report (available on the website) outlining the activities of the past year. She spoke of LDA's submissions to three government inquiries: Inquiry into speech, language and communication disorders and speech pathology services, Review of the National Curriculum, and the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group. These submissions reflect LDA's desire to be a part of the policy debate taking place across a range of fields affecting those teaching students with learning difficulties.

Molly acknowledged the tremendous work of Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall as editor of both the *Journal* and *Bulletin* over the past year, as well as his long-term involvement in Publications. Both the *Journal* and *Bulletin* provide our members with insightful, current and high-quality information to inform their practice. These publications are an essential part of the work of LDA and many people working in the field have expressed their appreciation for the access to high-quality research and commentary that this service provides. Molly informed members that Kevin has stepped down from the editorial team of the *Bulletin* but will continue to edit the *Journal*. Molly also thanked Alison Madelaine for her involvement on the Publication Committee as

joint editor with Kevin. Alison has resigned from Council after seven years' service for which LDA has been extremely grateful.

Professional Development has also been a focus over the year. Dr Lorraine Hammond and her colleague, Brooke Wardana, presented at a workshop on the Gold Coast earlier in the year. Eighty teachers benefited from their joint expertise on the best way to teach early literacy. Council member and speech pathologist, Alison Clarke, ran a very well supported workshop in Melbourne on spelling. The year culminated with two very successful and thought-provoking symposiums on the analysis of Reading Recovery data in NZ, raising questions of the efficacy of Reading Recovery for the lowest performing students. Professor James Chapman and Professor Bill Tunmer presented their findings, generating much discussion. The Melbourne event also enjoyed the input of John Hattie, who provided some of his own reflections on the topic.

Pye Twaddell, Diane Barwood and Molly de Lemos have been working on the development of the Online Tutor Search program to replace the current LDA Referral Service. This is now close to completion. The automation of several of LDA functions has the capacity to reduce the workload for the organisation. Pye's work on the website functionality is greatly appreciated.

Pye Twaddell, LDA treasurer, presented the LDA audited financial statements for the year ending June 30 2014 for approval. These are available upon request.

Following the business of the AGM, the recipients of the LDA Awards were announced. Dr Louisa Moats was awarded the Eminent Researcher Award

for 2014, presented by Taylor and Francis, publishers of the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*. Mandy Nayton, Executive Office of DSF, WA was awarded the Mona Tobias Award, and Dr Wendy Moore was awarded the LDA Tertiary Student Award. Both Louisa and Mandy will receive their Award next year. Wendy received her Award at the AGM and presented on her thesis findings, which focused on the development of vocabulary for young children through explicit instruction using storybooks.

Council member, Professor Anne Castles, concluded the afternoon with a presentation on the diagnosis of reading difficulties, highlighting the issues around identification of reading problems and the use of several tests developed at the Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders.

As is the usual practice, the AGM was preceded by a Council meeting where the incoming council members for 2014-15 were able to meet face to face to begin to plan for the year ahead. This year we welcome one new member to Council, Sue Spencer. We also belatedly welcome Roslyn Neilson to Council, who stepped in earlier in the year to replace Mary Delahunty.

The 2014/2015 Council is looking forward to continuing the work of LDA in 2015, especially planning the visit of Louisa Moats. We hope that all members of LDA will be able to attend one of the planned events. Thank you to our members for their support and commitment to the work of LDA.

*Alison McMurtrie*  
*Honorary Secretary, LDA*

# LDA Council 2014/2015

**L**DA will enjoy continuity for 2014/15 as there is only one new member joining Council. Sue Spencer, an LDA Consultant, will be replacing Alison Madelaine, who has resigned after seven years of service. A belated welcome to Roslyn Neilson who joined the 2013/14 Council mid-year to replace Mary Delahunty. LDA is extremely fortunate to have the expertise of both Ros and Sue for the year ahead.

Thanks are extended to Alison Madelaine for her valuable contribution to LDA in her role as convenor of the Publications Committee. A vote of thanks is also extended to Molly de Lemos for the enormous amount of work that she has put into LDA over the past year in her role as president. LDA is immensely grateful for this dedication and greatly benefitted from her extensive knowledge of the organisation. We welcome Jan Roberts to the position of president.

The changes to the LDA Constitution accepted at the AGM last year have started to come into effect. This means that the position of President Elect has been replaced by the position of Vice President. All office bearers have been nominated for one year.

See page 2 for listing of members of the 2014/2015 LDA Council.

## Profiles of new Council members

**Dr Roslyn Neilson, NSW**  
*PhD (Psychology), University of Wollongong; MSc Applied (Human Communication Disorders), McGill University, Montreal; BA Hons (Psychology and English), University of Melbourne.*  
Email: [roslyn@roslynneilson.com.au](mailto:roslyn@roslynneilson.com.au)

Dr Roslyn Neilson joined LDA Council in March 2014, to fill the casual vacancy following Mary Delahunty's resignation from Council. Ros Neilson has worked for many years as a speech pathologist in NSW, specialising in language and literacy. Her professional experience has included working with individual clients and their families and

teachers, as well as working with whole classes and small groups within schools. Her research interest in reading difficulties grew out of her clinical experience with the problem that children who present with early oral language and speech difficulties often develop difficulties with decoding, spelling and/or reading comprehension at school age. As part of her PhD research she produced a phonological awareness test, the *SPAT-R*, which is now in wide use throughout Australia. During her years working as a speech pathologist, she has continued to develop, research and publish further materials for assessing and supporting phonological and phonemic awareness. Ros has provided frequent guest lectures in several venues, including school staff development days around Australia, in the Speech Pathology Departments of Macquarie and Sydney University, and in the Masters of Special Education and Bachelor of Education courses at Wollongong University. In 2012, as Speech Pathology Australia's national speaking tour presenter, she ran two-day workshops for speech pathologists in all the capital cities, entitled 'Learning to Read' and 'Reading to Learn'. She served as a Councillor on the Board of Speech Pathology Australia from 2010 to 2012, and has contributed to working papers on literacy for the peak body. One of her current research interests involves adapting phonemic awareness assessment and evaluating early literacy intervention within remote Indigenous communities. Ros hopes that working with LDA will allow her to contribute to the association's efforts to advocate for and support children with learning difficulties, their teachers and tutors, and their families.



**Susan Spencer, Victoria**  
*MEd (Melb), PGSE Special Ed (Melb), Grad Dip TESOL, (Uni SA) RSA Dip TESL, (UK) TTC (Primary, UK)*  
Email: [spencereducation@tpg.com.au](mailto:spencereducation@tpg.com.au)

Sue Spencer was elected to the 2014/2015 Council in September 2014. Sue has been a member of LDA and an LDA Consultant over the past six years. She initially developed an interest in language development after teaching experiences in schools with a high proportion of children with English as a Second Language. She has taught across the ages in primary/middle schools in the UK, Bahrain, Adelaide and Melbourne, both as a classroom teacher and an ESL teacher. Over the past nine years, Sue has worked in the field of learning difficulties as a Consultant teacher to primary, secondary, and sometimes adults, who struggle with language and literacy and basic maths. It has been an interesting journey for Sue of upskilling, gaining new knowledge of pedagogies and working with wonderful students and their parents. Sue believes in continuous professional development so that she can deliver the best programs for her students, which are evidenced based, and give her students the greatest chance to succeed. Sue has attended many of the quality PD sessions LDA has presented. For the past four years, Sue has run a network group for other Consultant teachers of LDA, so as to break down the isolation of working in private practice, share knowledge and offer professional support.

Profiles of all Council members can be found on the LDA website: [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org).

# LDA Awards for 2014

The 2014 LDA Eminent Researcher Award, presented by the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, has been awarded to Dr Louisa Moats, while the recipient of the LDA Mona Tobias Award for 2014 is Mandy Nayton, and the recipient of the LDA Tertiary Student Award is Dr Wendy Moore. There were no Awards this year in the Bruce Wicking or in the Early Career Researcher Award categories.

## 2014 Eminent Researcher Award

### Dr Louisa Moats

*Ed. D. (Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 1982), MA (Peabody College of Vanderbilt, 1969), BA (Wellesley College, 1966)*

The very deserving recipient of the Eminent Researcher Award for 2014 is Dr Louisa Moats. Throughout her highly influential career to date, Dr Louisa Moats has specialised in the evaluation of language, reading, spelling, writing, and related learning problems in individuals of all ages. Dr Moats is currently the vice-president of the International Dyslexia Association and a member of the Professional Advisory Board of the Association of Academic Language Therapists. She serves as editor of influential publications including *The Annals of Dyslexia and Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Dr Moats' awards include the prestigious Samuel T. and June L. Orton Award from the International Dyslexia Association, for outstanding contributions to the field.

Dr Moats has been a teacher, psychologist, researcher, and graduate school faculty member. She has written numerous influential journal articles, policy papers and books, each with a focus on the key areas of literacy, language, and teacher training. Her career in education began after earning her Master's degree at Peabody College of Vanderbilt. She began by teaching students with learning difficulties, but later, realising the need for further knowledge in this area, earned a doctorate in Reading and Human Development from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Dr Moats spent the next 15 years as a licensed psychologist, specialising in

evaluation and consultation of those who experienced reading, writing, and language difficulties. She spent one year as resident expert for the California Reading Initiative; four years as site director of the NICHD Early Interventions Project in Washington, DC; and 10 years as research advisor and consultant with Sopris Learning. She has been highly influential in supporting educational innovations in the United States which have utilised evidence-based instructional strategies. For example, she has contributed to the development of Common Core State Standards in United States schools, and has served as lead consultant on professional development to the US Department of Education's Reading First initiative. She was responsible for the design, writing and implementation of professional development for all California teachers of reading.

In addition to the LETRS professional development series (reviewed in this issue of the *Bulletin*), Dr Moats' books include *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers* (Brookes Publishing) as well as *Spelling: Development, Disability, and Instruction* (Pro-Ed); the useful *Straight Talk About Reading* (with Susan Hall, Contemporary Books), and also *Basic Facts about Dyslexia*.

Her national tour of Australia in March 2015, which is planned to coincide with LDA's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, will be welcomed by community advocates, teachers, psychologists, and other professionals who are aware of the impact of her work in advancing the cause of effective instruction for literacy and learning difficulties. It will also be welcomed by those interested in hearing more about Dr Moats' research, and the policy implementation initiatives she has driven in the areas of curriculum development and teacher education. Louisa will receive her award during her visit to Melbourne.

## LDA Mona Tobias Award

### Mandy Nayton

*M. Ed. Psych (1995), Grad. Dip. Ed. (Primary) (1990), B. Psych. (1980)*

Mandy has received the Mona

Tobias Award in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the field of learning difficulties in Australia. Mandy has been a powerful and long-standing advocate for those with learning difficulties and disabilities. Mandy is an Adjunct Research Fellow at Curtin University's School of Psychology and Speech Pathology. She is an educational and developmental psychologist and qualified teacher, and has worked in a range of schools and in non-government welfare agencies where she has supported students with academic, social and developmental needs. Mandy emphasises the need to educate parents, teachers, and other professionals about specific learning difficulties and learning disabilities.

As executive officer of the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation in Western Australia (DSF Literacy and Clinical Services), and president of AUSPELD (the Australian Federation of SPELD Associations), she has worked tirelessly to raise awareness about how students with learning difficulties and disabilities can best be supported in their own environments without reducing learning opportunities. As executive officer of the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation, Mandy oversees the management of professionals involved in assessment and intervention services for children and adults. Mandy also undertakes extensive client support and advocacy work, development of educational resources, collaborative research, and design and delivery of professional learning programs. Mandy runs highly regarded workshops on vocabulary development, learning difficulties and literacy acquisition for both schools and universities. As president of AUSPELD, Mandy has contributed to submissions to government inquiries, and was appointed as a member of the Dyslexia Working Party and the Schools' Disability Advisory Council.

Mandy has also directly contributed to the work of Learning Difficulties Australia, making valuable contributions through workshop presentations and contributing articles to the *Bulletin*. Her response to the

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recent debate about the use of the term dyslexia (written in collaboration with Kevin Wheldall and Ann Castles) can be found in the previous edition of the *Bulletin*. Mandy has recently been busy visiting schools in the United Kingdom, observing effective literacy practices and holding discussions about issues related to learning difficulties and literacy instruction.

### LDA Tertiary Student Award

#### Dr Wendy Moore

*PhD, M. Ed., Grad. Dip. Psych., Grad. Cert. Learn. Diff., Grad. Dip. Ed.*

Wendy Moore was presented with the Tertiary Student Award at the AGM. Her excellent thesis on vocabulary instruction has practical implications for all teachers of young children.

Wendy has worked as a teacher for 19 years, and has spent 12 of those years working specifically with students with learning difficulties and literacy and numeracy problems. Her early undergraduate studies

focused on language acquisition and linguistics, and this background has provided the backdrop for an interest in the relationship between language development, literacy acquisition, and learning difficulties, which she has pursued throughout her career.

Wendy has worked with students from preschool through to Year 12 in both rural and metropolitan schools. She has taught in mainstream classrooms as well as at a specialised Language Development Centre for children with specific language impairments. She has been a classroom teacher, a learning support coordinator, and a literacy specialist teacher. She holds a substantive position as a Level 3 classroom teacher, but is currently working as a deputy principal in a District High School. Wendy has a degree in Philosophy, a Graduate Certificate in Learning Difficulties, a Graduate Diploma in Psychology, and has just completed her PhD in Education. The paper developed from her PhD research was the basis of the

Tertiary Student Award for LDA for 2014.

Wendy is interested in research that helps to improve outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds and for students with language and literacy learning difficulties. She is determined to ensure that research into language and literacy acquisition is translated into effective classroom practice. She aims to drive school innovations that ensure that literacy impairments are avoided for most students, and that students with learning difficulties and disabilities are supported adequately and as a matter of course in all schools across Australia. Recently, Wendy's research into the relationship between oral language and literacy acquisition has focused on the crucial area of vocabulary. The research she completed for her PhD, which will be reported in part in the next volume of the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, focused on effective classroom practices for improving vocabulary learning.

## Call for nominations for the LDA General Awards 2015

Members of LDA are invited to submit nominations for the 2015 Mona Tobias and Bruce Wicking Awards. Applications are also called for the 2015 LDA Tertiary Student Award. The closing date for nominations and applications is Friday 12 June 2015. These Awards are open to both members and non-members of LDA, but nominators must be current members of LDA. LDA reserves the right not to confer an Award in any of these categories if no suitable nomination is received. Please note that nominators may not nominate the same person for more than one Award.

Further information regarding the Awards and nomination procedures are provided on the LDA website.

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

### The Mona Tobias Award

The Mona Tobias Award is presented in recognition of an outstanding contribution to the field of learning difficulties in Australia. This

contribution may be in the area of leadership, research, practice or teacher and community education.

Emily Mona Tobias, B.E.M., died in 1980 at the age of 74 years. She was acknowledged for her exceptional skills as a teacher and her devotion to children with learning difficulties. Mona took early retirement from the Victorian Education Department to study learning disabilities under Sam Clements at the University of Arkansas. This led to her second career where she influenced many teachers and parents of students with learning difficulties. The Mona Tobias Award commemorates the pioneering work of Mona Tobias in helping children and adults with learning difficulties.

### The Bruce Wicking Award

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

with learning difficulties. The funds for the establishment of this award were provided through the generosity of the Wicking family and their friends to commemorate the life and work of Bruce Wicking.

### The Tertiary Student Award

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

### Announcement and Presentation of Awards

Recipients of the 2015 Awards will be announced in August 2015. Awards are normally presented at the LDA Annual General Meeting, details of which will be confirmed at a later date. Travel and accommodation expenses to attend the ceremony will be met by LDA.

# Systematic, not “balanced”, instruction

Louisa Moats

The accomplished researcher Susan Brady, in reviewing evidence regarding the merits of phonics instruction since the National Reading Panel (NRP), concluded that systematic, explicit, synthetic approaches are most strongly supported by past and current research, even though the NRP stopped short of delineating what kind of phonics would work best for novice or struggling readers (Brady, 2011). Explicit, systematic, code-based instruction is more effective with novice or poorly skilled readers than implicit, incidental, less structured methods (Archer & Hughes, 2011;

Chapman & Tunmer, 2011; Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004; Hattie, 2011; Rosenshine, 2012). Nevertheless, confusion reigns regarding the differences among these approaches. Further, teachers naturally prefer literature-based, non-systematic, student-centered, implicit teaching of literacy (e.g., Cunningham, 2009) unless they, too, are taught explicitly about what to do with whom, when, how, and why. This article illustrates the crucial differences in approaches and offers concluding thoughts about strengthening teacher education.

## Explicit phonics instruction

Explicit means fully and clearly defined. Information is put out in the open, explicated and demystified.



Continued next page >

Example of explicit instruction	Example of non-explicit instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Today we will study a new way to spell words that have a long vowel sound. This pattern is called the long vowel, silent e pattern, or VCe.”</li> <li>• “When a long vowel sound is spelled with one vowel letter, a single consonant, and an e at the end it is called long-vowel, silent e or VCe.”</li> <li>• “Let’s count the number of sounds in the word <i>late</i>. You finger stretch and say the sounds while I move a counter into each box: /l/ /ā/ /t/. ” Teacher moves counters into 3 boxes as students say each sound.</li> <li>• Teacher writes the word on the board. “Look at the word <i>late</i>. How many letters are there? (4) How many sound boxes? (3)”</li> <li>• “Since there are four letters and only three sounds, one letter is silent. It’s the final e. Let’s write the letters. What’s the first sound? (/l/) What letter spells /l/? (l)”</li> <li>• “What’s the second sound? (/ā/) Let’s write a in the second box.”</li> <li>• “What’s the last sound? (/t/). What letter spells /t/? (t)”</li> <li>• “There is a silent e at the end of the word. Does it go in a separate box? (no) Why not? (Because it doesn’t represent a sound.) We write a small e in the bottom corner of the box with the letter t.”</li> <li>• “The e is silent but it has an important job. It works with the a to spell the long a sound.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While chorally reading a passage aloud students stop at the word <i>late</i> and look up at the teacher for help.</li> <li>• The teacher asks the students to sound it out. They still struggle. “What’s the first sound?” The students say /l/.</li> <li>• “/l/ is correct. So what’s the word?”</li> <li>• Students misread the word <i>late</i> as <i>lat</i> with a short a sound.</li> <li>• “Would the word <i>lat</i> make sense in this sentence? No, this is about a person who is behind schedule and is not going to arrive on time.”</li> <li>• The teacher supplies the word. “The word is <i>late</i>.”</li> <li>• The teacher writes the following list of words on the board: late, fate, Kate, mate, Nate.</li> <li>• “Look at all these words. See how they look alike. They are all part of a word family. Now that you know how to read <i>late</i> you can also read all these other words.”</li> </ul>

Students don't guess or intuit what they are supposed to learn. The teacher states what is expected and uses lesson routines to support and ensure learning. Explicit instruction follows an "I do, we do, you do" sequence, or "model, lead, practice, practice, practice" until the student has mastered the skill or concept.

Non-explicit instruction, in contrast, asks students to infer or deduce concepts from context, exposure to examples, or prior experience. Exposure to phonics concepts or skills may be haphazard or incidental, or may involve insufficient practice to support automatic application of the skill. For instance, a popular "balanced literacy" activity asks students to work with the letters of an appealing word, such as "rabbit". The teacher dictates words such as bar, barb, bait, bib, and Brit that can be constructed from the letters in rabbit. If students have not been explicitly taught each pattern, which in this example include an r-controlled vowel (ar), a vowel team (ai), a short vowel (i), and a consonant blend (br), they will guess at the dictated words' letter sequences without conscious understanding of spelling correspondences. *Making Words* is fun for students who already can read and spell well; it is insufficient for students mystified by the sound-symbol correspondence system.

The table<sup>1</sup> (on page 9) contrasts the dialogue that might occur with explicit and non-explicit teaching of the long a, silent e (or VCe) phonics pattern.

During text reading, if instruction is implicit, students typically are asked to decode words in context on the basis of the meaning of the sentence, passage, or accompanying illustrations. For example, in a context-based, non-explicit approach, students are coached to recognise words using these steps:

1. Think about what would make sense here.
2. Skip the word and read the whole sentence.
3. Look at the pictures for help.
4. Look at the first letter; what sound?
5. Sound out the whole word.

In contrast, an explicit word recognition routine, for use while reading text, follows these steps:

1. Look carefully at the whole word.  
[Name the letters, if necessary.]
2. Sound it out, left to right.
3. Check it; does the word make sense here?

The first approach conveys to the student that he or she need not know exactly how the correspondences work and that guessing is a productive way of approaching unknown words. The second approach conveys that the student has – or should have – learned the major correspondences that can be relied upon to recover a reasonable pronunciation from the print.

### Systematic instruction of phonics

The term "systematic" describes two important characteristics of instruction: a) teaching that is carried out using step-by-step procedures or routines; and b) teaching of elements in relation to their place within a coherent knowledge structure – in this case, the system of correspondence between speech and print (Moats, 2010).

*Step-by-step teaching routines and consistent lesson formats.* Pre-established routines that occur in a general sequence are the procedural building blocks of each lesson. Routines help both the students and the teacher: students anticipate what is coming in a lesson, and thereby focus on the content of the lesson, and the teacher, in turn, attends more easily to student responses and adjusts the pacing accordingly. Lessons with established routines are likely to cover all steps necessary to facilitate learning and retention of information.

Systems of explicit teaching often incorporate consistent signals, cues, or prompts that elicit student responses. They may include routines for introducing a new concept, such as the following:

- Identify the target phoneme in spoken words.
- Pronounce and describe articulatory features of the phoneme, with mirrors.
- Write letter(s) that are used to represent the phoneme.
- Learn a mnemonic or keyword for the sound-symbol correspondence.

- Decode and spell words with the correspondence.
- Use the words in passage reading and writing.

*Having to do with a system.* The written code of English is a system in which each part (grapheme, grapheme sequence, syllable, or morpheme) can be categorised, named, explained, and/or understood in relation to a conceptual whole. As with any system, elements can be distinguished from one another, but each part has a place within the knowledge structure. The whole of English orthography is organized by several principles of representation: individual phoneme-grapheme correspondences, allowable letter sequences, morphemes or meaningful parts, and the language from which a word originally entered English. Any word can be explained from one or more angles and learned within this larger conceptual framework.

Suppose we were to teach a lesson on the suffix "-ful". What would be a systematic approach to teaching this word part? Any and all of the following concepts could give a student sufficient insight to support memory for the meaning and spelling of this suffix:

- -ful is a suffix morpheme with consistent meaning and spelling.
- -ful is a bound morpheme that marks a word as an adjective, although in some cases it can form a noun denoting quantity (as in spoonful).
- It is related in meaning to the Anglo-Saxon word "full" that does stand alone.
- It is in the category of suffixes that begin with a consonant.
- Because it begins with a consonant, it will not change the spelling of words to which it is added (useful, armful, spoonful, hateful, masterful).

Within the whole system of printed English, -ful is one adjective suffix among many that also need to be taught. Adjectives are words with specific grammatical roles and suffixation is one way of making an adjective. A suffix is one of a class of affixes, probably taught after prefixes and before roots. Affixes are in the

class of morphemes. Morphology is one system within language. And so we go.

*What are the characteristics of non-systematic programs?* Often termed “literature-based,” “meaning-based,” or “top-down,” these programs emphasise book reading (or being read to), written and oral responses to reading, and story writing activities. Phonics and spelling instruction may be embedded in these activities, but letter-sound relationships are taught either in the order of the alphabet or randomly, in favourite words appearing in texts. Any lessons in the alphabetic code that do take place are separate from text reading.

For example, there might be a lesson on “short o” (as in *hot*), followed by reading in a leveled book using the words “from”, “of”, “son”, and “off” – none of which have the sound of /ɒ/ (in North American accents). Some programs emphasise sight-word memorisation and begin by teaching children from 50 to 100 words as wholes, on flash cards, as if reading were a matter of visual imprinting. Only after learning to read these words do children receive instruction in the alphabetic principle. Some presumably “balanced” programs add a phonics workbook, but instruction in decoding remains incomplete, incidental, and irrelevant to the rest of the reading lesson. The student gains no fundamental grasp of how the system of representation works.

To summarise, *non-systematic* programs – which may be far more common than truly systematic programs:

- Teach concepts “as they come up” – during reading and writing.
- Do not teach the entire system of sound-symbol correspondences or other aspects of word structure in relation to a complete framework, and also do not explain how sentences, paragraph organisation and text organisation can be understood within language systems.
- Do not follow established teaching routines in each lesson that children and teachers can come to rely on.
- Do not categorise concepts or place them within language systems. For

example, igh may be taught in a family of “ight” rhyming words, but students are not taught that it is a low frequency, Old English, three-letter grapheme that is one of at least six spellings for the long vowel /i/.

- Do not provide practice materials, such as decodable books, that offer children the opportunity to apply what they are learning about letter-sound relationships. The reading materials these programs do provide for children are selected according to other criteria, such as their interest to children or their literary value.

The system of English orthography is complex. Its apparent irregularities and multi-layered representations of spoken language explain to some extent why many students struggle. Given its challenges, English then deserves more logical, comprehensive, informed, systematic teaching than other more transparent languages. Most of all, we know that instructional emphasis on the system and how it works is a key factor in how well students learn (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Brady, 2011; Calhoun & Petscher, 2013).

### Is there a role for discovery learning?

Sometimes explicit instruction is caricatured as rote and deadly. On the contrary, it can and should be interesting, engaging, and even entertaining. Alternating formats and introducing novelty, giving students manipulative letter tiles or words on cards, and involving the whole body in word building, for example, will maximise student attention. Some phonics concepts lend themselves to *inductive* teaching, although if well-designed, an inductive or “discovery” activity is also teacher-directed.

English has many letter patterns and rule-based spelling conventions that are determined by the position of a grapheme or a phoneme in a word. For example, the word “catch” uses “tch” to spell /ch/, but “ranch” uses ch. This regular, alternating spelling pattern depends on what immediately precedes the phoneme /ch/. When students are to learn that “tch” is used for /ch/ right after a short vowel, the

*Are teachers generally prepared to teach phonics – or indeed, any aspects of language structure – explicitly and systematically?*

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teacher might present lists of words with “tch” (latch, fetch, botch, pitch) and without “tch” (mulch, birch, bench), ask students to sort them by the spelling for /ch/. Students are then to discover and state what is different about the spellings for /ch/.<sup>2</sup> The teacher is actively involved in directing students to the target stimulus and giving immediate feedback, followed by practice with words using the spelling pattern.

Discovery lessons tend to take more time and to be much less efficient than explicit, systematic, direct instruction, especially with students who have trouble “getting” what they are supposed to pay attention to. On the other hand, students usually enjoy the hands-on activity of sorting words to find the patterns at work. In so doing, they have attended to the details in print and are more likely to remember specific words used in the lesson. In general, students tend to remember what they understand and have thought about, and well-designed inductive learning activities can be effective in promoting print awareness.

### A final word about teacher training

Explicit, systematic phonics instruction is preferable to implicit, incidental instruction. Indeed, the less well a student reads, the more the student depends on the teacher’s ability to reveal order and sense in a print system that often seems random and incomprehensible. Therefore, it is given that explicit, systematic instruction requires a knowledgeable teacher who is able to explain concepts, choose examples, give corrective feedback, and provide extended practice. Moreover, the teacher must follow a scope and sequence of concepts, from simple to complex, and from common to unusual, as necessary. Otherwise, randomness characterises instruction and the alphabetic system is never learned or understood.

Are teachers generally prepared to teach phonics – or indeed, any aspects of language structure – explicitly and systematically? The answer, unfortunately, is that those teachers who have strong preparation are a privileged minority (Moats, in press).

There are many reasons why this is the case, including the difficulty of the subject matter, lack of opportunity to learn it in preparation or continuing education, lack of instructional materials and textbooks with accurate information, and general misconceptions about how children learn to read and why it is difficult for so many.

What can be done? Several courses of action are already showing promise in the USA that might be replicated in Australia. First, university professors who collaborate on updating and upgrading the substance of their courses have been shown to produce more effective teachers. The Texas Higher Education Collaborative provides a model for other states and countries to emulate. Second, the International Dyslexia Association ([www.interdys.org](http://www.interdys.org)) has established *Knowledge and Practice Standards* to guide teacher certification and accreditation of teacher training programs. A certification exam aligned with the IDA standards is under development and will serve as an international marker of basic disciplinary knowledge in literacy instruction. Third, an independent advocacy group, the National Council on Teacher Quality, has succeeded in rating teacher education programs and disseminating the results of those ratings. While they are not flattering to many institutions, the rankings are raising public awareness of the importance of disciplinary knowledge, the challenge of preparing strong teachers, and how far we have to go before we know that there is a “highly qualified” teacher in every classroom.

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### Endnotes

1. This table also appeared in L.C. Moats and S. L. Hall (2010), *Teaching phonics, word study, and the alphabetic principle*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (LETRS Module 7). Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
2. Note that the common exceptions to the pattern are such, much, sandwich, which, bachelor, rich.

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# Factors that contribute to successful reading comprehension

**Mandy Nayton**

A compelling model of reading acquisition is that encapsulated in 'The Simple View of Reading' (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). This essentially describes the two central components of successful reading as being the capacity to read the words on the page accurately, and (simultaneously) the capacity to understand or comprehend the message or content being read.

In order to read accurately, students need to have grasped the alphabetic principle – that is, the knowledge that there is a predictable and reversible relationship between the sounds (phonemes) in the words we say, and the letters (graphemes) we use to write those words down. It is now widely accepted that the most effective approach to the teaching of accurate reading and spelling includes a multi-sensory, structured, synthetic phonics program, taught systematically, cumulatively and with ample opportunity for practice and application (NICHD, 2005; Rose, 2006; Hattie, 2009). As children's reading develops they also need to be taught – and make use of – orthographic, morphological and semantic knowledge in order to read and spell accurately (Plaut, 2005). Unfortunately, the understanding of how best to teach reading comprehension has not been as extensively researched, or as well-documented, as the strategies recommended for the development of reading accuracy, despite its obvious importance.

## What is reading comprehension?

In order to comprehend written material students need to:

- Accurately read and understand the words being used (phonic knowledge and vocabulary);

- Successfully link the units of meaning within each sentence (syntax);
- Activate and integrate prior knowledge in order to make successful inferences (retrieve connected information from long-term memory);
- Successfully integrate the meaning of successive sentences (local coherence/working memory); and
- Establish how the whole text fits together (global coherence).

Comprehension is fundamentally the goal of both reading and listening. It enables readers and listeners to: acquire new knowledge and skills; experience and be aware of alternate 'environments'; communicate successfully; and, achieve academically. The long-term goal of the reading teacher is to ensure that students learn to understand written language as well as they understand spoken language. It has been recognised that when children first start learning to read there is very little correlation between their language comprehension and their reading comprehension. However, once they are able to read accurately and fluently, there is a very strong correlation. The language of any text, whether it is spoken or written, is rarely explicit. In order to comprehend at a deeper level, readers need to make inferences that bridge elements of the text and support the coherence necessary for comprehension to occur.

## Inference making

The process of inference making allows readers to 'fill the gaps' in both spoken and written language and ensures that the text is understood at a deeper level. It allows readers to make sense of otherwise unconnected actions in a text (causal inferences) or



*The language of any text, whether it is spoken or written, is rarely explicit.*

may be used to elaborate or make predictions (elaborative inferences). Once students are reading fluently, they tend to approximate the adult model of inference making (Perfetti, Landi and Oakhill, 2006). This is, in part, due to the fact that inference generation is considered to require high levels of cognitive processing. If a significant amount of processing is being dedicated to reading accuracy or semantic retrieval, then it is less likely to be utilised for inference making. It is also the case that less skilled readers are more likely to make inferences that support coherence than inferences that elaborate.

Essentially, to comprehend, readers need to make inferences

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by drawing on prior knowledge (including vocabulary knowledge) and experience. This means that individual differences in both knowledge and experience will impact on a person's capacity to comprehend. However, deep understanding is likely to require the construction of meaning, not just passive retrieval of information (Kintsch and Rawson, 2005). For example, to understand a story, a student may need to infer the protagonist's motivations or, to understand a philosophical argument, a reader may need to analyse the relationships between different aspects of the text.

### Inference making difficulties

Four possible reasons that readers struggle to make inferences include:

- Prior knowledge deficits (including poor vocabulary);
- Poor understanding of syntax;
- Apparent inability to know when to make inferences; and
- Processing limitations – e.g., poor working memory, attentional issues or language deficits.

Working memory deficits, in particular, are strongly correlated with poor reading comprehension (Gathercole & Alloway, 2008). Understanding a sentence involves remembering the words within the sentence, retrieving information from any preceding text, interpreting and connecting syntactic information, integrating prior knowledge, monitoring text coherence, and making and including inferences. All of these place high demand on working memory.

### Assisting students to improve their comprehension

Students need to understand both the 'bare bones' of a sentence (literal meaning), often comprising a simple subject and predicate (e.g., 'The cow ate the grass' or 'The beautiful ballerina pirouetted gracefully across the stage') as well as higher-level

factors such as sensitivity to story structure, inference making, and comprehension monitoring. As previously indicated, understanding the words in each sentence is exceptionally important. Children's listening and reading comprehension has been shown to improve through the explicit teaching of vocabulary.

Once students have developed accurate and fluent reading, sentence comprehension strategies can be taught. Students learn to identify – what has happened, who was involved, when the event occurred, where the event took place, and why the event happened. This strategy serves as a foundation for later comprehension of longer text. Before they start utilising this approach, students need the ability to repeat five to seven word sentences, beginning with who and what sentences.

As part of their extensive and systematic review of early literacy teaching, the National Reading Panel (NRP) identified seven categories of effective evidence-based comprehension instruction:

- Comprehension monitoring;
- Cooperative learning;
- Graphic and semantic organisers;
- Question answering (teachers model active questioning);
- Question generation (students self-question to clarify understanding);
- Story structure; and
- Summarisation.

The research suggests that explicitly teaching a combination of strategies to bolster comprehension is the most successful approach.

#### 1. Comprehension monitoring

Comprehension monitoring occurs when the reader is actively aware of whether he/she is understanding or remembering the text being processed. The two main components of comprehension monitoring are: ongoing monitoring and evaluating; and implementing strategies when the text fails

to 'make sense'. It has been suggested that poor readers often read on automatically – unaware that something they have read "doesn't make sense". This is a strategy that can be started as early as Pre-Primary/Year 1, with students being taught how to ask themselves questions as they read (active reading) and monitor their understanding. For example, "Do I understand what I am reading?", "How does this connect to what I already know?", and "What do I think might happen next?"

When students pick up an inconsistency in the text they are reading (often the result of misreading a word or sentence), they need to know there are steps they can take to address this. Essentially they should: identify and isolate the difficulty; use 'think-aloud' strategies to highlight where and when the difficulty began; restate what was read; look back through the text; and/or look forward in the text.

#### 2. Collaborative learning

Collaborative learning occurs when students work together in pairs or in small groups on structured activities – often with specific roles. For example, in the Collaborative Strategic Reading program *From Clunk to Click* (Vaughn & Klinger, 1999) students are provided with cue sheets and work collaboratively through three phases of activity.

a) Prior to reading they brainstorm in order to identify prior knowledge and predict what they will learn.

b) During reading, the students identify and discuss the parts of text that are difficult to understand, including any unfamiliar vocabulary. They also work at identifying the main focus (or 'gist') of the text by selecting the most important person, place or thing and then identifying the most important idea about that person, place or thing.

c) After reading, students review their findings. They identify some questions to check their understanding, and then determine whether they can answer those questions.

### 3. Graphic and semantic organisers

The value of graphic and semantic organisers is that they provide a visual representation of knowledge. This can be particularly valuable for students with poor working memory or with learning disabilities. Three important uses have been identified:

- a) They help students focus on text structure while reading;
- b) They provide tools to examine and visually represent textual relationships; and
- c) They assist in the writing of well-structured summaries.

Graphic organisers have been used for multiple purposes, including: generating lists of character traits; improving vocabulary; identifying relationships in expository texts; activating background knowledge; setting a purpose for reading; and, helping students to see the text structure. An important finding by the NRP in relation to the use of semantic and graphic organisers was the recognition of their capacity to activate prior knowledge. One strategy, K-W-L, was identified as being particularly useful.

K – Identifying what I already Know.

W – Deciding what I Want to learn (setting a purpose for reading / including determining what new information will be gathered).

L – Recalling what I Learned from my reading.

### 4. Question answering

Students need to analyse the types of questions being asked, and consider both the text and their prior knowledge, in order to successfully formulate answers to questions being asked (including self-generated questions). In the *Questions-Answers Relationships* (QAR) program (Marzola, 2011), students are taught two major categories of question-answer relationships: 'in the book' or 'in my head'. Readers need to refer to the text to answer 'in the book' questions but need to explore further, drawing on prior knowledge, to answer 'in my head' questions. Essentially through strategies like the QAR program,

students learn to identify different types of questions and also develop different strategies to answer the questions being asked.

This allows students to discriminate between those questions that can be answered by referring back to the text (literal and inferential) and those that require skills in higher-level thinking (critical analysis, interpretation, generalisation and extension of ideas from text). Students need practice in answering a range of question types and to understand the difference between them.

### 5. Question generating

Teaching students strategies to improve their capacity to generate questions as they read is important and those teachers who model appropriate questions before, during and after reading have been found to have a positive impact on their students' comprehension of text.

In the NRP's review of the research into successful reading comprehension instruction it was suggested that there was "the strongest scientific evidence available... for the effectiveness of asking readers to generate questions during reading" (NICHHD, 2000, p.45). Used in isolation, it was found to have the strongest impact of the top seven strategies identified. Self-questioning has been found to distinguish good readers from poor readers in that good readers ask themselves questions before, during and after reading, whereas poor readers often fail to self-question.

### 6. Story structure

Many of the texts introduced in the primary school setting are stories, the structure of which tend to follow a predictable format involving characters, setting, problem, goal, action, and outcome (or resolution of the problem). When students are taught about story structure, they become more capable of retelling stories within a logical framework. They also show improvements in asking and answering who, what, when, where, why, and how questions.

For those students who struggle to recall the classic story structure, including those with working memory problems, additional strategies can be introduced (Marzola, 2005). For example:

- a) Five finger recall – each finger is used as a memory prompt for one of the structural elements – characters, setting, problem, plot, resolution.
- b) STORE – a mnemonic used to assist students in the retelling of stories – Setting (who, what, when, where); Trouble (what is the trouble / problem to be solved?); Order of action (what happened to solve the problem?); Resolution (what was the outcome (resolution) for each action?); and, End (what happened in the end?).
- c) The Language Circle – the five structural elements are written on Post-it notes and the student flags each of the story elements in the text as it is read.

### 7. Summarisation

There are a number of tasks involved in successful summarising:

- a) Deciding what are the most important ideas in the text;
- b) Generalising from examples or from ideas/things that are repeated; and
- c) Ignoring irrelevant details.

Students with poor reading skills or who have learning disabilities often struggle to summarise text successfully. A strategy developed by a team at the University of Kansas to assist students experiencing difficulties with summarising is known as the RAP Paraphrasing Strategy. It has three specific steps:

- a) Read a paragraph.
- b) Ask yourself, "What were the main idea and details in this paragraph?"
- c) Put the main idea and details into your own words.

In order to locate the main idea and details it is useful to remind students that the first and/or last sentence, key vocabulary, and repetitions of the

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same word or words often relate to the main idea.

An approach that brings together many of the strategies identified above is the Reciprocal Teaching (RT) approach (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Essentially this is an instructional activity that involves a structured dialogue between the teacher and the students incorporating the strategies of clarifying, question generating, summarising and predicting. Initially the activities are highly scaffolded but as the students master the strategies, the input of the teacher is reduced.

### Current research

An ongoing project undertaken by the University of York (UK) entitled the *Reading for Meaning Project: Evaluating interventions designed to support reading comprehension* has set out to examine three approaches thought to improve reading comprehension in poorly performing children;

- An intervention program incorporating oral language activities (the Oral Language (OL) program);
- An intervention program incorporating written language activities (the Text Comprehension (TC) Program);
- An intervention program incorporating both oral and written language activities (the Combined (COM) Program).

The effectiveness of the interventions has been evaluated using the WIAT II (Wechsler Individual Achievement Test) and compared to students in classes where the teaching approach had remained unchanged. The results indicated that all intervention groups improved significantly in comparison to the control groups and that these gains were maintained over time. However, the Oral Language intervention group achieved the greatest gains beyond the intervention period.

The Oral Language program focused on the development of the students' understanding and production of oral language and used a listening version of the Reciprocal Teaching approach to target vocabulary, figurative

language and spoken narrative.

For more information about this research and to access teaching resources once they become available, visit [www.york.ac.uk/res/crl/readme/html](http://www.york.ac.uk/res/crl/readme/html).

### Final comments

As indicated at the beginning of this article, comprehension is the goal of both reading and listening. The fact that many students struggle to develop adequate reading comprehension skills is of major concern, as is the lack of information available to teachers on evidence-based intervention. It is hoped that this snapshot of some of the teaching strategies known to have an impact on student outcomes proves to be of value to teachers looking for effective comprehension strategies.

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# A little light relief ...

## Parents perplexed after outbreak of facts learning at school



**Justine Ferrari**

**A**n alarming thing happened at my children's school last week. As a result, my son's Year 4 teacher has been dragged before the disciplinary board of the education department, which has launched a full-scale investigation. The school principal has assured me she won't rest until she gets to the bottom of it.

Worried parents mob me every morning in the playground wanting the details and some have gone so far as to withdraw their offspring from the school in fear of a repeat episode. I fear my son will not live it down and he too will have to change schools.

It started innocently enough after dinner. My son and daughter were arguing over how many party pies we needed to buy for my daughter's ninth birthday party.

My daughter had laboriously drawn pictures of party pies next to each guest, coloured neatly within the lines, and was in the process of counting them, one by one.

It was taking too long for my impatient son who blurted out: "Look. You have nine guests and you want to give them four pies

each. That's 36 pies."

"What. Did. You. Say?" I asked.

"Thirty-six. Nine fours are 36," he said.

"How do you know that?"

"We did the nine times table in class yesterday," he answered.

I did a quick test. Five fives? 25. Seven eights? 56. Sit on your hands. Twelve twelves? 144.

I was stunned. Here I thought he was safely ensconced in school, protected from the harsh world of facts except those I thought appropriate to pass on, and somehow, somewhere he's gone and learned the times tables.

There was no indication such dangerous learning was happening. His report card was glowing in its praise of his efforts in Human Society and its Environment, in which he had received top marks for his list of the differences between a transvestite and a transsexual. I thought the anatomically correct cardboard dolls he had made, complete with sequined costumes, had probably earned him the extra marks.

True, in his study of writing systems he has been struggling with Sanskrit but his reading of Egyptian hieroglyphics is comparable to that of a Year 5 student.

My daughter creates biodiverse garden plots with self-sustaining irrigation systems to attract native animals. She has to memorise the names of the plants because she is yet to learn the letter-sound combinations of the English language, which would enable her to read them. That's still a few years' off but she reads fluently in German already so I'm confident she will master English.

Now I'm no stage mother. I'm all for kids learning at their own pace and being in charge of their learning but I am cheating a bit. After my daughter has finished her homework in global warming, I've sneakily started teaching her how to sound things like sh, ch, and even some of

the spelling rules. I know, I know, it's university-level stuff, but it's not like I'm teaching her grammar.

I understand one cannot expect kids to be able to write before they know anything to write about. Primary school in my day was like the Dark Ages, our minds oppressed by the endless repetition of basic facts like the times table until we knew them by heart. I'm still enslaved by the ability to recall immediately the product of eight sevens.

At least some things have improved. Primary school kids these days are taught how to learn rather than what to learn; they learn problem-solving skills and how to think. University is where students are taught how to write a grammatically correct sentence and how to perform mathematical algorithms, if they do advanced studies. Undergraduate degrees understandably don't go that far.

And thank goodness important ethical matters have been taken out of the hands of parents. Who knows what kids were being taught in their own homes before schools started running programs in discrimination and values. Schools are right to concentrate on these important issues in the first few years and leave more basic information such as spelling or even the periodic table for later.

In the meantime, I'm waiting to hear whether my son will have to repeat Year 4. In all that time he spent learning the times tables, he has completely overlooked his work in critical literacy. He'll be spending all weekend in his room working on the sexist, racist and Marxist undercurrents in Winnie the Pooh, using the Disney television series as his source material.

*This article was previously published in The Australian newspaper and is reproduced here with permission. Justine Ferrari is a journalist with The Australian.*

# Instruct to improve: Creating Better Practice in the Classroom – Joint Conference 2015

## Call for Submissions and Workshops

The Biennial 2015 Joint Conference for Learning Difficulties hosted by SPELD, LSTAQ and LDA is planned for 18-19 September 2015. This conference will be held at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre.

In past years, up to 300 attendees, ranging from academics and classroom practitioners through to parents, have attended these conferences. A “hands on” approach, supported by keynote speakers has proven successful.

For 2015, the theme for the conference will be *‘Instruct to Improve: Creating Better Practice in the Classroom’*. The conference will consist of both formal presentations and interactive workshops. The Joint Planning Committee is seeking submissions that align with this

theme. Typical topics include, but are not restricted to, theory and practice in the following areas:

- Learning support in a National Curriculum environment
- Effective inclusive practices in primary classrooms and schools
- Effective inclusive practices in middle and secondary schools
- Effective use of assistive technology in inclusive classrooms for students with LDs
- Social media in the classroom
- Evidence-based instructional practices: Numeracy instruction and support
- Evidence-based instructional practices: Literacy instruction and support
- Models of effective teaching
- The role of assessment in an inclusive classroom
- Emotional Intelligence
- Gifted and Talented with Learning Difficulties (twice

exceptional)

- Employment options post-school

We welcome submissions directed at issues of current and local importance as well as topics which may have a wider interest. For 2015, sessions which focus on Indigenous or multi-cultural teaching of children with learning difficulties may be added as a special stream. Interested presenters should provide a submission in line with the conference requirements.

The Joint Planning Committee will select papers and workshops based on their potential to enhance learning for practitioners as well as parents. All papers and workshop notes will be published in the conference proceedings and association web sites for use by members. Papers will not be reviewed.

**Submission deadline: 19 December 2014. For further details and submission guidelines, visit the LDA website: [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org).**

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

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

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

This Award will be by open competition, and will be based on the submission of a paper in a form appropriate for publication in the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*. Those eligible

to receive this Award will be researchers who have completed their PhD within the last six years, and who are currently engaged in research which has the potential to make a significant contribution to theory or practice in the learning difficulty area. Selection of the Early Career Researcher Award will be based on recommendations from the Editor of the Journal to the LDA Awards Committee.

Researchers wishing to be considered for this Award are required to submit their paper, by email, to Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall, Editor of the Journal, at [kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au](mailto:kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au), by Friday 12 June 2015. The covering email should specify that the paper

is being submitted for consideration for the AJLD Early Career Researcher Award. All papers submitted for this Award will be considered for publication in the Journal, and those not qualifying for the Award may qualify for the special commendation of ‘highly commended’. Both members of LDA and non-members of LDA are eligible to be considered for this Award.

The Award carries with it a prize of \$500.

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

# Reading Recovery and Cassandra's Curse

Pamela Snow

Last week, I attended an excellent, though quite depressing, seminar organised by Learning Difficulties Australia, entitled *Reading Recovery and the Failure of the New Zealand National Literacy Strategy*, presented by Professors Bill Tunmer and James Chapman (both of Massey University).

The seminar was very well attended, with senior policy folk from the state and Catholic sectors present, as well as a number of education and speech pathology academics and practitioners, teachers, tutors, and other interested parties. The questions and comments from the floor were many and I think people would have stayed on for hours continuing the discussion if that had been possible.

So why did I find it depressing? The first depressing aspect was the established evidence, from the PIRLS data, on Reading Recovery's failure to deliver on the stated aims of its developer, the late Dame Marie Clay (1993), to "... help children acquire efficient patterns of learning to enable them to work at the average level of their classmates and to continue to progress satisfactorily in their own school's instructional program. When recognised training accompanies the use of procedures contained in this book, success rates are consistently high and surprising."

The second depressing aspect was the fact that policymakers (and as a consequence many, though by no means all, teachers) have been slow to acknowledge and act on the irrefutable data that Reading Recovery is not delivering on its promises. That it is in particular, leaving behind children who come from low socio-economic status families and schools is especially disappointing and unforgivable.

No-one would disagree with the importance of helping struggling learners to catch-up, and the earlier the better. That's where

the consensus in this debate ends, however, and the so-called 'reading wars' saga rears its ugly head. I don't intend to deconstruct this debate here (plenty of metaphorical ink has already been spilled on that one), but it is important to note that Reading Recovery is a "child" of the Whole Language movement. In essence, this approach to teaching reading, espoused in late 1960s and 1970s by Kenneth Goodman stemmed from the attractive (though unsubstantiated) claim that children can acquire literacy skills in much the same way that they acquire oral language skills – through experiential immersion. While this idea may have had strong face validity and appeal to the educational zeitgeist, it lacked one critical ingredient – an empirically derived theoretical basis. In fact, we now know (and probably knew back then) that unlike learning to speak and understand, learning to read and write are biologically "unnatural" acts (Gough & Hillinger, 1980) requiring sustained specific instruction. As Melbourne speech pathologist Alison Clarke explains in her engaging YouTube video, *How Phonics got Framed*, phonics-based reading instruction was suddenly deemed "old fashioned" and was pretty much universally abandoned in Australian schools (and teacher-training courses) in the 1970s, in favour of Whole Language-based approaches.

Many aspects of Reading Recovery have long perplexed me, most notably the question of what is being "recovered" for children who had not acquired the requisite skills in the first place? Secondly, I don't understand why any education system would adopt a reading instruction approach (whole language) that assumes a 15-20 per cent failure rate (and need for expensive and intensive intervention) by the end of the first year of school ("failure" here referring to the lowest performing students in the class – those whom Clay argued could be brought up to the norm via Reading Recovery).



*The whole language-Reading Recovery grip on teacher education and early years practice is doing a huge disservice to the most vulnerable and socially disadvantaged learners.*

Continued next page >

Imagine a hospital administrator deciding that operating theatre infection control guidelines were “old-fashioned” and unwieldy, and so proclaiming that henceforth, we’ll dispense with strict hand-washing protocols, letting practitioners use their own judgement on this, and rely instead on people’s natural immunity. As a fall-back, anyway, we have postoperative antibiotics for the tail of the surgical curve who (inevitably) happen to develop a serious infection. Of course those in that tail will already be disadvantaged in other ways, e.g., being older, or having multiple comorbidities, making their immune systems compromised and their benefit from antibiotics equivocal at best, and non-existent at worst. Let’s not even try to calculate the cost to the system (and society) of increased length of stay and lost social and economic productivity.

Of course such a situation would not occur and most would read that scenario and consider it laughable. But why are health and education so different with respect to the way in which evidence is derived, critiqued, and applied?

One key factor might be that when hospitals adopt systems that don’t work, patients die, and people can see that patients die. When schools adopt systems that don’t work, no-one dies and practitioners are largely shielded from the detrimental effects of their practices, however pernicious these effects may be over the longer term.

However just as we can’t hold individual doctors accountable for policies enacted in hospitals, we can’t hold individual teachers to account for policies enacted by their schools or education sectors. We must, however, hold policy makers and those who are responsible for teacher training to account to apply evidence ethically. The whole language-Reading Recovery grip on teacher education and early years practice is doing a huge disservice to the most vulnerable and socially disadvantaged learners. These are the very learners who need school

to accelerate their progress relative to more advantaged peers. The evidence presented by Tunmer and Chapman shows unequivocally that such acceleration is not occurring in NZ, and there is no evidence (of which I am aware) to indicate that it occurs here either.

I teach medical students enrolled in an undergraduate MBBS. Putting aside for a moment differences in university entrance requirements for medicine vs teaching, a major difference I see between these students and those in education (whom I have also taught) is their capacity and willingness to question and challenge evidence that is presented to them. In medicine, we know we would be producing graduates who are frankly dangerous to the community if they do not exit university as astute life-long consumers of new research and of edicts from “on high” (e.g. hospital administrators) that they should adopt or abandon a particular practice. Student doctors are taught to “argue their corner” and to do so using the language of evidence, not anecdote. Treating a medical condition is a matter of science (blended with positive personal qualities such as warmth and respect), not a matter of personal ideology (with a few notable exceptions, such as termination of pregnancy, where guidelines exist for how doctors should deal with their personal biases so as not to disadvantage their patient).

In the case of reading instruction however, we seem to have a terrain that has elements of religious boundary-setting around what teachers (and their educators) can and cannot be challenged over. This is ethically indefensible and if allowed to continue will simply perpetuate the widening gap between the “haves” and “have nots” in the early years classroom and beyond. There is nothing progressive, socially or educationally, about standing by and being complicit in maintaining such an unfair status quo.

Academics who have interrogated the evidence on Reading Recovery and found it to be wanting seem to

have been afflicted by Cassandra’s Curse – the ability to predict the future alongside the sure knowledge that they will be ignored.

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# Preparing pre-school children for learning to read

Kevin Wheldall

If we are serious about ensuring that all children learn to read within their first few years of schooling, we should make sure that the basic building blocks of literacy are in place for all children when they begin formal schooling. The research shows clearly that children commencing school with both phonological awareness and well-developed general language skills are far more likely to learn to read easily and quickly. If all children were to receive a program of instruction in these essential prerequisites in the year prior to commencing school, far fewer children would struggle to learn to read. It would also mean a levelling of the playing field so that all children, regardless of their family background, would be starting to learn to read from a more similar knowledge base. It is currently the case that many children from less advantaged home backgrounds beginning school are already way behind their more advantaged peers in these key pre-literacy skills.

The idea of teaching these skills to pre-school children may sound off-putting to some but there is no reason why these skills may not be taught effectively in an engaging and play-based way that is more appropriate for young children. An effective pre-literacy program for pre-school children should comprise instruction in the two key areas identified by research as the most important prerequisite skills for learning to read. First, they should be engaged in games and play-based routines that teach systematically the skills of phonological awareness so that children come to school already able to break up words into their component sounds and to manipulate the sounds in words. The second key component is an emphasis on developing good oral language skills more generally, including explicit vocabulary instruction. The best means of achieving this is by structured

storybook reading activities where children are encouraged to engage with the story being read, to answer questions about the story and to relate the events in the story to their own lives. A focus on these two prerequisite skill sets provides an excellent foundation for learning to read. This conceptualisation of what constitutes the best preparation for learning to read forms the basis for our pre-school program, known as PreLit.

PreLit is an early literacy preparation program, designed to be delivered the year before children start formal schooling. It will also prove useful for teaching children who come to school without the necessary prerequisite skills in place. The purpose of the program is to lay the foundations for good phonological awareness and other language skills in young children, to facilitate literacy development in the early school years. PreLit is particularly focused on improving the learning outcomes for those children considered at potential risk of long-term reading failure but will provide a good grounding in the key prerequisite skills for literacy for all children about to begin school. PreLit instruction is based on the findings of the accumulated research with this age group and will provide early childhood teachers with research-based teaching strategies and an effective model of delivery for the teaching of phonological awareness and oral language. It is designed to complement a play-based learning environment through brief periods of daily instruction.

*Kevin Wheldall is the Chairman of MultiLit. PreLit is published by MultiLit Pty Ltd. You can follow Kevin on Twitter (@KevinWheldall) where he comments on reading and education (and anything else that takes his fancy). You can also follow his blog, 'Notes from Harefield: Reflections by Kevin Wheldall on reading, books, education, family and life in general' ([www.kevinwheldall.com](http://www.kevinwheldall.com)).*



*An effective pre-literacy program for pre-school children should comprise instruction in the two key areas identified by research as the most important prerequisite skills for learning to read.*

# A personal reflection on teaching practice

Pam Judge

During the 1980s, I was a (relatively) young teacher in a mid west WA country town. I had a large split class of Year 2/3 students. In the mornings before recess, my (loud) Year 3s would go to the teacher next door for 'reading' and I would work with the Year 2s. I would have a lovely quiet time doing 'reading activities' with my little students. I can't remember a lot of what I did with them but I'm pretty certain it wasn't very effective in terms of getting them reading. Back then, I didn't know what I didn't know. At university I'd been told that teaching reading should be fun and that the main thing I should focus on was 'Meaning'.

Usually, we'd read a basal reader and then we'd do a 'fun' activity – like making a play dough frog (if we'd read a book about frogs), cut out and decorate a paper spider (if we'd read a book about spiders), or paint a picture of a butterfly (if we'd read a book about butterflies). My teaching time was quite relaxed and I spent an inordinate amount of time making playdough (for the frogs), mixing paint (for the butterflies) and drawing animal shapes that could be glued or stapled together.

I had a big file of reading activities that I would proudly share with other junior primary teachers (if they had anything good to share with me).

Despite my attempts at making reading fun, there were always the students who couldn't read very well. I didn't really know what to do with them, except to encourage them. I read to them, made them take home home-readers, and asked mum and dad to read with them, and I tried all sorts of different books with them. I realise now, that most of what I did focused around 'motivating' them – because I really had had no training and not a clue about how to help them become better readers.

Luckily for me, that year, someone in my school had decided that we

would trial DI (Direct Instruction) as a way of teaching more effectively.

I was shown a video of a class of American students sitting in a semi-circle and chorus responding to a female teacher with a twangy southern drawl. I felt somewhat miffed that my creative and fun lessons would be cast aside and that I would become the woman with the southern drawl – asking students to all chorus at the same time. I said that I needed some Professional Development if I was to implement this program. The PD was booked for me and a lovely lady arrived at my school and proceeded to show me how the program ran and how I could best implement it. Sensing my trepidation, she was kind and patient and she seemed to know a lot about how to run this program. Because she explained it so well, I was able to 'give it a bash'. Had she tried to force it upon me, I may have resisted – and I'm so glad I didn't.

Use the program (Reading Mastery Fast Cycle) I did and, day by day, I came to like doing it. I loved the fact that everything I needed was supplied. I came to enjoy using the script and noting that all of the students knew exactly what to do. I liked the fact that nothing ever popped up in the texts that the students hadn't encountered before. What I liked most of all was the amount of progress I could see students who'd found reading difficult were making. I liked the fact that the students would ask questions like, "When are we doing that reading again, you know, the one where you tell us what to do!".

The following year, I returned to the city to teach and DI became a memory. Now and then, I thought about it, but having up to 33 students in a class didn't lend itself to implementing it, classroom support decreed that any students who weren't reading well should NOT leave the classroom and should be supported within the mainstream focus of teaching. At a few staff meetings I tentatively suggested DI and was quickly silenced and sometimes told that DI could

actually 'damage' students.

Many years later, I was in the position of being one of three school administrators in an inner city school with huge social problems and not a great reputation for academic performance. After many discussions about school improvement and how we could help the students, we restructured the school so that all Year 3 students were tested and those who weren't reading capably were placed in DI groups. I purchased SRA Corrective Reading materials and we ran DI reading classes throughout the school from Year 3 upwards. We employed *Corrective Reading*, *Reading Comprehension* and *Thinking Basics*. We spent a lot of time, money and effort on this.

Over the next five years, we were thrilled with what we achieved. Our local high school informed us we were sending them the best students out of four other primary schools, we had teachers come to observe classes, I had phone calls from parents out of our area asking me if their kids could attend our reading classes if they moved into our area. My answer was always the same, "No, but I can give you the information you need to give to your local school in order to help your child".

Our students weren't always thrilled when they started out in DI. What they found really hard was having to be on task throughout the whole lesson – something they had never had to do before. On several occasions I had parents call me to tell me that their child shouldn't be made to come to DI classes if they didn't want to. I recall one particular telephone conversation that went like this:

"Hi, Pam Judge here, you wanted to speak to me?"

"Yeah, I'm having trouble getting my kid to school, she doesn't like your classes."

"What doesn't she like exactly?" (I had a fair idea!)

"She just doesn't want to come."

"Well, maybe the problem is that she's never had to concentrate

throughout the lesson before. I'm told that generally she spends a lot of time chatting and wasting time. She can't do that during reading lessons."

"Well, anyway, she calls you Judge Judy. She says you're really bossy."

"I take that as a compliment. Judge Judy spends her time sorting out people's problems and I'd like to think I sort out students' reading problems."

"Well, don't make her come anymore, if she doesn't want to."

"OK, that's fine Mrs C. however, what I will require you to do, is to come down to the school and sign a form for me that states that you understand your daughter can't read, but that you don't want her attending reading classes."

Mrs C. never came to sign that form – and her daughter went on to make great reading progress, as did many many students over those years.

I still teach DI classes whenever I come across students who can't read well. In fact, I'm currently waiting for the materials to arrive. I never fail to feel a frisson of excitement whenever I open the boxes and take out the Teacher's Guide and those lovely student reading books. I love teaching the lessons. I love the faultless instruction and the amount

of practice a student gets at breaking down the structure of a word. I always have a sense of having taught something well whenever I finish a lesson.

When I look back over the years, I remember many of the quiet little kids who turned up to classes barely able to read a sentence or two. I remember the kids who were initially loud and outspoken who found it really hard not to try and chat to me all the way through the lesson. The chronic fiddlers who wanted to play with pencil sharpeners shaped like crocodiles and rubbers with fluffy bits on them, instead of concentrating on the task in hand. The one thing that ties them all together is the progress that they all made and the fact that they all became readers. And that is what I am so grateful for – the fact that I was given the tools to teach them to read.

*Pam was the Deputy Principal of a large Perth Primary School for some years before moving to Hong Kong and working there for almost ten years. Pam is now the Principal of a WA primary school situated in the Wheatbelt. Email: Pamela.Judge@education.wa.edu.au*



*What I liked most of all was the amount of progress I could see students who'd found reading difficult were making.*

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# Visual processing and dyslexia – is there a link?

**Gemma Boyle**

**T**he causative factors of reading disorders (commonly referred to as dyslexia) have long been debated. In particular, the extent to which visual processing

difficulties impact on literacy outcomes has been a topic of controversy. One of the earliest documented cases of dyslexia was identified in 1896 by W. Pringle Morgan, a British physician, who described the impairment as “Congenital Word Blindness”.

It was clear from this label that, at the time, the visual system was seen to be heavily implicated in the reading process. This is not surprising, given that as we read, we need to see and identify the letter shapes on the page. However, in recent years, research has demonstrated quite conclusively that beyond the initial requirement to see and discriminate between the letters on the page, vision is unlikely to play a causal role in the development of dyslexia.

Extensive research evidence supports the view that dyslexia is predominantly a language-based disorder. The phonological basis for the difficulties in reading acquisition that are demonstrated by individuals with dyslexia has been recognised for decades. Indeed, the definition of dyslexia adopted by the NICHD (National Institute for Child Health and Human Development), the IDA (International Dyslexia Association) and DSF highlights this phonological impairment:

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterised by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems

in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (IDA, 2002)

It is specifically a phonological processing weakness that affects the development of the orthographic skills necessary to read and write the English code.

## **Making sense of what we see**

The process of reading text requires adequate vision and the ability to recognise and remember the letters of the alphabet. While vision is necessary for reading, it is not sufficient, as the symbols on the page must be successfully interpreted by the brain. While there are ocular conditions that can impair vision and therefore affect the visual input the brain receives, these conditions (such as strabismus, amblyopia, convergence, focusing difficulties and refractive errors) can be treated with glasses, eye patching, eye drops or eye-muscle surgery. Specific exercises can treat convergence insufficiency and most of these exercises can be performed at home (extensive in-office vision therapy is generally not necessary).

The treatment of such vision problems allows the individual to accurately perceive visual information, but will not improve the brain's ability to interpret the information. For example, treating convergence insufficiency can make reading more comfortable but will not improve the decoding or comprehension skills of the reader. Learning disabilities – such as dyslexia – cannot be diagnosed by undergoing vision testing. Determining whether or not a person has a sensory impairment is an important step in terms of understanding why he/she might be experiencing difficulties but a sensory impairment is not a learning disability. A thorough investigation of an individual's cognitive and processing abilities, their academic skills and their educational and medical history is essential for the accurate identification of a learning disability.

## **The impact of vision therapy**

Our understanding of the causal mechanisms underlying dyslexia has important implications for the recommendations made in terms of intervention and accommodation. Given that current research evidence does not support a link between visual processing difficulties and dyslexia, treatment programs designed to improve visual function through training are not considered to be an effective intervention for dyslexia.

An examination of the literature supporting the use of vision therapy as a means of addressing the difficulties experienced by individuals with learning disabilities has been criticised as being poorly validated, anecdotal, poorly designed, and poorly controlled (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009). It has been suggested that reported benefits of vision therapy are best explained by the placebo effect or by the remedial educational techniques employed in conjunction with the therapy.

## **The magnocellular visual system**

Some researchers have attributed the reading difficulties present in individuals with dyslexia to a deficit in the magnocellular visual system. This system is involved in timing visual events when reading. It signals any motion that occurs in the visual field and these signals are used to bring the eyes back on target. Studies have shown that the visual magnocellular system in dyslexics is poorly developed and this results in reduced motion sensitivity, unsteady binocular fixation and reduced contrast sensitivity. It is suggested that this weakness explains the phenomenon that some dyslexics report of letters on the page appearing to move around and cross over each other.

Although there is evidence to support the view that the magnocellular visual system is less well developed in individuals with dyslexia than those without, whether these visual deficits are causal or

consequential can be debated. The findings of a recent study published in *Neuron* demonstrated that visual magnocellular dysfunction is not fundamental to dyslexia but is likely to instead be a consequence of impoverished reading (Olulade, Napoliello & Eden, 2013).

In children who are typically-developing readers, visual motion perception is seen to develop with age and children show poorer performance on visual motion tasks when compared to adults. It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that learning to read in childhood may act to activate or mobilise the magnocellular visual system. Olulade and colleagues found that the acquisition of reading did indeed have a positive effect on magnocellular visual system function, as activity in the region of the brain related to this function (called Area V5/MT) increased following gains in reading skill in the group of dyslexic children studied. They stated that, "Since dyslexia impedes reading acquisition, it is most likely that the differences in magnocellular function reported here and elsewhere between dyslexics and their typically developing peers may be attributed to their lower reading level and less reading experience" (p.185).

The authors utilised fMRI technology to investigate the level of activity in Area V5/MT in individuals with dyslexia compared to typically developing readers. In typical readers, a relationship was detected between reading ability and activity in Area V5/MT during a visual motion processing task. Lower activity was observed in dyslexic children when compared to peers of the same age. However, when the children with dyslexia were matched to younger children of the same level of reading ability, no differences in motion processing were present. This result lends support to the view that an apparent weakness in V5/MT may not be causal to dyslexia but rather the result of reduced reading experience.

As senior author Guinevere Eden states, "Our results do not discount the presence of this specific type of visual deficit. In fact, our results confirm that differences do exist in the visual system of children with dyslexia, but these differences are the end-product

of less reading, when compared with typical readers, and are not the cause of their struggles with reading."

### Tracking

It is commonly and frequently reported by parents and teachers that children with dyslexia have trouble keeping their place in text and 'tracking' effectively from left to right across the page. The eye movements used when reading are called saccades; small, jumping eye movements which are high-velocity and short in duration. Individuals with dyslexia tend to exhibit saccadic eye movements and fixations similar to those observed in younger, beginning readers. However, normal saccadic eye movement is observed when the text level is matched to the reader's ability.

Again, the differences in saccadic movements between individuals with dyslexia and typically developing readers seems to be the result, rather than the cause, of their reading difficulties. Research has shown that weaknesses in decoding and comprehension, rather than a primary abnormality in oculomotor control, are responsible for apparent tracking difficulties experienced by poor readers. The functional impact observed includes: slow reading; increased duration of fixations; and, increased backwards saccades. When reading skill improves (through structured, evidence-based remediation), saccadic patterns also improve, however, there is no evidence to suggest that saccadic training results in better reading.

### For more information

The Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) provides a range of fact sheets ('MUSEC Briefings') designed to inform parents, teachers and other professionals about the evidence base for a variety of educational practices. The MUSEC Briefings on Behavioural Optometry and Irlen Tinted Lenses and Overlays can be accessed at: [www.musec.mq.edu.au/community\\_outreach/musec\\_briefings](http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/community_outreach/musec_briefings).

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# Suffer the little children

Johanna O'Farrell

In his celebrated and prophetic poem 'Dover Beach' (1867), Matthew Arnold describes an unnamed calamity, destruction and misery about to be wrought upon the world. Many regard his poem as foreshadowing the war, the eclipse of God and the loss of meaning that defined the 20th century. Perhaps when Arnold describes the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" and his encounter with "the naked shingles of the world" his premonition might also refer to universal decline of his own language; a decline which reduces humanity, confused and squabbling, to "ignorant armies who clash by night". It is my opinion that the language and literacy standards of Australian students in recent years has indicated the reality of such a decline.

As early as the 1960s, Australian education 'dropped the ball' when it came to teaching students to read, and most especially, teaching them to write. The 2013 PISA results, the Australian Industry Group's 'Report into Employers' Views on Workplace Literacy and Numeracy' (2010) and the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (2006) confirm that "inadequate" skill levels in literacy and numeracy is now a defining feature of the Australian workforce. Heather Ridout, Chief Executive of the Australian Industry Group wrote:

Literacy and numeracy shortfalls have emerged as a major issue for employers... Ai Group has become increasingly concerned about reports from across our membership of workforce literacy and numeracy deficiencies. The frequency with which this issue is raised indicates this is not a limited problem... A key finding is that more than 75% of employers responding to our survey reported that their businesses were affected by low levels of literacy and numeracy. This is a major finding... All occupational categories were impacted by inadequate levels of literacy and numeracy. The rejection of a more 'formal' or

'traditional' approach to language instruction, which began as early as the 1960s, deserves considerable blame for this decline. This along with, critically, the decline in a reading culture has led to the widespread impoverishment of the English language, particularly among Gen Y and subsequent generations.

Instrumental, inquiry and constructivist approaches to learning have transformed the educational landscape over the last 20 years. These methods were part of an attempt to counteract the overly prescriptive, regimented and propositional mode of learning often associated with education in the first half of the 20th century. There is no doubt that these contemporary methods have their benefits and deserve a place within the modern classroom. It is my opinion, however, that, like many other reactionary movements, the pendulum has swung too far.

Some primary schools resist the overuse of these 'progressive' methods, but they are increasingly few and far between. Formal prescriptive approaches to teaching the English language, such as phonics and grammar, are on the decline, in part because young teachers like myself were never taught these skills either. Instead the strategy is that students will simply learn to read "by osmosis". Many universities are explicitly instructing primary teacher candidates not to teach phonics but to teach the child to read by developing a word-picture association. At a prestigious Australian university, an acquaintance of mine asked her lecturer, "When are we going to learn how to teach children to read?" Unbelievably she was met with the response, "They don't want to learn how to read; they just want to be at McDonalds."

The renewed focus on literacy and numeracy within the Australian Curriculum and the introduction of NAPLAN is certainly a step in the right direction. However, the methods currently being promoted are largely insufficient for teaching such skills. Many teachers are being told they

ought not to correct a child's spelling but instead congratulate them on the words they got right. Moreover the time in which to do so is being whittled away by an over-crowded curriculum. Primary school students are embarking on "inquiry learning days" where they spend one day a week researching a topic of their choice. As part of the instrumental learning fad students will spend an entire afternoon making pizzas in order to learn about fractions.

Schools across the country are throwing good money after bad on ICT. Interactive whiteboards (many of which sit idle and unused), iPads and laptops are increasingly seen as the signifiers of a quality education. Whilst they certainly offer many wonderful new opportunities for learning and discovery, they are also provide enormous potential for distraction, waste time and are simply unnecessary for teaching 'the basics'. Furthermore, the Australian Government has recently recommended that children spend a maximum of two hours using iPads, computers and watching television. Given the often unlimited access so many parents give their children, it should be the job of schools to get students off the devices for a couple of hours in the day. This is all the more important, given that social media and video games are proving to be insurmountable distractions for many young people, often stifling or destroying altogether a love for reading and learning.

Underpinning this change in practice is the assumption that student engagement, interest and enthusiasm is somehow a measure of both the teacher quality and student learning. Consequently, there is an expectation that teachers 'entertain'. Whilst these are objectives that are certainly worth striving for, to some extent they have become the be-all and end-all.

Oftentimes, advocates of contemporary educational philosophy engage in a caricature of more formal, structured approaches not

Continued next page >

unlike that which appears in the opening scenes of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. Indeed, those who promote a rigorous, rules-based approach to the study of language are guilty of promoting a mindless, closed, intellectually sterile pursuit and are not unlike Mr Thomas Gradgrind, who insists that students be taught "facts, facts, facts" to the exclusion of creativity, speculation and inquiry. Similarly, there is a tendency to represent those in favour of contemporary education as advocating a student-directed 'free-for-all'. It is necessary to move past caricature, stereotypes and subjective labels and discern which methods work, and in what context they ought to be employed.

Within the context of contemporary classrooms we are putting the cart

before the horse. We are continually sending students on creative odysseys in which they 'create their own this' and 'build their own that', without providing them with the knowledge and skills to express ideas with clarity and accuracy, flair and sophistication. It is all well and good to promote higher order thinking skills but we must recognise that learning the laws of the language provide the building blocks for conceptual and philosophical thinking. And just like any violinist or athlete an English student, particularly in the junior years, must master the basics before taking on more complex and difficult feats. In order to do so, he must undergo hours of practice and repetition, if he is to use the language competently and well.

'Rigorous, repetitious' as a mode of

learning is 'on the nose'; shunned by those in academia and those earning a buck or two on the Professional Learning circuit. Consequently, we are now in the process of producing successive generations of Australians without functional English. The PISA results and that of the AIG report confirm this. Moreover, older teachers with language expertise will continue to age out of the system and a lax approach to language instruction will become more entrenched and eventually 'traditional' in its own right.

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## Spritz and other speed reading apps: prose and cons

**Sally Andrews**

**M**ost adults read about 200-250 words per minute (wpm). Spritz, a new reading application that is attracting considerable social media attention, claims that most people can easily double or triple this speed without any special training.

Normally when we read, our eyes move along the lines of a text, landing (fixating) on words for 1/10 to 1/4 of a second, then making short jumps (saccades) to the next word. The developers of Spritz claim that, in the traditional method of reading, only 20% of reading time is spent processing the content of a text, and 80% is devoted to moving the eyes between words. Their solution is to eliminate the need to make eye movements. Word are presented one at a time, beginning at the typical reading rate of 200 wpm, and the reader is encouraged to gradually increase it to rates of up to 1000 wpm.

Sounds good, doesn't it? At that rate,

you could read a novel in 90 minutes. But is that really possible?

### The science of speed reading

The science underlying the Spritz technique relies on two well-established characteristics of skilled reading.

First, skilled readers' perceptual span – the window of text we use during reading – is about 13 characters. This is therefore the maximum length of word exposed in the Spritz 'redicle'. Second, we characteristically land our eyes at a predictable position in the word – between the beginning and middle of the word – that Spritz refers to as the optimal recognition point (ORP). Spritz's major innovation is to centre the word in the redicle on the ORP and highlight it in red. This is claimed to speed up reading by ensuring that the reader fixates at the optimal location to identify the word while eliminating the time required for the reader to compute this location and move their eyes to it.

Spritz takes almost the opposite approach to increasing reading speed as the 'standard' approaches to speed reading spruiked in hundreds of

YouTube clips. These methods assume that sequential word-by-word reading is the major barrier to rapid reading and advocate a variety of methods designed to break this habit and adopt non-sequential scanning strategies, such as moving the eyes down the centre of the page, that are claimed to facilitate unconscious processing of relevant information in the text.

Despite the very different ways in which they aim to achieve it, the methods do, however, have a common goal of reducing subvocalisation – saying the words in your head – during reading. In standard methods, eliminating subvocalisation is a major focus of training. In Spritz, it is an automatic outcome of 'Spritzing' because the average rate of speech is less than 200 wpm, so subvocalisation cannot be maintained at rates higher than that.

### Comprehension (or lack thereof)

On the surface, Spritz is better aligned with scientific evidence about the skilled reading process than standard speed reading methods. Even skilled

readers fixate on most of the content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) in a text, although they often skip over short function words (e.g., to, in, on, the) and highly predictable words. Skilled readers' general strategy is, therefore, more similar to the sequential strategy forced by Spritz than the non-sequential scanning strategies advocated by many standard approaches to increasing reading speed. A sequential reading strategy is also important for comprehension, particularly in English where the order of words is important for meaning.

But at a deeper level, Spritz ignores critical aspects of the scientific evidence about eye movements in reading. Most importantly, it ignores the time and cognitive effort required to integrate the words in a text for comprehension. Although there is some truth to the claim that the relatively slow pace of eye movements reflects physical constraints on eye movements, it is primarily due to the cognitive demands of word identification and comprehension. The time we fixate on words depends on their familiarity, predictability and length – the factors that determine the time required to identify and integrate their meanings. We also pause at clause and sentence boundaries to conduct 'wrap up' processes that are important for effective comprehension.

Removing readers' control over which words they fixate and how long they look at them reduces comprehension. Systematic research conducted in the 1970s investigating 'rapid serial visual presentation' (RSVP) methods that present text one word at a time found that comprehension fell rapidly beyond rates of about 600 wpm, particularly for texts longer than single sentences. The Spritz developers' assertion that retention levels are at least as high as for traditional reading requires more detail to convincingly demonstrate that using the ORP overcomes these limits on comprehension.

### Reading vs speech

Essentially, Spritz forces people to process written language like speech – one word at a time with no opportunity to go back to check any errors in word identification or interpretation, as we do quite frequently during

normal reading. Obviously, we are very effective at understanding speech, and can apply those same skills to Spritzing. But speech contains a range of additional cues, such as intonation, pauses and gestures, which all contribute to comprehension. Speech is also usually simpler than written language and focused on well-defined topics, reducing the demands on working memory associated with its sequential presentation. Most critically, the typical rate of speech is around 200 wpm. The convergence with the typical rate of reading may be accidental. However, most cognitive scientists would attribute the similarity to the bottleneck caused by the attention and memory processes required for comprehension in both modalities.

These concerns about comprehension may be of little relevance for the social media applications that Spritz is designed for. Such content may be closer to spoken than written language in its complexity. Spritzing may be an effective delivery mode for tweets of less than 140 characters and for small-screen devices where there is little opportunity for readers to scan text. However, the need for users to stare even more fixedly at the middle of a screen may exacerbate the anti-social impact of such devices.

### Where to for the written word?

Will Spritzing yield transferable skills that benefit reading of standard text? The claims about extraordinary increases in reading speed with training in standard approaches to speed reading have not survived scientific scrutiny. However, the skimming strategies they teach are useful in many reading contexts. Perhaps similar benefits will follow from Spritz users discovering that they can understand text without 'saying the words in their head'. This may encourage the use of more flexible strategies in 'normal' reading contexts. However, Spritz reinforces a sequential approach to reading that is incompatible with the flexible, meaning-guided scanning strategy required for effective skimming.

Perhaps most frighteningly for a reading researcher – and reader – like me, the speech-like processing encouraged by Spritz might contribute to our evolution towards the world envisaged in Spike Jonze's recent film



*Skilled readers' general strategy is, therefore, more similar to the sequential strategy forced by Spritz than the non-sequential scanning strategies advocated by many standard approaches to increasing reading speed.*

*Her*, in which written text has become an anachronism. Deprived of exposure to text, readers may gradually lose the sensitivity to the structure of written language that underlies our capacity to locate the ORP for words and capitalise on the multiple cues in written text that contribute to effective comprehension.

But maybe I am just revealing my age, or smartphone envy.

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# Overview and Review: *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling*

Published by Cambium Learning  
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**A**ustralian teachers are required to undertake ongoing professional development, and they are entitled to demand that the coursework they spend time on should be as informative, challenging and useful as possible. It is in this context that the present discussion is offered: a review of the program called Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, or LETRS, authored principally by Louisa Moats. My comments are based only on an inspection of the booklets that accompany Modules 1 to 9 of the core LETRS program (see below), and my conclusions must therefore be tentative. Preliminary consideration, however, suggests the LETRS program seems potentially very valuable indeed.

LETRS is a professional development program for teachers of literacy, designed both to strengthen mainstream teaching practices and to provide teachers with strategies for helping children who are making slow progress. Although teachers who work through the program are likely to come away with a large range of practical ideas that they can implement in the classroom, LETRS is not a literacy program in its own right. The professional development is intended, instead, to provide a body of knowledge and a set of conceptual underpinnings about the English language, about normal literacy development, and about the ways in which student progress can be monitored— all presented in an interactive learning format that is suitable for adult education. All aspects of reading and writing are covered, including both word recognition and language comprehension.

The LETRS program consists of a core

12 self-contained modules, along with an introductory 'Foundation' module and three 'Supplementary' modules designed for teachers of English Language Learners, Early Childhood Educators, and Teachers' Aides. Flexible implementation for professional development is offered on the LETRS website: the course/s can be customised and studied as a series of professional in-service workshops delivered by a qualified LETRS presenter, or undertaken via an online program. The basic content of each module is, however, also available for separate purchase in a booklet, and it is possible that some teachers may simply choose to use these booklets as reference material (copyright restrictions naturally apply).

The titles of the core modules, and the blurbs offered on the website, are provided in the table on page 18.

A first comment to make about the LETRS program is that it looks very professional: the content is clear and succinct, the presentation is clearly organised, and the interactive sections are carefully designed to clarify and reinforce participants' knowledge about the topics being studied. LETRS should work well as an adult education experience. The course also covers a very impressive range of aspects of literacy development, with something available for every teacher's learning needs.

LETRS may be professionally designed, but is its content likely to add value to what teachers already know? I would like to make three points in answering this question, relating to:

- What LETRS has to offer regarding early mastery of the alphabetic code,
- How LETRS contributes to the issue of reading comprehension, and
- How the program contributes to the implementation of a Response to Intervention model, in which teaching is integrated with on-going assessment and differentiated instruction on the

basis of learning needs.

The issue of mastery of the alphabetic code is perhaps the most challenging aspect of LETRS, because the program uses an underlying conceptual model of word recognition that is different from the model typically used in mainstream Early Primary education in Australia. LETRS Module 1 introduces several theoretical concepts that are returned to frequently during subsequent parts of the program – concepts that are consistently underpinned by reference to current research evidence. One of these concepts is a cognitive model of reading that proposes a network of four processing systems that operate in the brain during the reading process (the theory is based on a Seidenberg & McClelland computational model from the late 1980s, as well as on current brain imaging research). Briefly, the four cognitive processing systems for reading referred to in LETRS are:

- The phonological processor, which deals with oral language input and output,
- The orthographic processor, which deals with writing output and reading input,
- The meaning processor, which deals with word meanings, and
- The context processor, which puts the word meanings into a larger textual context.

In the LETRS account of the four processing systems involved in reading, only three of the systems are at work in the initial recognition of words: the orthographic, phonological and meaning processors. That is, in normal reading development the context processor comes into play only *after* words have been recognised. The context processor can resolve semantic ambiguities, and it is necessarily used to enable textual understanding once the words have been read, but it does not play a part in the initial word recognition.

Module	Title	Editorial Blurbs ( <i>all directly quoted from the website: www.letrs.com</i> )	Grade level suitability
1	The Challenge of Learning to Read	Explores the reasons why many students have reading difficulties, the ways children learn to read, and the components of effective reading instruction.	All grades
2	The Speech Sounds of English: Phonetics, Phonology, and Phoneme Awareness	Introduces phonemes, discusses the importance of phonological awareness to instruction, and addresses some of the challenges of young English learners.	All grades
3	Spellography for Teachers	Explores the structure and history of English from several angles and provides teachers with the content they need to approach phonics, spelling, and word study with confidence.	All grades
4	The Mighty Word: Building Vocabulary and Oral Language	Addresses approaches to vocabulary instruction and stresses techniques for fostering word use, relationships, and structure, applying lessons learned in Modules 1-3.	All grades
5	Getting up to Speed: Developing Fluency	Reviews the rationale for a fluency component in lesson design. Participants learn and practice techniques for classroom reading exercises and charting results.	All grades
6	Digging for Meaning: Teaching Text Comprehension	Addresses the research base for teaching comprehension and approaches for teaching comprehension at the phrase, sentence, paragraph, and passage levels.	All grades
7	Teaching Phonics, Word Study, and the Alphabetic Principle	Focuses on the practice of effective, systematic phonics instruction and the importance of applying learned skills to reading and writing.	Early Primary (K-3) and Remedial Instruction
8	Assessment for Prevention and Early Intervention	Reviews the rationale for effective early screening with fluency-based measures, and the importance of valid, reliable, and efficient assessment tools.	Early Primary (K-3) and Remedial Instruction
9	Teaching Beginning Spelling and Writing	Addresses writing instruction for children in early grades who need to be taught the component skills that underlie composition.	Early Primary (K-3) and Remedial Instruction
10	Reading Big Words: Syllabification and Advanced Decoding	Addresses the instructional needs of students in third grade and above who inaccurately and/or slowly read and spell multisyllabic words. An advanced decoding survey is included.	Grade 3 to Adult
11	Writing: A Road to Reading Comprehension	Designed for all language-arts and content-area teachers, presenting major strategies that help students process, remember, and summarize the main ideas in written text.	Grade 3 to Adult
12	Using Assessment to Guide Instruction	An advanced module that helps intermediate and secondary educators identify and pinpoint the instructional needs of struggling readers beyond third grade.	Grade 3 to Adult

This conceptual position is, however, at odds with an entrenched practice in Australian reading pedagogy: the practice of using meaningful context as a primary word identification strategy when unknown words are encountered. Even though Australian educators have emerged from a strict Whole Language orthodoxy and tend to follow what the Australian curriculum calls a 'balanced' approach, it is still the case that Reading Recovery teachers, and almost all current Australian reading pedagogies, treat context as paramount in word recognition. There is indeed a different underlying model at stake: it is believed by most Australian teachers that printed words are recognised via three possible

'cueing' systems: semantic, syntactic and visual (sometimes called grapho-phonetic). The first two of these three cueing systems are typically regarded, in Orwellian terms, as 'more equal' than the third, and parents and teachers are very strongly discouraged from asking children to 'sound words out' beyond looking at the first letter. Instead, the prompt "What word would make sense here?" is standard. In the Australian version of a 'balanced' curriculum, therefore, the grapho-phonetic cueing system is only marginally used for decoding unfamiliar words. The development of grapho-phonetic knowledge is typically only addressed in the context of the reading and writing

of 'authentic texts', with sound-letter correspondences being referred to *ad hoc* whenever a particular issue happens to crop up.

The LETRS model, by contrast with the 'three cueing systems' model, separates out the phonological and orthographic processing systems, and sees them both as critically important in allowing access to word meaning. Moreover, the LETRS model states that both the phonological and orthographic processing systems work most efficiently if they are developed via the use of systematic, sequential phonics programs. Children are expected to learn to read words *out of context*, with accuracy and automaticity.

Many readers of this review will not be surprised that LETRS, based as it is on current research, takes this position in favour of systematic phonics teaching – the empirical advantages of phonics teaching is in itself not new knowledge. Furthermore, despite the rather loud silence on the issue emanating from the new Australian Curriculum, many schools have already adopted a formal explicit phonics program for their Early Primary years. But it can be argued that the support for the systematic phonics position offered by LETRS goes much deeper than simple advocacy of phonic programs. What is unique in LETRS is the very detailed but clear linguistic information on phonemic awareness, English phonemes and English orthography provided in Modules 2, 3, 7, 9 and 10, alongside the practical suggestions of how to implement phonics and spelling programs efficiently.

It is important to consider that most of the phonics programs in use in Australia are heavily pre-scripted, offering as much support to teachers as possible for their implementation, and indeed making it possible for the courses to be administered by Teachers' Aides who have no formal teacher training at all. In a sense the phonics programs are typically designed to be what is informally known as 'teacher proof.' This highly scripted approach is partly necessary because the majority of practising Australian teachers do not themselves have the explicit knowledge of the phonemic system of English and the English alphabetic code to teach it themselves with any flexibility or adaptability. Teachers' knowledge of the sound-spelling system of English is, at best, implicit and intuitive – and this allows them to *use* the alphabetic code themselves, but leaves them somewhat restricted when they are trying to *teach* children who are at some sort of disadvantage. It is the struggling readers who are most vulnerable; most of the scripted programs lack back-up support for children who show confusion, or who are inaccurate and slow as they try to segment and blend sounds in words, or who can't remember patterns of sound-letter correspondences. If the scripting of the phonics program does not work, many teachers do not have the underlying linguistic insight that will allow them to make sense

of the problems that students are experiencing, and to make adjustments and fine-tune their teaching to increase the scaffolding support. LETRS provides this underlying linguistic insight. It does this competently and economically, and for this it is very highly commended. It is heartening to see a program that works on enriching and enabling teachers, rather than on making education teacher-proof.

Some parts of the linguistic material covered in LETRS deal with the phonology of the American dialect, and would not work in Australia. For example, a thoughtfully prepared warm-up activity in which participants learn to read English words written in an unfamiliar script – in this case, the International Phonetic Alphabet – involves some phonemes that do not correspond to Australian and British pronunciations. Along similar lines, there is careful attention in the LETRS program given to phonological differences experienced by Hispanic and African American schoolchildren, and this material is less relevant in the Australian context than information on Indigenous languages and Aboriginal English would be. The problems created by these national differences, however, could easily be overcome with judicious adaptation of details; the teaching principles involved are very sound indeed.

The second aspect of the LETRS modules that looks promising relates to the treatment of reading comprehension. The underlying concept that LETRS uses regarding language comprehension is a simple one, based on enabling children to internalise meanings. LETRS addresses comprehension at the level of words, sentences and texts very thoroughly indeed in Modules 3 to 6 and 9 to 11 – but the potentially complex, sprawling topic is covered in an amazingly succinct way. This aspect of the LETRS modules seems the most immediately 'practical', in the sense of providing direct suggestions for teaching; the program is generous with templates for classroom use. Importantly, however, the overall theme of the workshop activities in these modules involves helping teachers to learn how to prepare the material they are going to teach, with children's comprehension in mind – to choose and think through the vocabulary they

will target, to consider the nature of the sentences they are modelling, and to choose the points in texts where they will pause during a joint reading session to ask clarifying and thought-provoking questions. The practical activities provided in the comprehension modules are very generalisable indeed to the teaching of material across the curriculum and across all grades.

The third aspect of LETRS that deserves a positive comment is its treatment of assessment and monitoring of student progress (Modules 8 and 12). The varying roles of assessment are clarified, and teachers are enabled to understand and use the assessment process productively. Given the context in which LETRS has been produced, there is much reference to the DIBELS screening regime that is in such widespread use in America, but once again the teaching principles of the LETRS program come through: the focus is on underlying assessment principles rather than the specific tools that might be used. DIBELS is analysed – alongside other assessment tools – for what it tests, and why and how it tests it. Course participants are expected to analyse any assessments that they themselves use in the same way. Particularly useful are the workshop activities related to discussion of the nature of a Response to Intervention approach and the difficulties associated with implementing this kind of process school-wide.

To complete the entire LETRS program and do it thoroughly would be a time-consuming and quite expensive activity. If I were running undergraduate university teacher education courses, I would make LETRS a compulsory unit of the degree, presented in full over several whole days, rather than trying to squeeze the relevant concepts into the already crowded weekly lecture-tutorial timetables. And if I were the principal of a school that wanted to improve teachers' confidence and competence in teaching literacy across the curriculum – well, I would consider LETRS very carefully indeed as one of my options, considering both the online and the customised in-service options.

Meantime, teachers will enjoy reading through the booklets for specific modules that interest them. I recommend them thoroughly.

# Consultant News

In the May *Bulletin*, several factors facing Consultants were highlighted that still apply today. Consultants still need to identify, and participate in, professional development closely aligned to their own personal needs but also relevant to their roles as teachers of children with learning difficulties. It must be based on research that is sound and relevant.

What has been of great significance recently is that many reliable providers are offering, often free, webinars that are current and interactive. Most provide proof of attendance in a certificate of participation. Such programs provide excellent alternatives for those Consultants who find attendance at city PDs difficult. In August/September, Get Reading Right introduced two such valuable webinars 'Dyslexia and Synthetic Phonics' and 'Encoding Difficulties with Synthetic Phonics'. When we get enough warning, we send emails advertising such events but it would be appreciated if Consultants let us know if they find something of interest. Any Consultant in doubt as to the suitability of programs in terms of appropriate PD may email at any time to check. I also urge Consultants to start participating in Spelltalk, a professional discussion group where current issues and research is discussed in an interactive way between educators and academics (<http://mailman.listserve.com/listmanager/listinfo/spelltalk>).

Currently, many postgraduate courses appear to be inadequate with regard to the provision of specific

training in learning difficulties. Too often, postgraduate courses in Special Education have limited presentations in appropriate, evidence-based teaching of either Literacy or Numeracy. Such courses often appear to be directed more towards physical, intellectual, social or psychiatric disabilities and inclusion. The Consultants' Committee is looking at ways of expanding the basic training prerequisites for Consultants in the future. Several models are under consideration.

Since early 2014, the Convenors of the Website, Administration and Consultant Committees, together with Kerrie McMahon, have put extensive effort into the development of the LDA Online Tutor Search. Although it has taken a lot longer than anticipated to be 'live' to the public, it is at last at the finish line. This replacement for the Victorian-based Referral Service is now providing the opportunity for Consultants to be found by parents or schools in all States and Territories. Obviously this expansion will require a recruitment campaign for new Consultants around Australia. There is much work yet to be done but it appears that the Consultants will move into LDA's 50th year of existence with the possibility of great things to come.

*Diane Barwood*  
Convenor, Consultants' Committee

## ANNOUNCING LDA Online Tutor Search

**L**DA has changed its tutor referral method to an online provision.

The new LDA Online Tutor Search is designed to allow LDA website users to search for specialist teachers with specific skills in teaching students with learning difficulties by location, year level, and areas of specialist expertise.

All tutors listed in the LDA Online Tutor Search system are specialist teachers who are registered as Consultant members of LDA, and who have relevant qualifications

and experience in the areas of:

1. Teaching children and/or adults with learning difficulties,
2. Assessment of relevant skills and monitoring of progress,
3. Individual instruction, strategies and support at different levels of literacy and numeracy, and
4. Organisational and study skills.

All LDA Consultant teachers are also monitored annually for current Working with Children Checks, full Public Liability and Personal Indemnity Insurance, and

regular participation in professional development.

At the moment the tutors included in the Tutor Search file are based in Victoria, and mainly in the Melbourne area. However, we expect in time to expand the Tutor Search to include tutors in other states and regions.

Visit [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org) and click on the homepage Online Tutor Search left menu heading. General phone and email tutor referral enquiries will no longer be provided. For Consultant Online Tutor Search enquiries, email [ldaquery@bigpond.net.au](mailto:ldaquery@bigpond.net.au)

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