

# Bulletin



**From the rock  
comes the sculpture**

## LDA Council 2018-19

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**LDA MISSION**

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.

**THE BULLETIN**

The Bulletin is published three times a year with support from the LDA Publications Committee and the Bulletin editorial team, which includes Robyn Wheldall, Pamela Snow, Bartek Rajkowski, Ann Ryan, Nicole Todd, Jan Roberts and Roslyn Neilson.

We welcome the submission of articles from LDA members and others with an interest in learning difficulties for possible inclusion in upcoming editions of this Bulletin.

Please submit articles, correspondence about the Bulletin, or letters for publication to the editor ([molly.delemos@gmail.com](mailto:molly.delemos@gmail.com)). For questions about content, deadlines, length, or style, please contact the editor. Articles in the Bulletin do not necessarily reflect the opinions nor carry the endorsement of Learning Difficulties Australia.

Requests to reprint articles from the Bulletin should be addressed to the editor.

The Bulletin is designed by Andrew Faith ([www.littledesign.studio](http://www.littledesign.studio)), and printed by The Print Team.

Cover photo by Ray Boyd

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# From the President

## Lorraine Hammond

**L**ike all LDA Council Members, I wear a number of hats and am writing this report from a remote community in the Kimberley of Western Australia where I am presenting professional learning on the explicit teaching of literacy. Twelve months ago I struggled to pronounce some of the school names, let alone find Bidyadanga, Djugerari and Wangkatjungka on a map. The Kimberley Schools Project is a state government funded initiative that pairs a teacher-directed pedagogy with evidence-based literacy instruction and involves coaching teachers and regular classroom demonstrations. It is both a privilege to work with the students and staff in these schools and a validation of the role of instruction. When I stand in front of a class of children whom I have never met before, high impact instructional strategies are all I have.

Since joining the LDA Council in 2010, I have primarily directed my energies into professional learning, a key aspect of LDA's Mission. We differentiate our professional development sessions within three streams: international speakers, local speakers who often deliver professional learning in schools, and selected professional learning for LDA Consultants. These sessions, which are open to members and non-LDA members, are underpinned by current research findings and how to translate this research into effective practice.

In 2018, LDA provided 35 hours of professional learning attended by 749 educators, speech pathologists and school and government administrators. In addition to sessions provided by international speaker and recipient of this year's LDA Eminent Researcher Award, Professor Kate Nation, we conducted professional learning in four Australian states on various aspects of

literacy and numeracy, as well as Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. About one third of all participants complete the online evaluation survey we send after each professional learning session, enabling LDA to gather feedback on the quality of the presentations as well as topics of interest for subsequent sessions.

The aim of professional learning is to increase participants' knowledge and familiarity with evidence-based effective teaching practice. Those attending LDA sessions in 2018 reported that this was the case with the majority of those responding indicating that sessions were 'very or quite' informative, useful and relevant. Comments on requests for professional learning included a practical focus on instruction and assessment, which will always be central to LDA's professional learning calendar.

In 2019, I am delighted to announce that LDA will welcome Dr David Kilpatrick to Australia. David Kilpatrick works at the Department of Psychology, State University of New York College at Cortland. David conducts research on reading development and reading difficulties and his 2015 publication *Essentials of Assessing, Preventing, and Overcoming Reading Difficulties* is a practical, accessible, in-depth guide to reading assessment and intervention.

*LDA's President, Dr Lorraine Hammond, is an Associate Professor at the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. Lorraine divides her time between research projects on high impact instruction, teaching pre and inservice teachers, supervising higher degree students and writing and delivering professional learning for The Kimberley Schools Project. Lorraine is the Chair, Deputy Chair and Board Member of three high performing schools in WA. Lorraine has been a member of LDA Council since 2010 and has previously served as President and Vice-President.*



## LDA Editor

LDA is seeking a new Editor for the LDA Bulletin. For further information or expressions of interest please contact the Convenor of the LDA Publications Committee, Dr Molly de Lemos, at [molly.delemos@gmail.com](mailto:molly.delemos@gmail.com).

# Council notes: 2018 in review

## Wendy Moore

**M**embers of LDA can be proud of the achievements of their organisation, which has continued its work in support, advocacy and education. LDA Council members serve in a voluntary capacity. In their various roles, they generously give their time and expertise to provide and organise professional learning; produce LDA's website, publications and social media; support consultant members; and lobby government bodies, school systems and higher education institutions.

Here are some highlights of LDA's projects and achievements from this last year:

### Professional Learning

LDA has hosted a range of very well received professional learning sessions this year, in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide. The professional development committee (convenor Dr Lorraine Hammond) was particularly delighted to host reading expert Dr Kate Nation from Oxford University for a tour of several states. LDA thanks each of the presenters listed below for providing LDA members and the wider community with such valuable, high quality presentations:

- Leaving nothing to chance – How explicit instruction can help prevent early learning difficulties (current president Dr Lorraine Hammond and Brooke Wardana)
- Identifying and addressing the needs of students with ASD and ADHD (Dr Anna Bortoli)
- Developing sentence complexity in written expression (Jenny Baker)

- Dyscalculia – Helping students develop mathematical understandings (Dr Judi Humberstone)
- Reading and language comprehension difficulties: Research-practice links and implications for the classroom (Professor Kate Nation, recipient of LDA's eminent researcher award)
- Spelling – Beyond the Alphabetic Principle (Sarah Asome)

### Supporting the role of specialist teacher consultants

LDA's consultants' committee (with Ann Ryan as convenor) has continued to work hard to ensure that its specialist teacher consultants are supported through local networking and professional learning. To this end, additional networks have been created, including those providing remote online access to meetings and workshops. The committee has worked hard to extend LDA's support outside of Melbourne by encouraging more regional consultants to join the service. It is terrific to see new consultant members from South Australia and Western Australia joining up and making their availability known through the online tutor search facility. Through its website committee and consultants' committee, LDA continues to work to improve processes to allow consultant members to more efficiently demonstrate that they meet LDA's rigorous registration requirements.

### Promoting best practice and informed policy

LDA Council members have been busy with their lobbying work. Here are a few examples:

- In June, then president Professor Anne Castles joined 2018 Mona Tobias Award recipient Alison Clarke to pen a letter to the Victorian Education Minister to encourage the availability of decodable texts for Prep students.

- Council member Professor Pamela Snow joined Anne in sending a letter to Bendigo Bank



- on behalf of LDA asking it to reconsider its decision to support the Arrowsmith program, based on a lack of evidence for its efficacy.
- Council member Dr Bartek Rajkowski has been active and effective in working with LDA's Treasurer and website convenor Dr Pye Twaddell to encourage the Department of Education in South Australia to recognise the needs of dyslexic students and the importance of a phonics check and decodable texts.

### Publishing academic journals and professional bulletins

LDA continues to publish its academic journal, the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties, twice per year, and to provide a copy of each issue to its members free of charge. Dr Tanya Serry, recipient of LDA's Early Career Researcher Award in 2015, is the Journal's new editor. The LDA Bulletin is published three times each year, and its production is managed by the Publications Committee, whose new Convenor is Dr Molly de Lemos.

### Educating the community about the nature and impact of learning difficulties

Information about learning difficulties and how to prevent and remediate them is provided to parents, teachers, policy makers and the public via LDA's website and through communication via the regular eNews, Facebook and Twitter.

LDA thanks former Council member Tanya Forbes for her work throughout the year on the LDA Facebook page, which will soon be replaced with a bright new version, so watch out for the notice signalling the changeover.

Council members are no strangers to the media. Dr Anne Castles has appeared in interviews on the ABC, and led the team in the recent debate hosted by the Centre for Independent Studies and the Australian College of Educators which focused on the best way to teach phonics in schools. Current president Dr Lorraine Hammond also makes regular media appearances, providing sensible commentary about how to ensure that classroom instruction is effective, and students don't become instructional casualties.

## Fostering professional alliances

LDA continues its support of the Five from Five Initiative hosted by the Centre for Independent Studies, and continues to host biennial conferences with SPELD Queensland and the Learning Support Teachers Association of Queensland. LDA has recently been working closely with AUSPELD to formalise an alliance that recognises the distinct identities and common aims of the two organisations, and provides a framework for joint promotions and policy statements.

## Providing access to quality resources

LDA is pleased to be working closely with Silvereye Learning Resources, who host LDA's bookshop, which is accessible through the LDA website. The bookshop offers a selected range of carefully chosen resources primarily in the areas of literacy remediation (particularly via 'response to intervention'), explicit and direct instruction, assessment for instruction, and numeracy. The LDA bookshop focuses on offering books based on evidence-based research and practical teaching resources for school administrators, classroom teachers, school support staff, and those who teach individual students.

## Acknowledging exceptional contributions to the field

Each year, LDA presents awards to those making exceptional contributions in the field of learning difficulties. At the

awards ceremony following the AGM in September, the following recipients were acknowledged.

Life membership of LDA was awarded to Dr Pye Twaddell, for her longstanding services as a Council member, Treasurer, and Website convenor. Pye continues to work tirelessly for Learning Difficulties Australia.

### **AJLD Eminent Researcher Award:**

Presented to Professor Kate Nation, Professor in Experimental Psychology and Fellow of St. John's College at Oxford University in the UK. Professor Nation's research is concerned with the psychology of language, especially reading and its development. She is interested in how children learn to read words and comprehend text, and more generally, the relationship between spoken language and written language. Alongside her research on typical development, Professor Nation studies language and cognitive processes in children with developmental disorders that impact on language and literacy development, including language impairment, autism and dyslexia.

**Mona Tobias Award:** Presented to Alison Clarke, a speech pathologist from Melbourne who is a passionate advocate for evidence-based practice, and developed the website Spelfabet. Alison helps parents, teachers and others to incorporate an evidence-based approach into high-quality initial instruction and early intervention through the provision of resources and timely advice. Her blog and engaging videos demystify what it means to teach reading, spelling and writing effectively.

**Bruce Wicking Award:** Presented to Ray Boyd, principal of West Beechboro Primary, a high performing school in Perth. Through his enduring commitment to teacher-directed instructional practices and evidence-based literacy instruction students, staff at West Beechboro Primary School ensure students are not 'defined by their post-code'. Because of Ray's commitment to effective literacy instruction, students who might otherwise have experienced difficulties learning to read achieve success.

**Rosemary Carter Award:** Fay Tran is the inaugural recipient of the Rosemary Carter Award. Fay is an outstanding consultant member who has contributed to the field of learning difficulties through her work with students as a Learning Support Teacher at Geelong Grammar and following her retirement as an LDA Consultant providing private tuition. Fay's commitment to evidence-

based practice saw her resist pressures to abandon the phonics approach for the teaching of initial reading in the 80s and 90s, and she was successful in ensuring that direct teaching of phonics was maintained at her school. Fay is the author of Teaching Kids to Read and through her website Learning2Read provides a wealth of information and resources for parents and teachers.

## New Council for 2018-2019

The new LDA Council for the 2018-2019 year consists of executive and ordinary members of Council. LDA welcomes Dr Molly de Lemos back to Council, says farewell and thank you to retiring Secretary Jo Whithear and to retiring Council members Pam Judge and Dr Jennifer Buckingham, and welcomes new members Mary-Anne Apps and Kate Gurjian.

**President:** Dr Lorraine Hammond (WA; Convenor of Professional Development Committee)

**Vice President:** Professor Anne Castles (NSW; Convenor of the Awards Committee)

**Vice President:** Ann Ryan (VIC; Convenor of the Consultants' Committee)

**Treasurer:** Dr Pye Twaddell (NSW; Convenor of the Website Committee)

**Secretary:** Dr Wendy Moore (WA; Convenor of the Administration Committee)

**Ordinary members:** Mary-Anne Apps (ACT); Dr Molly de Lemos (VIC; Convenor of Publications); Lyn Franklin (VIC); Kate Gurjian (NSW); Dr Bartek Rajkowski (SA); Jan Roberts (VIC); Professor Pamela Snow (VIC); Dr Nicole Todd (QLD); Dr Robyn Wheldall (NSW)

*Wendy Moore is the Secretary of LDA and Convenor of the Administration Committee, email [wendy.m.moore@gmail.com](mailto:wendy.m.moore@gmail.com)*

# Update on LDA Publications

## Dr Molly de Lemos

**A**s the new Convenor of the LDA Publications Committee I would like first to acknowledge the enormous contribution that Wendy Moore has made in her role as Convenor of the Publications Committee and Editor of the Bulletin over the last four years. As a previous Editor of the Bulletin I am aware of the huge effort that is required to keep up the regular schedule of three issues of the Bulletin each year, and to ensure

a range of interesting and relevant articles to keep our members informed and up to date with the latest research and thinking in the area of reading and learning difficulties. Wendy also initiated the production of the LDA e-News, a more regular email newsletter to keep members informed of current issues and upcoming events. Wendy has now taken on the equally challenging task of LDA Secretary and Convenor of the LDA Administration Committee, and we wish her well in these new roles.

Pending the appointment of a new Editor of the Bulletin, I have taken on the role of Acting Editor of the Bulletin, with David Wilkins continuing in his role as Assistant Editor of the Bulletin. Robyn Wheldall has provided additional editorial support for this issue of the Bulletin. Ann Ryan has taken on the role of editor of the LDA e-News, and Tanya

Serry is the new Editor of the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*. I am appreciative of the ongoing support of other members of the LDA Publications Committee and the Bulletin editorial team, including Pamela Snow, Ann Ryan, Nicole Todd, Bartek Rajkowski, Jan Roberts, and Roslyn Neilson.

We are calling for expressions of interest for someone to take over the role of Editor of the Bulletin, and I would be delighted to hear from any member of LDA who might be interested in taking on this position, or who might be able to suggest someone who might be willing to take on this role. Please contact me at molly.delemos@gmail.com for further information or enquiries relating to this position.

*Dr Molly de Lemos is the Convenor of the LDA Publications Committee, email [molly.delemos@gmail.com](mailto:molly.delemos@gmail.com)*

## AUSPELD and LDA

### Robyn Wheldall

**R**epresentatives of AUSPELD and LDA met in Melbourne in September to discuss ways in which the two organisations might form an alliance. The aim of such an alliance would be to further the aims of both organisations, as well as to present a more powerful combined front on matters of policy, such as the introduction of a Year 1 Phonics Screening Check.

The background of the two organisations was discussed, with AUSPELD historically supporting parents of children with learning disabilities and their families (in addition to teachers and other professionals), whereas LDA was founded by teachers 53

years ago and was more geared to the professional development of teachers. It was agreed that while there was overlap in the constituencies served by the two organisations, there was much to be gained by forming an alliance. Discussions are continuing but it is very positive that this first step has been taken.

For those in LDA who may not be aware of how AUSPELD is constituted, the following provides some detail. AUSPELD is a federation of independently incorporated not-for-profit (NFP) state SPELD entities which was established in 1970 and is a registered NFP in its own right. It represents the combined memberships of the five state SPELDs (NSW, Victoria, QLD, WA, SA) at a federal level, with the head-office of AUSPELD located in Perth. Services are also provided to the ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmania by different state SPELDs, depending on need.

While there has been some discounting for members of the two organisations for Professional

Development events in the past, this is likely to be expanded in the future. The current discount available to all LDA members registering for the 2019 DSF Language, Literacy and Learning Conference may be of particular interest. This event will be held in Perth on April 6-9, 2019 and has some celebrated keynote speakers including Professor Stanislas Dehaene, who is one of the world's most influential researchers in the field of reading and the brain, and Professor Kathy Rastle, co-author (with Anne Castles and Kate Nation) of the important 2018 article *Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert*. More information about this important conference can be found at <https://literacylanguageconf.com/>. LDA members should tick the member box to get the discounted conference rate.

*Robyn Wheldall is a member of LDA Council, and also a member of both the LDA Publications Committee and the LDA Professional Development Committee. Email [robyn.wheldall@pecas.com.au](mailto:robyn.wheldall@pecas.com.au)*

# Why are children not getting the systematic explicit phonics they need?

**In her acceptance speech for the 2018 Mona Tobias Award, Alison Clarke focused on the failure of the education system to provide students with the systematic, explicit teaching of reading that they need to become successful readers.**

**M**ona Tobias was a legend of her time, and it is an honour for me to receive the Mona Tobias Award.

In 2012 I set up my Spelfabet website as a way to vent my frustration about how many children weren't getting the systematic, explicit phonics teaching they need. It was also a way of documenting often hard-to-find synthetic phonics teaching resources in one place, so others didn't have to search as hard as I did for them.

I really didn't know what I was getting into. The site clearly hit a nerve, as it has now had nearly three million hits. I get a lot of correspondence from people saying that they've found it useful.

However, the reason I set the site up hasn't gone away. I'm a clinician, so I want to tell you about two of my clients. One of them is aged seven, in Grade 1, and on the Autism Spectrum with severely delayed language. He's a cheerful, delightful chap inclined to do unexpected things. Once I turned my back on him and a piece of easy-to-crumble polystyrene, and the next thing I knew it was snowing polystyrene in my office!

I've been working with him since early June this year, when he could only read a few words in some very basic decodable books - the Little Learners Love Literacy Stage 1 books and orange Pocket Rockets. He tended to read the first couple of letters and guess the third one in CVC words. He couldn't really spell much beyond his name.

He had been seriously let down by the education system, but luckily he has a parent with a serious work ethic who believes he can learn. He has now read the whole Phonic Books Magic Belt series, and moved on to the Alba books, so in three months he has learnt the entire basic spelling code, and is now about to start working on vowels beyond the "short" vowels.

His writing is neat and legible and on the Test of Written Spelling 5, he now scores in the average range for his age. He is also reading regular words and pseudowords as well as his peers, and on irregular words (which we haven't studied much) is only a little below average, according to the MOTIF Castles and Coltheart test.

It's possible to make great strides in decoding and spelling in a short time, even with children with significant challenges, as we all know from the research, but this is still not happening routinely. I feel optimistic that this child's oral language skills will benefit from having access to language in a visual, static form via print. I've seen many kids' oral language scores improve significantly once they can read.

Another student I worked with yesterday has not been so lucky. In her early school years, she had a mild to moderate language disorder. She attended a school where I'm told she had no language therapy or phonics intervention. During literacy activities for all of primary school and even the first couple of years of high school, she was mostly colouring in, because she hadn't learnt to read.

In her mid-teens she came to see me for literacy intervention, by which time her oral language problems had become

severe. She's now learning to decode and spell, but progress is slow and of course as an adolescent she has a lot of other things she'd rather be doing. At school they want her to participate in lessons about Macbeth. She has been seriously let down by the system, and it makes my blood boil. The intervention she needs should have started nearly a decade ago.



I'm conscious that we need to positively and proactively seek to end the 'reading wars', but it's hard not to get angry when you're continually dealing with kids like these, who are still being massively let down by the education system. It's great to have all of you in LDA as colleagues working to ensure that they are taught more effectively and successfully, thanks so much.

*Alison Clarke is a speech pathologist from Melbourne who is a passionate advocate for evidence-based practice, and developed the website Spelfabet. Her blog and engaging videos demystify what it means to teach reading, spelling and writing effectively.*

*Further information about Mona Tobias is available in the book by Patricia G. Nottle, Mona Tobias said Yes, published by Nookadin Press, Mt Waverley, 1997.*



# From the rock comes the sculpture



**Ray Boyd**, recipient of the 2018 Bruce Wicking Award, explains how explicit instruction has lifted the performance of disadvantaged students at his Perth primary school.

**W**est Beechboro Primary School is located in a working-class suburb in the eastern metropolitan region of Perth. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), a scale that represents levels of educational advantage, places West Beechboro slightly below the Australian average, in the sixth decile relative to other state public schools (one indicates the highest socio-economic standing, while ten is the lowest). The school has moved from a decile of 8 where it was placed in 2012. The staff cohort, since becoming an Independent Public School, has been very stable. The school population, for the same period, has consistently been at approximately 480 students from Kindergarten through to Year 6; however, the recognised success of the educational programs indicates that these numbers will continue to increase as it becomes a school of choice for its local intake population. Of the 475 current students, 11% are indigenous and a further 48% are from homes where English is a second language.

West Beechboro, over the years from 2010 to the current time, continually revisited its teaching pedagogies and there has been a marked improvement

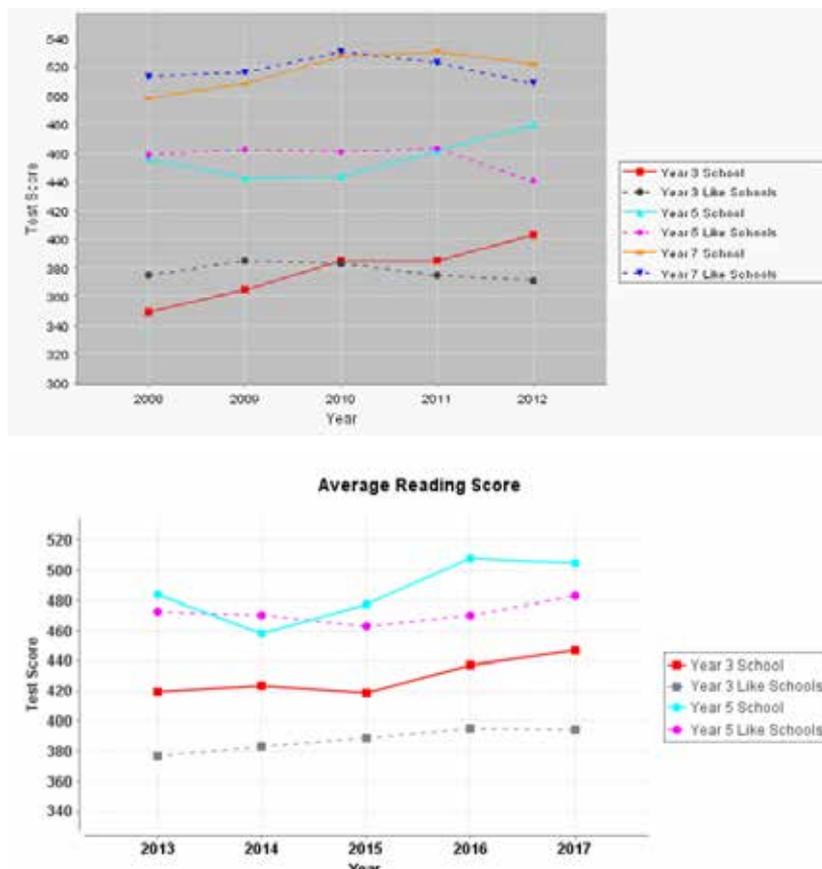
in student achievement across all the domains of national testing (NAPLAN); a gain predominantly credited to the implementation of an explicit instruction model across the school. Running parallel to this is a content-specific curriculum guide that incorporates the broader Australian Curriculum requirements, providing a detailed and prescriptive working document for teachers.

Moreover, West Beechboro has invested considerable time, money and leadership energy in ensuring that any instructional programs utilised in the school are sequential in nature, support the prescribed instruction model, are resourced appropriately, and are research-based in terms of proven academic success, thus promoting the belief of 'No Failure Learning' (NFL) within the all staff. All staff have engaged in professional development to embed a common language and understanding about implemented approaches in order to create what Fullan (2001, p. 64) refers to as a "school-wide professional learning community", where collective intelligence is built into the school's learning community. A potential issue for West Beechboro was that, while these structures existed, there was still

the possibility that a 'patchwork quilt' mentality could permeate the school's culture, with professional development becoming more reactive than proactive. It was imperative that we ascertained whether understandings were being applied and that teacher efficacy was at a level whereby student success was guaranteed. Furthermore, West Beechboro's espoused desire to become a leading state public school meant that the focus has to be on both personal mastery and team learning if there is to be ongoing and sustainable improvements.

In 2012 the leadership team developed a professional learning operational plan that outlined a succinct timeline for professional learning in relation to curricular content and pedagogic knowledge. This plan was underpinned by seven principles of highly effective professional learning that were adapted from the Victorian Department of Education. These were that professional learning was: focused on student outcomes (not just individual teacher needs); focused on and embedded in teacher practice (not disconnected from the school); informed by the best available research on effective learning and teaching (not just limited to what they currently know); collaborative, involving reflection and feedback (not just individual inquiry); evidence-based and data driven to guide improvement and to measure impact; ongoing, supported and fully integrated into the culture and operations of the school; and an individual and collective responsibility at all levels of the system.

Understanding that leadership does not "function in a vacuum" (Sorenson, Goldsmith, Mendez, & Maxwell, 2011, p. 8), we realised that to ensure high levels of teacher efficacy, we needed to foster highly effective and reflective professional growth structures that not only encouraged teachers to look outward, but also inward at themselves. We believed that coaching, instructional rounds and mentoring provided the necessary structures for professional growth. However, we felt that it was crucial to gauge their effectiveness in order to clearly "identify and solve curricular problems that negatively affect instructional programs and student achievement" (Sorenson et al., 2011, p. 156), and which may potentially impede teachers' efficacy and ability to operate at the highest of levels as a classroom practitioner. We continue to reflect on the way that this is carried out across the school.



**Figure 1.** Longitudinal Summary of Reading Achievements according to NAPLAN against state Like Schools

As a leadership group it remains critical in guaranteeing that a productive, collaborative culture is maintained through these processes and that they do not simply become a compliancy process. We work to ensure that the model is “driven by the powerful paradigm that we are much more effective together than we are separated” (Muhammad, 2009, p. 112). With this in mind, West Beechboro Independent Public School teaching and teacher assistant staff have continually participated in professional development to refresh, update or learn about how to identify significant reading difficulties in reading and options for intervention to implement when significant difficulty in reading is identified.

This recognition complements the school’s current use of Jolly Phonics and Jolly Grammar in the Early Phase of learning, MultiLit and MiniLit in the Early through to Senior Phases of learning, and Spelling Mastery from Years 1 to 6, which are used to complement and strengthen the information contained in the ‘Teaching & Learning Handbook’ that provides our staff with very clear structures to support the development of reading from an early age.

Our approach is based on evidence from research papers about phonemic awareness used in the Inclusion Online course called Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading, specifically Big Ideas in Beginning Reading, published by the University of Oregon Centre on Teaching and Learning.

“One of the most compelling and well-established findings in the research on beginning reading is the important relationship between phonemic awareness and reading acquisition.” (Kame’enui et al., 1997).

There is an expectation of our teachers that they should know the following:

- Definition of phonological awareness (PA)
- Definitions of key PA terminology
- The relation of PA and phonemic awareness to early reading skills
- The developmental continuum of PA and phonemic awareness skills
- Which phonemic awareness skills are more important and when they should be taught
- Features of phonemes and tasks that influence task difficulty
- Terminology (phoneme, phonemic awareness, continuous sound, onset-rime, segmentation)

We work hard to ensure that all our staff are able to:

- Assess PA and phonemic awareness and diagnose difficulties
- Produce speech sounds accurately
- Use a developmental continuum to select/design phonemic awareness instruction
- Select examples according to complexity of skills, phonemes, word types, and learner experience
- Model and deliver phonemic awareness lessons
- Link phonemic awareness to reading and spelling
- Evaluate the design of instructional materials

Source: modified from Moats (1999).

More importantly, we assist and support staff in identifying what a lack of phonemic awareness looks like so that our students who require it are supported at a level which enables them to establish this precursor to being successful in literacy.

Our staff are aware of what the research says in relation to PA and know that, “The best predictor of reading difficulty in kindergarten or first grade is the inability to segment words and syllables into constituent sound units (phonemic awareness)” (Lyon, 1995), and that there is considerable evidence that the primary difference between good and poor readers lies in the good reader’s phonological processing ability. As a direct result of this we invest a great deal of time in the early years establishing this grounding. We do not leave it to chance and we do not make any assumptions about a child’s background when they walk through our gates, again working into building a NFL attitude.

In late 2009 we identified, through various data sources, that our students in some cases were leaving school illiterate. In addition to this we had children who were spending 3,4,5 and even 6 years in intervention programs but they were not moving academically in terms of improved literacy or numeracy levels. Further to this, analysis of our behaviour records clearly indicated that behaviour in the classrooms was actually impeding the teachers’ abilities to teach.

It was apparent after conducting classroom audits that there was limited consistency across the classrooms. This was both across year levels and within year levels. In this respect we did not have a common instructional language within the school.

A presenting challenge was teacher buy-in which was the first and most significant challenge. When it comes

to teaching, everyone has their own philosophy about what works best. In many cases this is the first pedagogy that the teacher was exposed to when they undertook pre-service teacher training. It became important to move teachers from a stance that was underpinned by a philosophical belief, to one that was backed by proven research that had identified practices that were deemed to be effective. There was in addition the ‘toxic culture’ of a knowledge poor teaching and learning community, as described by Kent Peterson (2016), and a system that did not support what we were intending to do.

As a school our purpose is to ensure that we provide the children who step through our gates with the best educational foundation that we can, and that we provide them with the necessary literacy and numeracy skills that will enable them to apply these to more complex problems. This we believe will ultimately provide them with the necessary skills that will allow them to pursue further learning. We understood that if the kids left their primary years illiterate and/or innumerate then it was highly likely that they would be playing catch up, if they ever caught up, for the rest of their lives.

## Shaping the Rock

To support the implementation of a whole school approach that we believed would bring about significant student improvement in literacy levels, we used a variety of methods:

- Initially an analysis was undertaken of longitudinal and comparative school data in relation to our local and state schools.
- From here we were able to present internal comparative school data that clearly demonstrated, on a small scale, the significant impact that teacher instruction and instruction methods had on student outcomes in the formative years.
- Light house classrooms were then established using teachers who were eager to adopt and implement the suggested changes. To support this coaching was used to provide support and ongoing feedback to the teachers who were working to bring about the changes.
- The second stage involved a natural adoption of the new approaches as staff observed the clearly visible improvements that were occurring in various classrooms.
- The third stage involved using in-school examples of the changes

that were taking place. These were positioned alongside the research. This then provided the theory behind the reason for the changes as well as real time improvement that was contextual that supported the theory.

The rationale behind the method was that as a general rule teachers learn best when they can see something actually working. Everyone comes into the profession with a personal philosophy about teaching. It is this philosophy that shapes their teaching style and the various approaches that they have used. In some cases teachers adopt the method of teaching that they were first exposed to, either at University or at the school that they were appointed to.

If we look at Michael Fullan's (2010) change train analogy, the least amount of change would be required in the case of those teachers who had already bought into the belief to change. It therefore made sense to work with them first. This action would then assist in moving those teachers who only needed further verification that the change would be effective. This group needed no further energy expended on their change other than to provide the same support structures the first group had access to. The final group, the real resisters to change, were the ones who would need the most energy expended on them to bring about change. In regard to this, what we did as a school leadership group was to mandate the changes. The leadership group then went about ensuring these changes were implemented in the resister's rooms. On a simpler level we could say

we applied Hersey and Blanchard's (1977) theory of situational leadership. Through this approach we aimed to:

1. Establish whole of school instructional language.
2. Create a structured and sequential learning journey from K-6 that provided clear instructional expectations for teachers as well as being able to be articulated to the wider community.
3. Implement instructional practices that had a proven research background and had resulted in positive student improvement relative to academic achievement and/or social emotional development.
4. We gave ourselves five years to see a significant whole school turn around. In some cases, especially around the behaviour domains of schooling, we saw improvement within the first year.

We have now developed a clear and concise instructional language from K-6. This has continued to be refined and further developed. The following data sets, which have been shown to staff, shared with the school board and communicated to our community, illustrate significant and ongoing improvement:

- PIPS
- NAPLAN
- PAT
- State Mandatory On Entry testing.

Instructional rounds, which are carried out in the school, clearly demonstrate to everyone involved that there is a common approach that is being used across the school and behaviour data also indicates that the

changes have been successful.

As a direct result of this work:

- Academic achievement has improved.
- Students who leave our school are now gaining access to academic scholarships into private and independent high schools.
- Because students are achieving success in literacy and numeracy, and support structures have been put into place to assist those that require additional support, our students are in intervention programs for considerably less time.
- Our students are now achieving success on the sporting field.
- Our students are entering and winning STEM awards and science competitions.

The instructional model that we advocate across the school draws on research from many current and past education researchers. We have demonstrated that a whole of school approach is important not just for the students but for the teachers. In creating a common instructional language, it enables everyone to talk about the same practice and in doing so help each other. This in turn helps the school grow as a teaching and learning community.

West Beechboro's recognition by LDA through the Bruce Wicking Award is a public acknowledgment for our staff that we are making a difference for every child that steps through our gates. The teaching of reading is not a serendipitous event, nor should it be. Rather it is a deliberate act that every one of our staff understands and because of this our students are given every opportunity to be successful. Our

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	
Colour Scheme <span>Red &amp; Green</span> <input type="button" value="Submit"/> <span style="float: right;">Alternate view: <a href="#">Results in graphs</a></span>									
Year 3	Reading 348 330 - 366		Narrative Writing 385 370 - 400		Spelling 387 370 - 404		Grammar and Punctuation 342 323 - 361		Numeracy 346 331 - 361
	SIM 374 365 - 383	ALL 400	SIM 394 386 - 402	ALL 414	SIM 377 368 - 386	ALL 400	SIM 374 364 - 384	ALL 403	SIM 375 367 - 383
Year 5	456 438 - 474		461 444 - 478		467 451 - 483		464 445 - 483		452 437 - 467
	SIM 461 452 - 470	ALL 484	SIM 465 457 - 473	ALL 486	SIM 464 456 - 472	ALL 484	SIM 469 460 - 478	ALL 496	SIM 452 444 - 460

Figure 2. 2008 My School data for West Beechboro Primary School vs similar schools (SIM) and all WA schools.

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar	Numeracy
Year 3	447	455	489	475	447
Year 5	505	459	533	511	495

Figure 3. 2017 My School data for West Beechboro Primary School vs similar schools (SIM).

staff know that if you are passionate, reflective and a learner, you can become an outstanding teacher; that our job is to teach - not facilitate learning and not to be curriculum designers; that every student must be accountable; that teachers must have high expectations, including the expectation that every child can read, write, spell and be proficient in maths; and that differentiating the curriculum is not dumbing it down!

In 2008, as indicated by My School, our data sets showed that we were significantly lagging the performance of similar schools (SIM in Figure 2).

In 2017 the My School data showed that West Beechboro was outperforming similar schools (green in Figure 3 indicates higher scores than similar schools).

This change did not come about because we taught to the test. It came about because we changed what we did. We looked at what we needed to do to ensure that our students were successful readers and we altered the way we taught and the methodology we used to do this. More importantly, we moved our understanding of the teaching of reading from an ideological stance to one that examined what the science of teaching reading was saying. The rest, as they say, is history.

*Ray Boyd is Principal at West Beechboro Primary School in Perth, WA. Ray was 2014 WA Primary School Leader of the Year and is the 2018 recipient of the LDA Bruce Wicking Award. He is also a successful distance runner who has represented Australia at the World Track and Field Championships (marathon) and the World Cross Country Championships.*

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# Individualising the teaching of reading and spelling: reflections from the classroom

**Fay Tran, recipient of the inaugural Rosemary Carter Award reflects on her fifty years of teaching children to read.**

I have been teaching children to read for at least 50 years and I have never come across a child that I couldn't teach to read.

My initial training at Adelaide Teachers' College started when I was just 16. It was a two year course for infant school teachers, and I think it was a good grounding in the practical skills for teaching. The methods lecturers were all experienced teachers. We even had a speech and language lecturer who required us to learn the phonemic alphabet. Later I completed the Teacher's Diploma, B.Ed and B Sp. Ed. So along with my librarianship training and a couple of short courses, I reckon I have had at least 6 years formal training.

However, I do believe that my real training was gained through experience from working with children. Every child is different, and every student has taught me something about the learning process and how to teach.

Actually, my teacher training probably started with animals. When I was about 10, I taught our ageing cocker spaniel a few tricks like sitting and barking on command. Then when I was a teenager, I was a horse rider. Before I had my own horse, I helped with the exercising and training of a team of polo ponies. Later, when I did have my own horse, I joined a dressage

club and learnt more about teaching horses to do new things. Dogs and horses can't be trained in a group, and new skills and actions have to be taught in very small steps with lots of praise and encouragement and a firm 'No' when they do the wrong thing.

Individualising teaching has always been my priority and it sometimes got me into trouble.

During a teaching practice week at teachers' college, I wrote the required child study about a little girl who was struggling with English and was fidgety and inattentive during lessons. My conclusion was that she didn't understand what was going on and needed some individualised instruction. The class teacher was not pleased with the report, but my lecturer understood my position.

Then in my first job in a two teacher country school, I was in trouble with the district inspector because I hadn't put my Grade 1 children through a reading readiness program. These exercises were, and still are, visual discrimination tasks. I felt that it wasn't necessary because four of the five grade ones were already six and starting to read, and I was teaching the fifth on his own and he was picking up the sounds and phonics skills quite well.

After only one term, I was moved to Kingscote Area School, on Kangaroo Island, and that was a totally different teaching environment. As an isolated community, Kingscote had no special schools, no psychologists or speech therapists, and in those days, there were no integration aides either. I remember one boy who had some level of brain injury from birth and could barely talk. He also had behaviour issues because of his frustration. I realised that his difficulties were with speech rather than language or intelligence, and I was able to teach him to read and write, at least well enough for him to know that he could do it in time.

I remember that there, and in later schools, I taught the students who needed one to one teaching at my desk, and often in other lessons like art and nature study. Of course, I had to hastily cover the walls with art and produce a nature science table when the annual inspection was due.

My next appointment was at Kangaroo Inn Area School in the South East of SA. This new school had been formed by the closure of several small schools in the region and had a huge range of student achievement. We had lots of readers, all phonics-based, of course, as the school inherited the stocks of the schools that were closed, and teaching reading in groups and individually was easy. Spelling seemed to be more of a problem than reading, so I taught it also in groups, except for one boy who had to have his own program, as he didn't seem to have been taught spelling at all.

At this school a little girl taught me about the power of book therapy. She had a badly burnt hand from a cooking accident at home. While the burns had healed, her hand was severely scarred and two of the fingers were stuck together. She kept the hand covered and was reluctant to socialise with the other children. One day she showed me her reader, which had a story about a boy whose house had caught on fire and he was slightly burnt. 'Look', she said, 'This boy got burnt just like me!' That book changed this child's life. She stopped being ashamed of her injury and started to socialise with the other children. She even showed them her hand and talked about what had happened. Later I heard that she had had surgery on the hand and it was restored to almost normal.

My next move was to a department teacher-librarian course and I became one of the first primary teacher-librarians in the country. (SA leading the way as

it is now with the phonics test!). I saw my job then as matching children with books that they could enjoy, as well as advancing their skills and knowledge. Apart from the story-telling and introducing new books at the beginning of the lesson, this was also an individual teaching exercise.

The next step was a year in an Infants School in Cambridge, England. The first six months I had a reception class. The rule was that children were taught in the morning, and in the afternoons engaged in play activities in the class room, similar to our preschool activities. I broke the rules a bit by setting up reading and writing tables as well, and doing my individual teaching, while supervising the play activities. My children seemed to thrive with this arrangement and no one complained.

Then it was back to SA and being a school librarian for a few years before getting married and pregnant and having to resign, as was required in those days, and then moving to Victoria.

Of course, being a stay-at-home mum was also a learning experience. As you would expect, my three children were exposed to books almost from birth and I even remember showing a picture book to one in a crib. They all learnt to read before going to school, which did cause a few problems when they had to endure the reading readiness exercises in Prep. My son's teacher commented to me that he wasn't very good at these exercises, but I knew that he could read and was probably just not interested.

During this time a group of local mums and I set up a Montessori Kindergarten in Geelong. I didn't instigate the project, but was part of the management committee and also worked as a volunteer assistant one day a week. This was also a great learning experience. I appreciated the individual approach to learning and the emphasis on every child learning at their own pace and practising skills until mastery. My youngest child started there at two years and nine months and loved it. I still use Montessori maths equipment and phonics apps in my teaching.

When my three children were all at school, I obtained a part time position as a learning support teacher at Geelong Grammar. My job there was to work with the school psychologist, who was also a lecturer in Education at Deakin University, to move remedial teaching down from Year 5 to Year 1. Now I could indulge myself in genuine individual teaching without getting into trouble.

We called it our Early Intervention

Program and I think we may have been pioneers at this.

The first step was the screen testing of every class in reading and maths using the PAT tests, and then I individually tested any child with a low score, or about whom there were concerns. I also individually tested all children at the end of Prep and you will be horrified to learn that I used Marie Clay's Concepts About Print test, because it was the only one I could find. Of course, I added my own phonemic awareness and phonics subtests. How I taught the children, in small groups or individually, and how often, was left up to me and the class teacher. It seemed to work well, and all of our students learned to read.

In the mid-eighties we had a major crisis, when the Head of English at our Prep to Year 8 campus was given the task of converting the early primary teachers to Whole Language. LDA life member, Dick Weigall, was our Year 5 teacher and he and I, with the help of another class teacher, fought the proposal. There were many arguments at staff meetings, but we won. We convinced the staff that reading and spelling skills had to be taught. We may have been about the only school in the state that refused to become Whole Language believers. From then on the students most in need of individual attention were those coming in from other schools. Much later, about 2005, the junior school moved even further to the right and arranged for all teachers to be trained in the Spalding method.

After 25 years at Geelong Grammar I retired and became an LDA teacher.

This must be one of the most rewarding jobs there is. Every day I am sincerely thanked by parents and their children for the work I do. I know that I am making a big difference in these children's lives. However, it is also frustrating and worrying, because I am aware that these children, and many others who don't get help, are being harmed by their schools. All my students arrive for the assessment and first lessons, anxious and lacking in confidence. Some are home schooled because they just can't cope with the stress and others often tell their parents that they don't want to go to school. These are intelligent, even highly intelligent, often artistically talented children, who think they are dumb and have no future.

Gradually, with the help of lots of decodable readers, a little white board, apps and computer programs, I get them to relax and enjoy the learning process. Once they see that they are making progress, and that they can actually work out words for themselves, for both reading and writing, the main battle is won. Of course, it can take a year or more to overcome the school induced difficulties, and move them to accurate and fluent reading with comprehension. Parents sit in on my lessons and I sometimes have the mothers in tears when they recognise a turning point (that I am sure all other LDA teachers know about) and realise that their child is going to make it as a reader.

We all know that reading is a very complex skill made up of several



Fay Tran receives the 2018 Rosemary Carter Inaugural Award at the LDA AGM on 22 September. Seen here with colleague Jan Roberts, a former President of LDA, and members of Rosemary Carter's family Adrian Carter and Kathy Kang.

subskills. Every child must master all of these skills if they are to succeed, regardless of how difficult some might be to some children, and they must become automatic, so that reading words and comprehension can be managed at the same time.

Teaching is also a complex skill that is more than just choosing a method and then instructing children by following a textbook or program.

For example, I use several different sets of readers, including Fitzroy, Little Learners Love Literacy, MultiLit and a few sets published by Phonics books, and match them to the needs of each child. I often use books from three different sets in the one lesson.

I don't actually plan a lesson, but work from the detailed notes of the previous lesson, and feel my way forward with graphemes, spelling and reading, using whatever exercises, teaching aids, apps and computer programs that seem appropriate at the time.

The most difficult task is to undo the harmful teaching of previous teachers. The habit of guessing words from the first letter and context is very hard to break. The emphasis on fluency is also harmful for both accuracy and comprehension. It is difficult to persuade children to slow down in order to decode accurately, and also to reread any words, phrases and sentences that don't seem to make sense.

If I, and all the other 75 LDA consultants, can teach children to read and spell with only one hour a week, and some back up at home, why can't the schools do it with 30 hours a week?

Not teaching children to read in the first three years of school is what I would call child abuse. In fact, I believe that school principals should be held accountable for teaching every child to read. They cannot be allowed to blame the child or the parents for the failure of their staff to provide every child with the essential skills of literacy.

Thank you, Rosemary Carter, for providing a beacon of light for those of us who have followed in your footsteps.

*Fay Tran has been a Consultant member of LDA since 2011 and is a member of the Consultant Network Group in the Geelong area. She has been active in promoting effective reading instruction through her website Learning2Read, and is the author of two books, Teaching Kids to Read and Harry and the Little White Cloud, and one App, Tricky Spelling. She was the recipient of the LDA Bruce Wicking Award in 2011.*

## LDA President's Award, presented to Rosemary Carter at the LDA AGM on Saturday, 25 August 2007

*Extracted from the LDA Bulletin, Volume 39, No 4, December 2007*

A special President's Award was made to Rosemary Carter at the LDA AGM in Melbourne on 25 August 2007 in recognition of her long and dedicated service to LDA. Rosemary has been a member of LDA since its early days as the *Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers Association of Victoria* and has made a major contribution to LDA both as a member of Council and as Convenor of the Consultants' Committee. She

was instrumental in setting up the LDA Referral Service, becoming the first LDA Referral Officer in 1991, and is well known to all members of LDA, and particularly to our Consultant members. She is held in high regard not only by our members but by those outside of LDA who have appreciated her advice, support and professionalism in all matters relating to provision of services for those with learning difficulties. Our congratulations to Rosemary for this well-deserved award.

# Is decoding about word identification or about making meaning from text?

In this edited version of an article first published on her website, **Alison Clarke** raises questions about the definition of decoding as used by David Hornsby in a recent talk at Sydney University.

Last May, educational consultant David Hornsby spoke at Sydney University about The Role of Phonics in Learning to be Literate, and his talk was recorded and put on YouTube. I recently heard from the Developmental Disorders of Language and Literacy Network that the video was being shared widely by teachers on social media. So I took a look.

Mr Hornsby begins by explaining that his definition of decoding is “making meaning or comprehending”. I did a double-take. Yes, that’s really what he says.

In the solidly-evidence-based Simple View of Reading, the term “decoding” usually means word identification, whether this is achieved by sounding out words, or instantly and without conscious effort, once a familiar word’s spelling, pronunciation and meaning are bonded in memory (via orthographic mapping or, in dual route models, via the lexical route).

Sometimes researchers use “decoding” to mean only sounding out words, but in both its broader and narrower definitions in the reading research, the key focus of decoding is linking print to speech.

Decoding is not about semantics, syntax or context, which fall on the Language Comprehension side of the Simple View of Reading equation (Decoding multiplied by Language Comprehension equals Reading

Comprehension).

Astonishingly, Mr Hornsby’s definition of decoding is also in the Australian Curriculum:

**Decode:** A process of working out the meaning of a text. Decoding strategies involve readers/listeners/viewers drawing on contextual, lexical, alphabetic, grammatical and phonic knowledge to decipher meaning. Readers who decode effectively combine these forms of knowledge fluently and automatically, using meaning to recognise when they make an error and to self-correct.

Mr Hornsby goes on to say that you can’t decode the word “gamp” because it lacks meaning, whereas the meaningful word “lamp” can be decoded.

Which made me wonder whether David Hornsby, or anyone from the Australian Curriculum’s Words May Mean Whatever We Choose Them To Mean Committee, has ever been glamping. I went glamping in 2012 in India, it was marvellous. Our luxury, lakeshore tent even had a plumbed-in toilet.

If the verb “to glamp” is in my spoken vocabulary, but not in yours, does your reading brain tackle its printed form differently to mine? What if you have an inkling that “glamp” is a portmanteau of “glamour” and “camp”? Can a sliver of meaning slide a word over the decoding line? What if you’ve heard it before, but can’t say what it means?

The word “glamping” was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2016, but people have been glamping for centuries. The Ottoman Sultans were right into it. A 1520 diplomatic summit in France involved 2800 tents and marquees and red wine fountains.

In 2012, when I said I was going glamping, was it a meaningful word, or a meaningless pseudoword? Seem like a silly question? That’s because it is.

The boundary between real words and pseudowords is very porous. Words come and go in languages all the time. Think of internet campaigns to revive delightful defunct words like “groak” and “crapulous”. Think of professional jargon and product names. Talk to an eight-year-old enthusiast about Pokemon. Make up a

word and google it.

One person’s real word is another person’s pseudoword. Typical kids starting school only know a few thousand words, so almost everything in the Oxford English Dictionary is a pseudoword to them.

An unfamiliar letter string is just an unfamiliar letter string, until you’ve used your writing system knowledge to convert it to one or more plausible strings of speech sounds (decoded it), so you can see if it rings any bells in your vocabulary.

It might only be in your phonological lexicon (i.e. it sounds familiar) or also in your semantic lexicon (i.e. you know what it means). Many words have more than one meaning, so a child might know what “set” means when talking about setting the table or “ready, set, go”, but not a set of tennis. What matters most for learning to read and spell a word is being able to sound it out, and having heard it before.

Just because you don’t know a word doesn’t make it a non-word. Mr Hornsby’s example non-word “gamp” is actually a real word for a large, unwieldy umbrella.

*Alison Clarke is a speech pathologist from Melbourne who is a passionate advocate for evidence-based practice, and developed the website Spelfabet. Her blog and engaging videos demystify what it means to teach reading, spelling and writing effectively.*

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# The 'Phonics Debate': a lesson in irony

A comment on the ACE/ CIS Phonics Debate by UK blogger **Monique Nowers**, published on her blogpost *How to Teach Reading* at [howtoteachreading.org.uk/](http://howtoteachreading.org.uk/)

**I**rony can be a difficult concept to explain, so I am always delighted when I come across something that exemplifies it so well as to serve as a masterclass.

The setting was the recent 'Phonics Debate' on 31 July 2018 hosted by the Australian College of Educators and the Centre for Independent Studies.

The proposition, 'Phonics in context is not enough: Synthetic phonics & learning to read' was supported by:

1. Distinguished Professor, Anne Castles, Macquarie University
2. Dr Jennifer Buckingham, The Centre for Independent Studies
3. Mr Troy Verey, Marsden Road Public School

Whilst speakers against the proposition, the so-called 'negative' team, were:

1. Professor Robyn Ewing AM, University of Sydney
2. Dr Kathy Rushton, University of Sydney
3. Mr Mark Diamond, Principal, Lansvale Public School

The full debate is available on Youtube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=725&v=snUNsYfrxjY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=725&v=snUNsYfrxjY)

So, what was so ironic? Actually, many of the 'negative' contributions were positively steeped in the stuff, but my jaw did drop when the second 'negative' speaker, Dr Kathy Rushton, opened her remarks by quoting the first few lines of Lewis Carroll's wonderful *Jabberwocky*,

first published in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

*"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!*

I don't wish to misrepresent Dr Rushton so I include her remarks. She said of the poem:

*"...of course there are nonsense words, they're in context, a context that can make sense. And we feel that is what children should be able to do, read texts from the very beginning, and the beginning is, as Robyn [Professor Robyn Ewing] said, at birth, that have meaning for them.*

Now, while *Jabberwocky* enthusiasts may delight in analysing the origins and roots of Carroll's word-crafting, the whole point is that we don't know the precise meaning of the pseudo-words in *Jabberwocky* and no amount of considering the context is going to help us. Carroll did not want us to know, it is all about the sounds of the words as they roll gloriously off our tongues, that paint the picture most vividly. In fact, Alice herself says:

*"It seems very pretty," she said when she had finished it, "but it's rather hard to understand!" (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are!"*

The irony is of course, that unless a child is a fluent and confident decoder, one who eschews guessing and assiduously blends the sounds all the way through the word, it would be impossible for them to independently read *Jabberwocky* at all. It could be of course that Dr Rushton thinks this doesn't matter, as she was at pains to say that real reading was 'silent reading' where the child is free to construct their

own meaning from the text, but personally, I think they'd be missing out.

Moreover, Dr Rushton's words were doubly ironic as her colleague, Professor Robyn



Ewing, had earlier criticised the UK's phonic screening check, particularly for its use of pseudo-words. Professor Ewing correctly informed us that the check consists of 20 real words and 20 pseudo-words, but then despaired about the children "disadvantaged" by it because they could already "read". By this she meant the sort of child who couldn't meet the standard because they 'have to make meaning' of the words they are trying to read which will lead them to resolve any word they don't immediately recognise into one they're more comfortable with, typically one which is visually similar. Therefore, when faced with a pseudo-word they guess, e.g. the *strom-to-storm* example so often bandied about. It is just such a child who could not then read *Jabberwocky*.

However, Professor Ewing's criticisms were either woefully uninformed or deliberately disingenuous because the phonics check, in fact, provides a very clear, child-friendly context for the pseudo-words it presents:

*"All pseudo-words in the check are accompanied by a picture of an imaginary creature. This provides a context for the child (naming the type of imaginary creature) to ensure that they are not trying to match the pseudo-word to a word in their vocabulary."*

It is always made absolutely clear to each child whether the words they are trying to read are real words or made up 'alien' names.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-screening-check-sample-materials-and-training-video>

But, as fabulous as *Jabberwocky* is, reading it (or Roald Dahl etc.) isn't why

we need to check if children's phonic skills are secure enough for them to be able to read pseudo-words. It is necessary because it is vitally important to know if, for example, they can read:

- new vocabulary
- words they haven't seen in print before
- syllables of multisyllable words
- words they know but with new-to-them suffixes
- people and place names  
...and so on.

Of course, English has many obscure words that we could possibly use instead, an unknown word is the same to the child as a pseudo-word, but as individual vocabularies vary so much we couldn't be certain that the chosen words would be unknown to every child. Using pseudo-words is also the fairest to the child, as it is a clear signal that they need to carefully decode, and not guess.

In later comments, Dr Rushton said of her experience of teaching reading:

*"I've taught kindergarten...I've watched children struggle...it [the reading problem] happened before I got to meet the child. It happened in the home."*

Like her colleague before her, Dr Rushton was keen to lay the blame for reading failure at the door of parents and children. To be fair, I understand why she might think this. If a child hasn't been explicitly taught to read (and they won't have in Ewing/Rushton's model classrooms) then they have no choice but to use the 'compensatory strategies' that only poor readers use, such as guessing from context, to try and identify the words before them. And should that child suffer the double disadvantage of having more limited spoken language skills, then you can see why they might struggle to learn to guess as fluently as their peers.

Rushton was correct in identifying that competent adults do use context to help them understand the meaning of new words, but what they absolutely don't do is to use context to decode or identify the words, particularly not of words that they know the meaning of. They don't use context to guess at "slithy toves" or "borogoves", they decode. That is the fundamental difference that she and her colleagues have stubbornly failed to grasp. And, frankly, I still haven't decided quite what 'context' makes any sense of what the 'negative' team had to say at all.

*Monique Nowers has been a specialist dyslexia, reading and maths tutor for over 20 years, and also a school governor for over 15 years. As well as tutoring she provides phonics training to schools and parents and teaches English as a foreign language. She is a member of the UK Reading Reform Foundation and has established a blog on How to teach Reading at [howtoteachreading.org.uk](http://howtoteachreading.org.uk). Email [nowers@nowers.net](mailto:nowers@nowers.net).*

## The Phonics Debate

The Phonics Debate, *Phonics in context is not enough: synthetic phonics and learning to read*, was organised by the Australian College of Educators (ACE) and the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), and was held in Sydney on 31st July 2018, with speakers Distinguished Professor Anne Castles, Macquarie University, Dr Jennifer Buckingham, The Centre for Independent Studies, and Mr Troy Verey, Marsden Road Public School, who spoke for the proposition, and Professor Robyn Ewing AM, University of Sydney, Dr Kathy Rushton, University of Sydney,

and Mr Mark Diamond, Principal, Lansvale Public School, who spoke against the proposition.

The presentations of the participants in this debate, together with comments on the debate, were subsequently published in a Special Issue of the ACE publication *The Professional Educator*, which is available online to members of ACE, or can be purchased in print from ACE by non-members of ACE.

There is also a video of the debate that can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snUNsYfrxjY>

# Education Reporting in Australia

**Greg Ashman recommends four education reporters to follow.**

We all know that education reporting is often quite poor. Straightened media outlets have ditched their dedicated education sections and reports often read as little more than the press release that prompted them. At worst, we read a breathless account of how Arcadia High School has introduced Cyborgs into History lessons and why everyone thinks this is marvellous.

However, there are signs of change in Australia. The Sydney Morning Herald has decided to devote a [page](#) to education every Monday. And I perceive the increasing clout of some great journalists who do investigative work and ask the difficult questions that the press releases don't address. Here are four to follow (in no particular order):

## 1. Rebecca Urban, The Australian (@RurbsOz)

Urban has recently been looking into the links between the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and wacky American 21st century skills guru, Charles Fadel, prompting the federal education minister, Dan Tehan, into a [response](#). Urban has also worked hard to unpack the related issues with the recent Gonski 2.0 review.

The Australian is paywalled, making access to Urban's articles tricky. I have no objection to newspapers seeking payment for their journalism but I do

think the option of paying per article (e.g. \$1.00) should be available, particularly as many teachers will only be interested in reading the education stories.

## 2. Henrietta Cook, The Age (@henriettacook)

Cook's journalism is strong in two key elements. She is critical, challenging rather than simply accepting established positions, and she brings debates from within the education community to the general public in a way that parents and other non-specialists can understand. Her piece (and the one that prompted me to write this article) published on September 29, 2018 titled, [Dull, predictable: The problem with books for prep students](#), is an excellent exploration of the issue of decodable versus predictable early readers. It might sound dry, but by personalising the issue, Cook manages to convey its importance.

## 3. Jordan Baker, The Sydney Morning Herald (@JordsBaker)

Baker is from the same Fairfax stable as Cook and has a similar style. In her article, [Hard facts v soft skills: a new front in the education wars](#) published on September 1, 2018, Baker gives a good airing to the sceptical view of 21st century skills, something that is rare outside of Urban and The Australian. It was especially important, in my opinion, for the views of Alan Finkel, Australia's Chief Scientist, to be given space. 21st century skills have been given a big push from the Gonski 2.0 review and so it is critical for the public to know what is at stake.

## 4. Natasha Robinson, The ABC (@NC\_Robinson)

Robinson is highly visible in the education community, having recently chaired the excellent [phonics debate](#) put together by the Australian College of Educators and the Centre for Independent Studies.

Robinson is also the go-to person on the continuing saga of [school funding](#). Funding is not my area of expertise but it is important and Robinson does a good job of explaining the issues.



*This is an edited version of a piece that was originally published on September 29, 2018 on Greg Ashman's blog [Filling the Pail](#), which can be found at <https://gregashman.wordpress.com>. The original, with links to the articles referred to, can be found there and is highly recommended.*

*Greg Ashman is a teacher working in Ballarat, Victoria and is also currently undertaking a PhD. He is on Twitter as [@greg\\_ashman](#) and has recently published his second book, *The Truth About Teaching: An Evidence Informed Guide for New Teachers*. Greg is an active blogger and has had articles published in *The Australian*, *Quillette*, *The Age*, *The Spectator* and *the Conversation*. Read more on Greg's blog at <https://gregashman.wordpress.com/bio>. Email [greg.ashman@gmail.com](mailto:greg.ashman@gmail.com)*

# Think on This

## A comment from Kirsten Duncombe on the public stance of the NSW Teachers Federation on the teaching of reading.

It is notable that the NSW Teachers Federation has recently weighed in on matters of effective literacy instruction.

Specifically, the NSW Teachers Federation commissioned Sydney University Professor Robyn Ewing to write a report on the teaching of reading. This report, published in mid-2018 and entitled *Exploding Some of the Myths about Learning to Read*, was commissioned after a departmental research paper was published that supported an emphasis on synthetic phonics when teaching reading.

In her paper, Robyn Ewing makes clear her belief that phonics in context, as already embedded in most initial teacher training programs, and as currently practised in the majority of primary schools across Australia, is enough.

It is not my intention here to weigh in on the specifics of this ongoing debate.

Instead, I wish to come at this from the perspective of a subject close to the heart of all of us in education: critical thinking.

Carl Sagan wisely noted that “science is a way of thinking much more than it is a body of knowledge”. This quotation dovetails nicely with the Oxford dictionary’s definition of critical thinking as “the process of analysing information in an objective way, in order to make a judgement about it”.

One of our 21 Century teaching objectives is to foster and reward critical thinking in our students, preparing them, in as much as we ever can, for the unique challenges that the coming decades will bring. It is only fitting, then, that we hold ourselves, and each other,

to high standards in this domain also, actively engaging in, and acknowledging, critical thinking methodology.

If the NSW Teachers Federation, or anyone else for that matter, wants to comment or advise on the place of systematic synthetic phonics in early reading instruction, it is imperative that they first acquaint themselves with the research and the theory on both sides of the debate.

To understand the theory and supporting data of advocates of phonics in context, I recommend reading the work of Stephen Krashen, Kenneth Goodman, Frank Smith and Margaret M Clark.

For information supporting the claim that phonics needs to be taught systematically, following a clear scope and sequence, see the work of Mark Seidenberg, Louisa Moats, Stanislas Dehaene and Maryanne Wolf.

Good critical thinkers will familiarise themselves with both sides of a debate, and in addition will seek out intelligent criticisms of each side as well.

Good critical thinkers use evidence-based reasoning, and do not confuse opinion with fact.

And good critical thinkers are on guard for common thinking errors, which include:

- Cherry picking – glossing over alternative perspectives
- Anecdote – using a personal experience instead of a sound argument or compelling evidence
- Appeal to authority or consensus – attempting to justify the conclusion by quoting an authority in its support or on the basis of how many people hold the same view
- Circular reasoning – where the premise of an argument or a conclusion is used as support for the argument. Usually this happens when evidence is missing or glossed over
- Cognitive shortcut bias – doggedly sticking with a favoured view, when other more logical possibilities exist
- Jumping to conclusions – using only a few facts for a definitive conclusion

This is not just an appeal to the NSW Teachers Federation, but to any one of us who is prepared to step in and comment or advise on the role of systematic

synthetic phonics instruction in early reading. Effective literacy instruction is too important an issue for any of us to take a public or professional stance on

without having done our homework.

Have we engaged in wide reading and research on this issue, from both sides of the divide?

And are we modelling best practice critical thinking methodology that would do our students proud?

*This comment has been abstracted from Kirsten’s open letter to the NSW Teacher’s Federation on her blog post at <https://kirstenduncombe.wordpress.com/author/kirstenduncombe/>*

*Kirsten Duncombe is a high school teacher who worked as a Visual Arts teacher for 10 years, teaching students in Years 7 to 12. After her experiences of having her own child go through early primary school without learning to read or spell, Kirsten was inspired to retrain as a Learning and Support teacher. Kirsten now works in Learning and Support in a NSW public high school. Email [kirstenduncombe@gmail.com](mailto:kirstenduncombe@gmail.com)*



# An open letter to student teachers

**Pamela Snow's open letter to student teachers encourages them to improve their understanding of the history of reading instruction and the science of how children learn to read, so that they are able to better provide the evidence-informed literacy and reading instruction which their students will need.**

**D**ear Student Teachers

I'd like to have a chat with you. It's about reading. Yes, I know you're probably being told to think about literacy, and even about multiple literacies, but let's get down to tin-tacks about the business of lifting meaning off a page of printed text, because all children need to be able to do that. It's non-negotiable. Specifically, we need to talk about an unpalatable fact that you may not yet be aware of - the fact that too many children exit primary school with reading, writing, and spelling skills that are years below the level that they will need to make the transition to secondary school and succeed academically and vocationally. I don't know if you have spoken with any secondary teachers recently and asked them how satisfied they are with the reading, writing, and spelling skills of the Year 7 students they are enrolling? I have, and they are not happy.

We've known for at least a couple of decades now that certain factors and approaches promote the successful transition to literacy in the early years of school. For reasons that are puzzling to the rest of us, though, a large number of education academics don't seem willing, able and/or interested in engaging with this evidence. The problem is that this impacts on what you, as student teachers, are taught about reading in your pre-service education. You might be interested to know that many teachers, even recent graduates, bemoan the fact that they learnt precious little (if anything at all) about teaching reading, and much of what they did learn was inaccurate, out-dated (even at the time), and unhelpful to the most vulnerable students they meet in their classrooms.

So it's increasingly untenable for the rest of us to ignore this and look the other way.

Your lecturers are right to point out that one of the factors that influences reading success is children's early oral language exposure. As a speech pathologist, I am right on board with the importance for reading of early expressive and receptive vocabulary, syntactic complexity and narrative production and comprehension. We know that children from more advantaged family backgrounds generally arrive at school better equipped to make the transition to literacy, and of course that makes teachers' jobs easier. The more advanced the starting point for any learner, the easier it is for a teacher or instructor, on just about any skill. This applies to learning a musical instrument, acquiring a second language, and learning how to drive a car – something you may have done recently. Prior knowledge and skill can provide a great head-start.

But this does not mean that biology is destiny or that what you do in the classroom is irrelevant. On the contrary, it means that that what you do as the classroom teacher is critically important if the trajectories of children's lives are

to be changed. Education is meant to level the opportunity playing field, but children can't be successful academically without strong reading, writing, and spelling skills.



Did you know that learning to read is not "biologically natural"? It's actually a recent innovation in terms of human civilisation (only about 6,000 years old) and humans must adapt language and visual systems in the brain to accommodate this culturally, socially, academically, and economically important contrivance. We don't fully understand why (a combination of genes and environment no doubt) some children seem to quite seamlessly make the transition to literacy, almost irrespective of the type of reading instruction they receive. A large proportion do not, however, and they need explicit instruction by highly knowledgeable teachers, right from the outset. If you start from behind, your progress has to be accelerated in the early years of school, so you can catch up with your more advantaged peers and keep up with the curriculum. But you don't catch up unless you are being specifically taught the knowledge and skills that more able learners already have when they come to school.

This might sound like a strange proposition, but when you graduate, you will really be at the front line of our public health workforce. The literacy (and numeracy) skills that students exit primary school with play a large part in determining their health and wellbeing across the life-span. If you don't have strong literacy skills, you will probably exit school early, and be unable to engage in further vocational training or higher education. This is an issue because in nations such as Australia, jobs for unskilled workers are rapidly disappearing. In a technology-based

economy, students need to be able to stay at school and complete Year 12, so that their life chances (social, economic, mental health) are strong. Youth detention centres and adult prisons are full of people with low literacy skills, because of a “school-to-prison pipeline” phenomenon that sees an over representation of young people from complex, disadvantaged backgrounds exiting school early and unequipped for life. It does not need to be this way. If you don’t believe me about our economy becoming more technology-based, think about the self-checkout points at your local supermarket. What jobs do they take away? What jobs do they create?

You probably won’t hear terms like “Whole Language” in your pre-service training, but this is almost certainly a pervasive influence on what you are being told about how children learn to read, and what you should be doing in the classroom to support this. In fact, you’ll probably be told that the best approach is something with the reassuring name “Balanced Literacy”. But don’t be fooled. This is just Whole Language in a new dress. They both draw on a de-bunked set of ideas that originated in the 1970s and should have been completely retired by the 1980s, but sadly, they persist. Examples of such ideas and approaches include the so-called “Three Cueing” (or “Multi-Cueing”) strategy for beginning readers, remedial programs such as Reading Recovery, and the use of predictable, levelled readers in the early years (vs using decodable texts for beginners). At some point, you may become so angry that you feel like asking the government to refund your university fees. After all, you assumed that by enrolling in an accredited primary education degree, you would be exposed to scientifically accurate and up-to-date information. This will not have been the case for many (maybe even most) of you.

Teacher knowledge of how phonemes, graphemes, digraphs, trigraphs, schwa vowels, syllables (stressed and unstressed), morphemes, words, and discourse-level text work in a linguistic sense is way too low. Do you know what all of these terms mean? It’s actually not OK if you don’t and you may find you need to spend a lot of your own time and money after you’ve graduated, trading in your already out-of-date pre-service education on knowledge that has been around for decades but wilfully and knowingly withheld from you while you were at university.

Once you graduate, I recommend that you seek out other professionals (e.g., speech pathologists and educational psychologists) whose pre-service education has probably taught them quite well about the structure of language and how reading works (this can be variable though, to be fair). These professionals will be happy to work and learn with you to support your knowledge and skills, and to promote the interdisciplinary teamwork that can be a most satisfying part of life in schools. I think that teachers should be the most knowledgeable practitioners in schools about all aspects of reading, but unfortunately over recent decades education academics have collectively discarded and/or rejected a large body of specialised knowledge that rightly belongs to you as a future education graduate. Perhaps you could ask some of your lecturers about how they have allowed this situation to develop.

If you’re nearing the end of your pre-service education to become a primary school teacher and have not yet heard about the fact that in the last two decades there have been three international inquiries into the teaching of reading (USA, UK, and Australia), then this is very worrying. Wouldn’t you think this is core knowledge, that (again) belongs to you as a teaching professional? Most importantly, you need to know what those inquiries concluded and recommended for you, the classroom teacher, so that your students achieve strong academic outcomes, regardless of their starting point. Another one for you to ask your lecturers about (but I predict some fairly dismissive responses).

Perhaps you’ve been told by your lecturers that teachers are professionals and as such are in a position (and have the “right” in fact) to choose approaches that they think best for their students. Well this is all well and good but being a professional does not mean “choosing your own adventure” in the classroom. It means working from the best available scientifically-derived evidence and modifying your practices as new research findings come to hand and pass through a “quality filter” in terms of their strength and relevance to your practice. Would you prefer to go to a medical practitioner who did his or her own thing, according to personal preference, or to one whose practice reflects robust and recent evidence? Similarly, when you get on an aeroplane, do you want the pilot to try out a few ideas of his or her own, or do you

expect that a pre-determined protocol will be adhered to, and evidence-informed judgement will be applied if something unexpected occurs? Unfortunately, you and your colleagues won’t be accorded true professional status in the eyes of the community until all education academics take scientific rigour seriously. Simply demanding professional autonomy and respect doesn’t cut it.

There’s a science to teaching reading, but you are probably told that it is really all about your relationship with your students, exposing them to beautiful children’s literature, and some incidental, embedded instruction, ideally with not too much emphasis on phonics. Your relationship with your students is important, as is their exposure to quality children’s literature. This may even be enough for some students, but you are bound to feel perplexed, frustrated and even saddened by the lack of progress that some students make in the face of well-intentioned low-impact teaching strategies. A particularly pernicious message you may have been “sold” by education lecturers is that reading failure reflects children’s home environments, i.e., a failure of parents to talk to and read to their children enough in the pre-school years. This is inaccurate and is an unforgivable dereliction of responsibility on the part of education academics for what goes on in the classroom. Make no mistake, your knowledge of language and literacy, and what you do in the classroom matters enormously and you can make a large and satisfying difference to students’ futures.

Another argument that is sometimes entertained by teacher unions, education academics, and some teachers is that all that is needed to lift the performance of struggling readers is more money. Think about it though. It costs the same dollar amount to have a teacher in front of a class, regardless of what they are doing instruction-wise. More money is unlikely to be forthcoming in the near future, and even if it was, it’s teachers’ knowledge and instructional practices that make a difference, not politicians opening their treasure-chests at election time. The fact that many schools in disadvantaged areas punch above their weight on academic achievement is proof of this. So, this is actually good news for you – you are entering a profession in which you can make a difference to the arc of children’s lives, provided that you are knowledgeable and skilled as a professional.

Your own language and literacy skills are important. You can’t teach what you

do not know. As noted above, you'll need to prepare for some serious up-skilling early on in your career if you are going to have an explicit (as opposed to only an implicit) knowledge of how language works, in both spoken and written forms. This will be particularly important when you are teaching students who don't seem to immediately "get" reading. At the moment, though, we create way too many instructional casualties – children who do not have an intrinsic learning disability, but can end up appearing this way, as a result of inadequate or misguided early instruction. It's not easy to catch these kids up – much better to teach them properly the first-time round and avoid the added complication of behavioural and emotional difficulties that often accompany reading problems.

I know that what I am saying here may be depressing and alarming, but it is not information that should be sugar-coated. If you are committed to

teaching because you believe it is a way of being a positive influence in the lives of children, then don't let go of your aspirations and motivations for becoming a teacher. Connect with teachers who have had their own epiphanies about reading instruction and adopt a sceptical stance when your pre-service education and your classroom observations and experiences don't align.

Hopefully, over the course of your career, things will change substantially, and beginning teachers will be equipped with current evidence about how reading works, how to teach reading, and how to best identify and support struggling readers early on in their journeys.

There are plenty of people and resources out there to help you, but also plenty of distracting edu-fads and pseudo-science, as well as some out-dated notions that are very difficult to dislodge. In spite of all of this, though, you can make a difference and can elevate the standing

of the teaching profession for those who come after you.

Good luck!

*This piece was originally published on the Snow Report on 5 August 2018.*

*The original can be found at <http://pamelasnow.blogspot.com/2018/08/an-open-letter-to-student-teachers.html>.*

*Professor Pamela Snow is both a speech-language pathologist and a registered psychologist. She is Head of the Rural Health School at La Trobe University. Her research concerns risk in early life, particularly as this pertains to oral language competence and early literacy instruction and attainment. She is a Fellow of Speech Pathology Australia and a former State Chair of the Australian Psychological Society. Read more on Pamela's blog at <http://pamelasnow.blogspot.com>. Email [P.Snow@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:P.Snow@latrobe.edu.au)*

## Pamela Snow reflects on The Reading League Conference, Syracuse, October 2018

In late October, I had the great honour of attending and participating in *The Reading League Conference*, in Syracuse, in upstate New York. The Reading League was formed just a couple of years ago, with the aim of advancing the awareness, understanding, and use of evidence-based reading instruction, and has the byline *When we know better, we do better*. It is the brain-child of Dr Maria Murray, a former academic at State University of New York (Oswego), ably supported by a team including Drs Jorene Cook, Heidi

Beverine-Curry, Michelle Storie, and Ms Stephanie Finn. The enthusiasm, sense of shared endeavour, and demonstrable capacity for hard work these people display is nothing short of inspirational. It was therefore additionally wonderful to learn at the conference that *The Reading League* has been the recipient of a large philanthropic donation (USD 9million) from the *Pleasant T. Rowland Foundation*. We can only dream of philanthropy on this scale in Australia, but I am confident that it will be put to good use, both to expand national programs for teachers, and to

commence an endowment fund. My congratulations to *The Reading League* team on this outstanding achievement, especially so soon after its creation.

Keynote speakers at the Conference in Syracuse included Dr Louisa Moats, Dr Steve Dykstra, and Dr David Kilpatrick. Some of the academic and applied highlights of the conference program are discussed on my blogpost about *The Reading League Conference*, which can be found at <https://pamelasnow.blogspot.com/2018/11/the-reading-league-conference-tour-de.html>.

# Book Review: Learning disorders: A response to intervention perspective

Reviewed by **Wendy Moore.**

*Peter Westwood, Learning disorders: A response to intervention perspective, Routledge, 2017.*

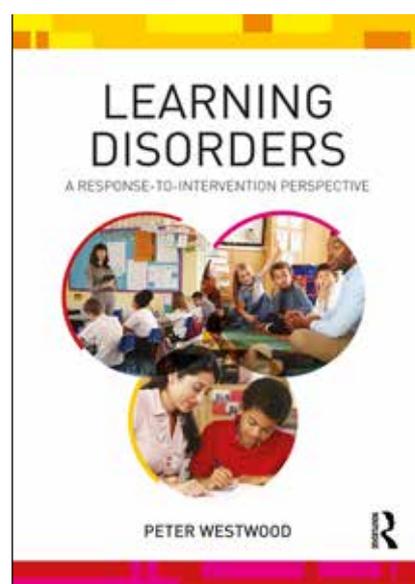
I am very much committed to making sure that students at my school are given the support they need to be successful, so was delighted to receive this little gem to review. Peter Westwood is a prolific and assured authority in the field of learning difficulties and disorders, and this short, clear and practical guide communicates directly with schools and teachers about how they can make a difference. I would have been a little disappointed if I had been able to read this book without it challenging any of my current beliefs and practices; I don't undertake professional reading just to have my current thinking corroborated! No fear of that though: *Learning Disorders* got me delving back into the research, questioning assumptions, and emailing teachers at my school about things I am now wondering about. In short, it has proven to be a great little poke in the ribs.

The book is of very manageable length, but still covers plenty of ground. First, Westwood sets the scene, clearly explaining how learning disorders have been conceptualised over time, and how they are currently understood in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. For Australian readers this is an absolute boon – while there is a focus on our context, this is

balanced and enriched by international perspectives. Next, he carefully explains how learning disorders might be distinguished from other causes of poor academic performance, and how they might be exacerbated by these other factors. He then clearly describes the characteristics and learning needs of students with reading disorders, writing disorders, and mathematical learning disorders. In the last part of the book, other difficulties that can impact on learning are discussed.

We can all get hung up on terminology: is it a learning difficulty, specific or otherwise, or is it a learning disorder? Should we call it dyslexia, or reading disorder? Does dysgraphia refer to handwriting specifically, or writing more broadly? Westwood handles these issues deftly, explaining how each term has been used, but stubbornly refusing to enter into arguments about which term is 'best' or 'right'. While practitioners and theorists will have particular reasons for their nomenclature choices, they have little bearing on what should happen in classrooms, and that is the approach taken in this book.

A particular strength of *Learning Disorders* is its adoption of the three-tier *response to intervention* model as the basis of its recommendations for supporting students in schools. Westwood thus places responsibility for the progress of students with learning disorders where it belongs: with whole school policy and resourcing. He makes clear that schools must make the necessary provision for providing quality teachers, effective instructional models and robust learning programs at each of the recommended three tiers of support: the mainstream classroom context, regular small group remediation for those at risk, and daily individual intervention for students who require it. The book thus provides a very clear guide for school leaders.



In the chapter about dyslexia, Westwood notes that the three-tier intervention model should begin at Tier One with effective teaching that focuses in the first years of school on phonemic awareness, phonics, and the automatic recognition of frequently occurring words. He argues that reading instruction should begin with the systematic teaching of letter-sound correspondences using a synthetic phonics program, and explains what this might look like. Usefully, he lists some available programs that are good examples of this approach. He explains that this learning should never occur in isolation, and that providing students with appropriate decodable texts that allow them to practise the phonic patterns that they have learnt is critical. Westwood notes that flash cards and digital resources offer appropriate practice activities, and that linking phonic learning with early spelling practice is very useful. He also emphasises the importance of teaching reading comprehension strategies, and reminds us that young students need to

have engaging stories read to them daily. Westwood notes that despite effective delivery of good early instruction, some students will require additional support. Some students will require second tier, or even third tier support, and the earlier these students are identified and remediation provided, the better.

The model of Tier Two support for reading disorders described in this book includes intensive daily teaching in groups of up to four students, preferably using a program with carefully sequenced steps. Active engagement, accelerated pace, frequent positive (and corrective) feedback and mandatory re-teaching to mastery are all required, and are the hallmarks of an explicit instruction approach. Westwood suggests that commercial programs are often effective ways to achieve these outcomes, and provides *MacqLit* and *Success for All* as examples.

Tier Three support for the three percent of students with the most entrenched reading disorders requires daily, individual sessions. The argument here is that this remediation should be provided by a very experienced teacher rather than a paraprofessional. As well as intensive and accelerated teaching, this daily tutoring can involve counselling. In *Learning Disorders* Westwood describes some different Tier Three interventions. He describes the efficacy of *Reading Recovery* (RR), but notes that, to be optimal, this approach will require modification through a supplementary focus on phonics. He cites research suggesting that individual tutoring, as required by RR, may be too expensive an option for students who can be helped just as effectively by strong Tier One and Tier Two programs, and notes that RR may have limited applicability for students with the highest levels of need. Westwood then describes the evidence available in support of both the *MultiLit Reading Tutor Program* and *QuickSmart Literacy* (from the University of New England in NSW), as well as linking to other systematic reviews of a range of online and face to face programs which focus more heavily on Tier One and Tier Two interventions, many of which appear to have good efficacy.

*Learning Disorders* includes a really useful chapter on writing and spelling disorders, again from a three-tier response to intervention framework. Westwood emphasises the need for teaching, rather than just encouraging, spelling and writing structures and processes. While he supports the view

of writing as a communicative and social process, he is wary of classroom writing environments that lack direct teacher guidance. He notes that, at Tier One, all students need to become confident with handwriting and spelling, typing and word processing, constructing and punctuating sentences, and with creating paragraphs. He also emphasises the need for teacher vigilance in identifying students who require support from the very first year at school. He is critical of a developmental perspective that assumes that writing will emerge in due course given enough encouragement and opportunity. Rather, Westwood encourages Tier Two interventions from early on. The important message here is that dyslexic students and others with difficulty framing their ideas to compose text will require structures to scaffold the writing process.

One minor concern I have about this book is the relatively brief discussion of students who have a significant difficulty with the oral language requirements of reading comprehension and broader academic engagement. While Westwood does discuss the additional needs of students with *specific language impairment* (now more commonly referred to as *developmental language disorder*), he suggests that this is a relatively small group compared to those presenting with dyslexia. However, co-occurrence is common: around half of students with reading difficulties, including those who are the most resistant to intervention, may also experience DLD (see the review by Adlof & Hogan, 2018). Westwood makes the sensible suggestion that students with oral language-based difficulties will require additional support with vocabulary and other aspects of language, but makes no specific suggestions for the content of these interventions. This omission reflects the reality in schools: short of individually designed speech pathology interventions, comprehensive oral language enrichment programs are difficult to source.

The chapter on mathematical learning difficulties, like the earlier chapters, is organised into tiers of intervention. At Tier One, Westwood makes sensible suggestions about how to balance the need for learning basic arithmetic facts with the need for students to be engaged in meaningful mathematical problem solving. Appropriate focus areas and teaching methodologies for Tier Two and Tier

Three are provided, and include judicious selection of digital learning resources. Suggested resources include *Math Recovery*, *Numeracy Recovery*, and the *QuickSmart Mathematics Intervention*. There is also reference to reports and reviews which evaluate a number of other resources.

This handy reference book is balanced, up-to-date, and a very useful reference to assist schools and teachers to decide how to organise intervention and where to start with program selection. Even more importantly, it is a reminder that meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties is not only an educational imperative, it is actually very achievable. Use it as a guide to make a start, or to do even better.

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# A Country Practice – meeting Kate Munro in rural Mudgee

**Ann Ryan interviews Kate Munro, an LDA Consultant Member located in Mudgee, NSW.**

**K**ate established and now works as a specialist teacher for struggling students in a private business, Advokate, in Mudgee. This rural city with close to 10,000 people, in the central west region of NSW about three hours drive from Sydney, is known as a coal mining and wine producing region.

**What led to you to specialise in the field of learning difficulties?**

I am a primary teacher. When she was in Year 1 my daughter experienced unexpected difficulty in learning to read, and being in a regional area, no one seemed to know what to do. It didn't make sense to me that a bright young student (since assessed as being in the 90th percentile on a cognitive assessment) with good language skills was unable to read. At that time there were no services or supports available in our rural area, so I knew that I had to become my daughter's teacher.

**How did you learn the skills to support a student with specific learning needs?**

First, I attended a two-day SPELD workshop in Orange where I met the inspirational Lin Meeks. Empowered and excited by my new learning, I followed this with an online Graduate Certificate of Education in Learning Difficulties from Edith Cowan University in Perth. I learnt so much doing that course, and I guess it generated a passion for learning more about learning difficulties, especially

how to teach children who struggle with literacy and numeracy. Reflecting on my past teaching practices, and the number of students that I had taught, my studies opened a new way of looking at things – which of course has now become my day to day practice.

**What does your day to day work look like?**

I am self-employed and work privately. My business name, Advokate, is a helpful play on words to reflect the nature of my business which provides intervention and advocacy. As a parent and past classroom teacher, I feel that I am in a good position to advocate for students who are struggling. Where possible I try to work with the child, parent, school and health professionals. While most teachers are open to receiving assessment reports and recommendations, this is not always the case. Sometimes I feel like the stand-alone person.

Most students come to me after school, although I see five students while they are at school. Sessions mostly run for one hour, with some delivered in two half hour sessions. I am trialling three 20 minute remote sessions for early years students. Three of my current students are remote and their online sessions are facilitated by Zoom.

**How do students find you?**

My clients have all found me through word of mouth. I have no need to advertise although I have joined the LDA Online Tutor Search. This is particularly helpful in situations where a paediatrician or educational psychologist recommends that parents seek the services of an LDA Consultant. Since starting my business with one student eighteen months ago, soon after my family moved to Mudgee, I am now at



full capacity with 24 students and I have a waiting list of 26 (this is down from 30 as I have employed another teacher who works under my supervision).

#### **How do you know what support students need?**

I get as much information as possible through health reports, school reports, my standardised assessments, parents and sometimes the child. I then draft an IEP which I send to the family for suggested adjustments. If the parents would like to access advocacy services, they will then usually organise a meeting with the school and I attend. It is a positive process, and it allows for collaborative sharing and review. Many parents do not realise that they should have input into the development of the IEP and regular reviews. I can support them through this process.

#### **What are the challenges of living in a remote rural area for assisting students with specific learning difficulties?**

Firstly, diagnosis. It is costly both in terms of dollars and time for a family to travel to a major centre or city for an assessment by an educational psychologist. It can also be exhausting for the child. The trip often requires an overnight stay for the family. Then there is the difficulty for teaching staff to access the guidance needed to interpret the report and to respond with appropriate interventions, particularly when the support of an educational psychologist is not immediately available. I think the situation is changing, but slowly.

For teachers and specialist staff it can be a tough thing to get to professional development sessions that are specific to the needs of students with learning difficulties. For many small rural schools who are strapped for funding, it is especially difficult to send staff to a PD and to provide cover with replacement staff. So being in a regional area often seems to make it ten times harder.

#### **What programs do you regularly use?**

Among other programs I use Toe by Toe for secondary students and Cracking the ABC Code for early years students. I introduce Dibels from K to Year 9 to monitor the development of reading skills. I send decodable reading material home – often from the Totem or Talisman series, Little Learner's Love Literacy program and Fitzroy Readers.

#### **How do you determine and monitor student progress?**

The formal assessment reports from educational psychologists that some students arrive with are an excellent starting point, along with NAPLAN

results and school reports. I usually do a Woodcock Reading Mastery assessment on the initial visit. I use Dibels progress tracking for accuracy and fluency, and Dibels DAZE for monitoring comprehension. The data from the Dibels program is especially useful when sharing progress reports with parents.

#### **If you could recommend only one text, what would it be?**

Equipped for Reading Success, by David Kilpatrick, is my go-to favourite. The power of that book allows me to teach phonology to older students – it is wonderful and the kids love challenging themselves with the one minute activities.

#### **And what if you could wave a magic wand?**

For my business/consultancy practice I would love to see more qualified people available to work alongside me. I have recently employed a teacher who has completed the SPELD teacher training course which ran over six months, one weekend per month – quite a commitment. Not many local people are willing or able to commit to this training. To find a local LDA certified Specialist Consultant Teacher would be wonderful as at the moment I am the only one here registered to work with LDA referred students.

#### **So why did you join the LDA Specialist Teacher Team?**

When doing my Graduate Certificate through Edith Cowan University, I met Lorraine Hammond. Both she and the course inspired me with such great and valuable information that I wanted to be closely involved with LDA. Being in regional NSW, having other like-minded people to network with was really important. I love the collegiate support and ongoing learning I am exposed to through LDA Consultant membership.

#### **Last words?**

The work we do as specialist teachers is extremely important. Unfortunately, there are too few specialist teachers to cope with the need but hopefully one day this will change. I would be very happy to be made redundant!

*Ann Ryan is the Convenor of the LDA Consultants Committee, email [convenor.consultant@ldaustralia.org](mailto:convenor.consultant@ldaustralia.org)*

*Kate Munro is an LDA Consultant Member based in Mudgee, NSW. Kate runs Advocate Educational Solutions which supports students with Learning Difficulties/Disabilities through evidence based tuition and advocacy. She is an accredited SPELD NSW Tutor and Learning Difficulties*

*Australia Specialist Literacy and Numeracy Teacher. Kate provides assessments and intervention programs for students from Kindergarten to Year 10. Individualised programs are delivered on a one on one basis. Kate can also work with pre-school students to develop pre reading skills before starting school. Along with providing intervention, Kate can work with parents, schools and health professionals to develop Individual Learning Plans for students with disabilities. If you have any questions please contact Kate on 0427298357 or [kate@advokateeducational.com.au](mailto:kate@advokateeducational.com.au)*

We welcome the submission of articles from LDA members and others with an interest in learning difficulties for possible inclusion in upcoming editions of this Bulletin.

Please submit articles, correspondence about the Bulletin, or letters for publication to the editor. For questions about content, deadlines, length or style, please contact the editor. (Email: [pubs.media@ldaustralia.org](mailto:pubs.media@ldaustralia.org))

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Requests to reprint articles from the Bulletin should be addressed to the editor.

# Consultant Notes

## From the Consultants Committee Convenor, Ann Ryan

There has been a flurry of activity since the last Consultant News and many opportunities for consultants to participate in professional development and to build points necessary for renewal. With a drive to attract new consultant members to service the needs of students across Australia, there has been an equal emphasis on providing professional development opportunities in cities around Australia. The 2019 Professional Development program will begin with Dr Ann Williams presenting a session on practical maths strategies for students with dyscalculia on February 10th at the Treacy Centre in Melbourne. Registration is available through the LDA website.

The Online Tutor Search (OTS) service continues to be well used by those seeking the services of a specialist teacher in learning difficulties. Currently, changes are underway to allow users to be well-versed on the services any individual consultant offers, and to make an informed choice before contacting any tutor. Tutors will be invited to submit a brief profile on their experience, qualifications, and specific areas of interest. This will be included in the information provided on tutors selected through the OTS.

The OTS now has an option for students to engage with tutors through a range of online platforms, depending on what is available and in use by the student and tutor. This may include Zoom, Skype, Scribblar and other tutoring applications. While an online session has limited application in supporting the use of manipulative materials, it can replicate a face-to-face session in most other ways with the use

of shared, interactive whiteboards and shared documents. It can be of value to students who are unable to access face-to-face learning support due to distance, illness, family circumstances, or for other reasons. In some cases online support is necessary simply to manage the juggle of busy lives, as has been the case for aspiring elite sports people, performers or others with unusually high commitments to training regimes.

Following the recent AGM we welcome newly appointed Councillor Kate Gurjian to the Consultant Committee. Kate has broad experience in delivering professional development and her skills will be valued as we aim to extend the reach of PD to all consultants. Mary-Anne Apps, who directs the Apps Learning Centre in Canberra, is also a welcome new Council Member. And we are especially delighted to have Molly de Lemos return to Council. Over the years Molly has shown a huge commitment to the consultant team with LDA, and our mission to provide educational support to struggling learners.

The Centre for Effective Reading Instruction and the International Dyslexia Association have developed a self-paced online course on reading instruction with nine pre and post tested modules to teach the critical skills for proficient reading, writing and assessment, as well as best practices that support students' acquisition of these skills. This free online course and option to attain certification is offered on the Reading Rockets 101 website. There is a link to this online course through the LDA website.

Hoping to share some stories of Consultant members I am delighted to have had the opportunity to talk with Kate Munro from Mudgee. You will find Kate's story in this edition of the Bulletin. Being in a reasonably remote rural area, and after only 18 months of providing private tuition as an LDA Specialist Teacher, Kate now has a full capacity of students and has a waiting list of 26. Kate talks of the unique challenges that parents and teachers of young people with learning difficulties face in the bush. I hope that you find the time to read Kate's story.

It is often said that the best advice can be found among practitioners, those working at the coalface - or in the LDA context, those working directly



with students with specific learning difficulties on a daily basis. Thinking about our consultant team, I am reminded that many have published books related to their work as either reference books or learning programs. These include Fay Tran's *Teaching Kids to Read*, Kate Gurjian's *Must Have Guide For Parents (2nd Edition 2015)*, Jean Bolton's *The Huntsman's Lodge* series with resource kit, and Jan Roberts' *Spelling Recovery: The Pathway to Spelling Success*. These texts, among others written by consultant members, are gems of practical knowledge: what is known to work, and what is based on strategies that are well supported by evidence.

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For details about the process and requirements for becoming an LDA Specialist Teacher Consultant, please refer to the website [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org)