

# BULLETIN

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## From the President

**T**he LDA AGM on 16 October marked the end of my term as President, and so this report represents a good opportunity to reflect on the events of 2009/2010.

2009 was a busy and eventful year for LDA, with the biennial Joint Conference in Brisbane and the visit by Sir Jim Rose (with the DVD of the Melbourne Seminar distributed to members early in 2010).

However, 2010 has been far from quiet:

- LDA has been active in contributing to and aiming to influence policy and practice at National and State level. A submission was made to the NSW Inquiry into the Provision of Education to Students with a Disability or Special Needs, and a commentary was made on the Draft Australian Curriculum, with specific reference to the sections of the English curriculum relating to the teaching of beginning reading (see July 2010 issue of the *LDA Bulletin*). LDA has also had representatives on the Dyslexia Working Party, and on the Advisory Committee for the NSW Department of Health project on assessment of learning difficulties in primary school-aged children.
- Plans are well underway for the next Joint LDA/LSTAQ/SPELD Queensland Conference which will be held in Brisbane on 16-17 September 2011, on the theme 'Include and Impact: Challenging Learning in a National Environment'.
- Members should also have noticed

significant changes to the LDA website over the last year. These include an 'In the News' section with regular updates of

news stories on issues relating to students with learning difficulties as well as issues relating to education more generally, an ever-increasing glossary of terms, a discussion forum and back issues of the *Bulletin* now available for download.

- Some changes have been made to the criteria for acceptance of Consultant membership, with current teacher registration now a requirement. We have also tightened up procedures for renewal of Consultant membership.
- LDA continues to run Professional Development workshops and seminars. In addition to the regular Victorian program of workshops for Consultants, we have had a workshop on 'Understanding and Treating Dyslexia' in Melbourne and in November, in a new initiative, we will be having a joint Symposium with SPELD-NSW in Sydney on 'Successful Research Based Classroom Practice'.
- We continue to publish both the *Bulletin*



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## LDA Mission Statement

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

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



## Membership of LDA Council 2010/2011

### OFFICE BEARERS

#### President

Louise Mercer (Qld)

#### President-Elect

Craig Wright (Qld)

#### Immediate Past President

Lyndsey Nickels (NSW)

#### Treasurer

Pye Twaddell (NSW)

#### Secretary

Molly de Lemos (Vic)

### COUNCIL MEMBERS

Margaret Cameron (SA)

Anne Castles (NSW)

Olivia Connelly (Vic)

Ruth Fielding-Barnsley (Qld)

Lorraine Hammond (WA)

Elaine McLeish (Vic)

Alison Madelaine (NSW)

Barbara Nielsen (SA)

Jan Roberts (Vic)

### COMMITTEES AND CONVENORS

#### Executive/Management Group

Convenor: Louise Mercer

#### Administration Committee

Convenor: Molly de Lemos

#### Publications Committee

Convenor: Alison Madelaine

#### Consultants Committee

Convenor: Jan Roberts

#### Professional Development Committee

Convenor: Craig Wright

### PUBLICATIONS

*Journal* Editors: Kevin Wheldall and

Alison Madelaine

*Journal* Associate Editor: Ruth Fielding-

Barnsley

*Bulletin* Editors: Molly de Lemos,  
Margaret Cameron, and Craig Wright

### WEBSITE

Website Editor: Margaret Cameron

### REFERRAL SERVICE

Referral Officer, Victoria: Elaine McLeish

### ADMINISTRATION

Administration Officer: Kerrie McMahon

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and the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*. A Special Issue on Numeracy is planned for 2011. In addition, we have successfully negotiated for LDA members to have online access to the *AJLD* in addition to the hard copies, so that PDFs of journal articles can be downloaded as required. The *Bulletin* is now also available online on the LDA website.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the hard work of all members of LDA Council and support staff, without whom none of this would have been achieved. In particular, I would like to acknowledge those members who will not be on Council in 2011: Joan Cooper, who served as Convenor of the Consultants' Committee in 2009 and has been actively involved in Consultant activities, including the organisation of the program of workshops for Consultants, and Max Coltheart, Past President of LDA, who has raised the profile of LDA and lobbied for effective provision for people with learning difficulties through his activities on major national committees (such as the Dyslexia Working Party). At the same time, I welcome our two new members of Council: Dr Lorraine Hammond, from Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, who is well-known for her work in the learning difficulties area, and Olivia Connelly, who has been active on the Victorian LDA Consultants Policy Sub-committee, which advises LDA Council on Consultant issues. Dr Louise Mercer now takes over as LDA President, and I look forward to working with her in my role as Immediate Past President.

Lyndsey Nickels  
President

## LDA NOTICES

### Victorian Program of Weekend Seminars 2011

All members of LDA and non-LDA members are welcome to attend. Sessions include a brief consultant meeting and refreshments.

#### Saturday 19 February 2011, 10am to 12pm

**Part 1:** Commonwealth Government's Carer Allowance Scheme

**Speaker:** Dr Jack Stephane, former LDA consultant from Melbourne, now in private practice in Darwin.

**Part 2:** Operating a Private Practice

A 'Q and A' session with a panel of experienced LDA Consultants chaired by Jan Roberts.

**Venue:** SPELD Victoria, 494 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy North, 3068

**Deadline for booking:** Wednesday 16 February

#### Sunday 15 May 2011, 10am to 12pm

**Topic:** Using Graphic Organisers for Successful Teaching and Learning

**Speaker:** Radmila Harding, special education teacher and educational consultant.

**Venue:** SPELD Victoria, 494 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy North, 3068

**Deadline for booking:** Wednesday 11 May

#### Fees for the above workshop

**Cost:** \$25 for Consultant members of LDA.

\$30 for non-Consultant members of LDA.

\$10 for student members of LDA.

\$40 for non-members of LDA.

#### Booking for the workshop

Payment may be by credit card, cheque or EFT. All payments are to be made via the Administration Officer, Kerrie McMahon (see booking form). Late bookings and payments will incur an extra charge of \$10. Payment 'at the door' is no longer accepted. Booking forms can be downloaded from the LDA website at [ldaustralia.org](http://ldaustralia.org), or contact Kerrie McMahon, at [ldaquery@bigpond.net.au](mailto:ldaquery@bigpond.net.au).

## LDA 2010 Awards

Recipients of our LDA Awards for 2010 are Dr Lorraine Hammond, for the Mona Tobias Award, and Mr Andrew Fildes, for the Bruce Wicking Award. These Awards were presented following the LDA AGM on 16 October.

### Mona Tobias Award 2010

The 2010 Mona Tobias Award was presented to Dr Lorraine Hammond in recognition of her significant contribution to the education of people with learning difficulties through her research, graduate and undergraduate teaching, teacher professional development, and community engagement.

Dr Lorraine Hammond is Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of Special Education at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. She graduated with a Bachelor of Education (Secondary English) at the Western Australian College of Advanced Education (now Edith Cowan University), and went on to do a Postgraduate Diploma for Teachers of Students with Specific Learning Difficulties in London and an MA in Specific Learning Difficulties at Middlesex University in England, completing her PhD at Edith Cowan University in 2001. She has supported students with learning difficulties in a variety of roles, both as a classroom teacher and in the Centre for Inclusive Schooling in Perth, prior to moving on to university teaching at graduate and postgraduate level. She has been active in promoting effective reading instruction and in training teachers to teach phonological awareness and systematic decoding to beginning and struggling readers, and in providing teachers with strategies to support students who have difficulties with reading comprehension, writing and spelling. She is a regular presenter at conferences and school professional learning days, has published widely in professional journals, and has taken on leadership roles in a number of professional associations, including AUSPELD, the Dyslexia SPELD Foundation Inc. WA,

and the Secondary Reading Teachers' Association of WA. In 2002 she was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to investigate effective practices to support individuals with dyslexia.

Dr Lorraine Hammond was recently elected as a member of the LDA Council for 2010/2011.

### Bruce Wicking Award 2010

The Bruce Wicking Award was presented to Andrew Fildes in recognition of the significant contribution he has made through his foundation to the provision of assessment and treatment services and quality programs which have significantly affected the lives of people with language and learning difficulties and their families.

Andrew Fildes is the Founder and Chairman of the Andrew Dean Fildes Foundation for Language and Learning Disabilities, which was established in 1996 to provide services for people throughout Australia with language and learning difficulties. The Foundation is a non-profit/tax-exempt organisation, and obtains donations to fund its programs for the support of people with language and learning difficulties. Programs provided include screening for early identification of language problems, comprehensive assessment of speech, language and literacy skills for diagnostic and teaching purposes, provision of resources and programs to assist children with language-based learning difficulties, education programs for teachers and teacher assistants on the nature, cause, consequences, and treatments for language and learning difficulties, and information and support programs for parents. Through the programs sponsored by the Andrew Dean Fildes Foundation for Language and Learning Disabilities, Andrew has made a significant contribution to the provision of services to support people with language and learning difficulties.

## New Members of Council 2010/2011

LDA welcomes two new members to the LDA Council for 2010/2011, Dr Lorraine Hammond and Olivia Connelly.

Dr Lorraine Hammond, this year's recipient of the LDA Mona Tobias Award, brings to LDA Council a wealth of knowledge and experience relating to the teaching of students with learning difficulties, as well as to the training of teachers to support students with learning difficulties. Her appointment to Council will expand our expertise in the area of learning

difficulties, and also help to strengthen our links with our LDA members in Western Australia.

Olivia Connelly is a Victorian Consultant who has been an active member of the Victorian Consultants' group and has recently taken responsibility for organising the Consultants' PD program. Together with Jan Roberts and Elaine McLeish, Olivia will help to strengthen the support network for our LDA Consultant members.

### LDA BULLETIN

Please note that as from 2011, three issues of the *Bulletin* will be published each year.

To keep our members better informed of ongoing LDA activities, the *LDA Bulletin* will be supplemented by an e-newsletter, to be sent out two or three times a year.

To receive the LDA e-newsletter, please ensure that we have your current email address.

## 2009 Mona Tobias Award presentation: Awarded posthumously to Dr Ken Rowe

Katherine Rowe

*This is the substance of the speech given by Dr Katherine Rowe, Ken's wife, in accepting the posthumous award recognising Ken's lifetime contribution to education, particularly in understanding teaching and learning.*

**K**en's passion for understanding how people, but especially children, learn, and what constitutes a 'good teacher' and 'good teaching practice' drove his search for ensuring that educational theories of teaching and learning had a solid evidence base before they became a major social experiment that could have disastrous consequences, not only for individuals but for society as a whole. This was partly driven from his own early working experience and partly from the experience of paediatricians.

After teacher training, Ken taught at a one-teacher school in Gippsland, and then had to fulfil his obligations in the National Service 'call-up'. He was in the Education Corps, and it was his responsibility to ensure that many of the young men who had been called up had sufficient literacy skills to be safe. He was sent to Vietnam, initially to replace a teacher who was ill, for three months. He had to teach Maths in French at Vung Tau High School. He saw how competitive, scarce, and how valued education was for the small proportion of the population who were offered it. The rest of his time in Vietnam he did not speak about until recently. On his return, while working in the Police Education Centre, he returned to study. He realised that what was being taught in schools and how it was being taught was rarely evaluated. He was fascinated by how people learned and how so many managed to slip through the system with insufficient skills to survive easily in the world.

In addition to this experience, discussions around the dinner table revealed that paediatricians who were essentially trained to manage childhood diseases were now evaluating children who were depressed, suicidal, disruptive and suspected of having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) but who, in fact, were disengaged from school and often illiterate. Up to 50 per cent of paediatric consultations related to developmental and behavioural issues. There were commonly two peaks when children were referred: transition from infant grades to middle schooling and transition into secondary school. Clearly, if thousands of children who were distressed

and underachieving at school were being seen each year by doctors for educational issues, something was not working.

In medicine, practices and evidence are constantly scrutinised, but education has tended to follow fashions or political whims, partly because research can be so difficult to do. Evidence should be reliable and applicable to the wider population. Small descriptive studies had their place, but they could be very biased and misleading as a basis for policy. Ken studied in London under Harvey Goldstein, who provided him with the tools to ensure that the research design and any analyses of the data were appropriate, were matched to the type of data, and accounted for measurement error, as well as the hierarchical nature of educational data (that is, students within classes, within schools, within regions). Ignoring these basics resulted in errors so great that no conclusion could be confidently drawn. This opened a whole new world to him.

When he returned to the Department of Education, he had support from Peter Hill, who was the-then Director of Education, to conduct several large-scale educational studies, including the '100 Schools Project'. Other studies evaluated the importance of teacher professional development, interventions such as Reading Recovery and the effects of single-sex classes on outcomes. He conducted a huge randomised controlled trial with longitudinal data that could also take into account the hierarchical structure of the sample using region, school, classroom and student. He could separate socioeconomic factors including parental education from classroom/teacher factors.

During his time in the UK, the prevailing view was that social class was strongly predictive of outcome. At an inner London school he visited, the teachers almost boasted that they had not had a single student pass the Oxbridge exam – allowing them entry to Oxford or Cambridge – for several generations. It was clear to him that there were bright students in the school. So was this low performance due to teacher expectations and teaching practice? If outcomes were predicted by social class, then Australia had little hope, considering the origins of her early settlers. Against prevailing wisdom, Ken found in all his studies that socioeconomic status (SES) accounted for only seven per cent of the residual variance when the intake characteristics of the child were taken into account. On the other hand, teacher effects contributed 40 to 60 per cent of the residual variance. The quality

of each teacher was the strongest predictor of how well children learned. Equipping teachers with the skills to communicate and teach became paramount. SES could not be used as an excuse.

Ken argued hard to include measures of children's behaviour in these studies. This was viewed in a very dim light by educationalists in those days, as the common view was that the child's behaviour in the classroom could not have anything to do with teaching practice. It was due to 'background', 'the child', 'the family' and so on. His longitudinal studies showed that improving literacy improved classroom behaviour. It was assumed that a child did not read because they were inattentive rather than that a child was inattentive and disruptive because of poor literacy skills. He was able to partial out the effects to determine the direction of effects. Although there was a small positive effect due to inattentiveness (that is, children with ADHD need medication to improve their concentration), it was many times greater in the opposite direction. Children reported as inattentive and disruptive in the classroom usually had poor literacy skills. He demonstrated that teaching children to read and improving their literacy skills made an enormous difference to their classroom behaviour. His PhD expanded this thesis.

During his time in the Department of Education, he learned how important it was to get the message over to politicians, and also to stand his ground if the evidence was contrary to government policy. There was no way that he was going to change his findings to suit a whim or fashion. He just had to find a way to make the evidence speak for itself. The problem was how to get the message through the classroom door and into the classroom.

It was noted that more than 80 per cent of children presenting to paediatricians at the Royal Children's Hospital with difficulties with literacy had problems with processing auditory information. A 'guesstimate' of the numbers in each annual cohort, who were identified as struggling with literacy, and those likely to have problems with processing auditory information needing assessment, meant that the Audiology Department would have no resources to test any other children. It was also known that many reports to schools from learning difficulty clinics, psychologists and health professionals were either carefully filed away and never looked at again or filed in the 'circular filing cabinet' – the rubbish bin. The common complaint was that it was 'too hard adjusting your teaching for one child when you are dealing with so many'. This was assuming that the teacher could understand the jargon in the report and could work out what the implications were for their teaching practice. Many professionals had difficulty communicating simply what needed to be done and what could realistically be done in the classroom.

These concerns led to the auditory processing study that involved teachers learning how to assess this aspect of

development in their own students and see for themselves the variation among their students. As most teaching and communication in the classroom is verbal, this was crucial. This study provided normative data for students from school entry to Year 9 on a short simple screening test involving digit span and sentence length recall. Teachers were shown how to do it and briefly told the implications for communicating in the classroom.

The capacity of the children in their classroom to recall spoken words, and the implications for communicating information, became obvious to teachers. If a student had difficulty with recalling digits, this equated with unrelated information: ideas, items on a list, phonemes in a word. It was crucial to either 'chunk' or group the information to assist with recall, just as we do with mobile phone numbers, or the information is lost. If there is difficulty with sentences of a particular length, familiarity with language (among other things) can affect recall, but overloading occurs and information is again lost if communication is not adjusted. This is well-recognised in public speaking, where it is expected that people catch their audience's attention before speaking, speak more slowly, and pause, thus 'chunking' the information and checking to see if their audience has understood what they have said. If not, they rephrase it more simply. This well-recognised and well-established strategy for speaking in public, or for acting on stage, is also crucial for communicating in a classroom. The study showed that the difference in literacy achievement for all measures in the intervention schools was highly significant, as compared with the reference schools where literacy and behaviour measures were taken but there was no professional development.

The auditory processing study confirmed why understanding this aspect of development was so important. Children increase this capacity slowly and teaching must take it into account. If ignored, 20 per cent of students are at risk of 'not having a clue' what they are being asked to do. They ask their friends, teachers have to repeat the information, time is wasted, and the classroom is disrupted. The impact for children where English was not their primary language, and especially the impact on outcomes for boys for such a simple intervention, was highly significant. Boys' behaviour is normally scored by teachers as more disruptive than girls, and continues to deteriorate as they progress through school. When teachers understood and used good communication skills the deterioration in the boys' behaviour did not occur.

Ken recognised that teachers were "schools' most valuable resource", but in recent years they appeared to have little training in child development, in how children learned, and in how to communicate in the classroom. He demonstrated that teacher professional development that improved teachers' skills also markedly improved their

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job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism, and that simple strategies for communication, taking into account normal childhood development, improved understanding and educational outcomes, and decreased disruptive behaviour in the classroom.

One day after speaking about auditory processing on the *ABC Life Matters* program, he was asked to return a call from a lady who had contacted his office. His secretary had a broad smile on her face. The lady recounted her story. She said, "I am 64 years old and have been married for 38 years, and I never understood why my husband never did anything I asked. I listened to what you said about auditory processing, so I caught his attention, spoke slowly, chunked the information, and waited for compliance. And do you know what he said? 'That is the first time since we've been married that I have ever understood a word you've said!' It's done wonders for our marriage!" And then she added, "We are never too old to learn."

Ken's role in chairing the national Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy attracted expression of entrenched views. His insistence on an evidence base for those viewpoints resulted in the conclusion that children needed explicit instruction in systematic phonics to equip them to engage in the broader literacy curriculum. With an estimated 30 to 40 per cent of children commencing secondary school not having sufficient literacy skills to engage in the curriculum, 'Teaching Reading' could not be ignored. It was essential that teachers be equipped with the skills to teach in the classroom. His favourite illustration was that teaching reading without these skills was like going around a golf course with just a putter in your golf bag. He always said that golf was designed to keep him humble, and that was with the usual range of clubs. Teaching is never easy but we shouldn't make it impossible.

Teaching teachers skills to retrieve children who had fallen below national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy in the upper levels of primary schools was one of his most satisfying studies. The national benchmarks seem to be lowered to ensure that state departments have most children able to step over the hurdles rather than jump over them. Falling below these benchmarks was low indeed. It was clear from the professional development sessions with the intervention schools that many teachers could not identify the characteristics of a 'good teacher'. It seems that they had not thought about it much. But they could often identify a particular teacher who had influenced them, or a colleague who was very good. Ken enjoyed asking students of all ages, and they could quickly identify who the good teachers were and what their characteristics were. There were very consistent responses. "They care about you." "They know what they

are talking about and are enthusiastic about the subject." "They are interested in whether we learn." "They are fair."

It seemed that teachers had either not been taught or it hadn't registered just how children learn. They had heard about learning styles, but had not necessarily linked this information to any developmental process about 'taking in' information. In the professional development sessions, they were given simple principles about how children learn and how to interpret their observations of children; how they can communicate with and teach children who may have difficulty in taking in information in particular ways; how to remediate with direct instruction to provide information and skills that the children have missed; and how to teach strategies for learning. This sample of schools in the Third Wave Project included a disproportionately high number of schools with indigenous students.

Ken went to speak to some children in this project who had made several years' gain in outcomes over a six-month period. The teachers said that the students were now "concentrating more", but the students said that "it was the first time they had understood what they were meant to be doing". School attendance had increased and they indicated that it was now "worth coming to school as they were able to learn something". The direct instruction materials, particularly in maths, were very helpful, but understanding how to communicate in the classroom was central.

Teachers could, when provided with appropriate strategies, 'Work out What Works' very effectively. It did not matter whether it was single-sex classes or a co-educational setting, or whether the students were disadvantaged or underachieving, quality teachers were the key, and teaching them to understand how children learned, how to communicate effectively and providing them with strategies that had a strong evidence base so they could be confident that they worked, improved their job satisfaction and the educational outcomes for the students. They could teach, so that children could learn. They just needed good evidence to help them become 'good teachers'.

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*...he demonstrated that teaching children to read and improving their literacy skills made an enormous difference to their classroom behaviour.*

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*Dr Katherine Rowe is a paediatrician who has spent most of her career at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne (apart from her 'practical paediatrics' at home with three sons). She has had a long-standing interest in the overlap between education and health. Managing children who present with behavioural problems but who need educational assistance or children with chronic illness where providing opportunities to persist with education has been central to their ability to cope, has been very rewarding. Collaborating with Ken to provide some evidence and some solutions for these crucial areas has been even better.*

# There's no such thing as a reading test

Real literacy involves learning about the world, not just letters and sounds

E.D. Hirsch and Robert Pondiscio

It is among the most common of nightmares. You dream of taking a test for which you are completely unprepared – you've never studied the material or even attended the course. For millions of American schoolchildren, it is a nightmare from which they cannot wake, a trial visited upon them each year when the law requires them to take reading tests with little preparation. Sure, formally preparing for reading tests has become more than just a ritual for schools. It is practically their *raison d'être*! Yet students are not prepared in the way they need to be.

Schools and teachers may indeed be making a Herculean effort to raise reading scores, but these efforts do little to improve reading achievement and to prepare children for college, a career, and a lifetime of productive, engaged citizenship. This wasted effort is not because our teachers are lazy or of low quality. Rather, too many of our schools labor under fundamental misconceptions about reading comprehension – how it works, how to improve it, and how to test it.

Reading, like riding a bike, is an ability we acquire as children and generally never lose. Some of us are more confident on two wheels than others, and some of us, we are told, are better readers than others. The culture of testing treats reading ability as a broad, generalised skill that is easily measured and assessed. We judge our schools and increasingly, individual teachers based on their ability to improve the reading skills of our children. When you think about your ability to read – if you think about it at all – the chances are good that you perceive it as not just a skill but a readily transferable skill. Once you learn how to read you can competently read a novel, a newspaper article, or the latest memo from corporate headquarters. Reading is reading. Either you can do it, or you cannot.

This view of reading is only partially correct. The ability to translate written symbols into sounds, commonly called 'decoding,' is indeed a skill that can be taught and mastered. This explains why you are able to 'read' nonsense words such as 'rigfap' or 'churbit'. Once a child masters letter-sound correspondence, or phonics, we might say she can read because she can reproduce the sounds represented by written language. But clearly there's more to reading than making sounds. To be fully literate is to have the communicative power of language at your command – to read, write, listen, and speak with understanding. As nearly any elementary schoolteacher can attest, it is possible to decode skillfully yet struggle with comprehension. And reading comprehension, the

ability to extract meaning from text, is not transferable.

Cognitive scientists describe comprehension as domain-specific. If a baseball fan reads "A-Rod hit into a 6-4-3 double play to end the game", he needs not another word to understand that the New York Yankees lost when Alex Rodriguez came up to bat with a man on first base and one out and then hit a groundball to the shortstop, who threw to the second baseman, who relayed to first in time to catch Rodriguez for the final out. If you've never heard of A-Rod or a 6-4-3 double play and cannot reconstruct the game situation, you are not a poor reader. You merely lack the domain-specific knowledge of baseball to fill in the gaps.

Even simple texts, like those on reading tests, are filled with gaps – presumed domain knowledge – that the writer assumes the reader knows. Research also tells us that familiarity with domain knowledge increases fluency, broadens vocabulary (you can pick up words in context), and enables deeper reading and listening comprehension.

Think of reading as a two-lock box, requiring two keys to open. The first key is decoding skills. The second key is oral language, vocabulary, and domain-specific or background knowledge sufficient to understand what is being decoded. Even this simple understanding of reading enables us to see that the very idea of an abstract skill called 'reading comprehension' is ill-informed. Yet most US schools teach reading as if both decoding and comprehension are transferable skills. Worse, we test our children's reading ability without regard to whether we have given them the requisite background knowledge they need to be successful.

Researchers have consistently demonstrated that in order to understand what you're reading, you need to know something about the subject matter. Students who are identified as 'poor readers' comprehend with relative ease when asked to read passages on familiar subjects, outperforming even 'good readers' who lack relevant background knowledge. One well-known study looked at junior high school students judged to be either good or poor readers in terms of their ability to decode or read aloud fluently. Some knew a lot about baseball, while others knew little. The children read a passage written at an early fifth-grade reading level, describing the action in a game. As they read, they were asked to move models of ballplayers around a replica baseball diamond to illustrate the action in the passage. If reading comprehension were a transferable skill that could be taught, practised, and mastered, then the students who were 'good' readers should have had no trouble outperforming the 'poor' readers. Just the opposite happened. Poor readers with

high content knowledge outperformed good readers with low content knowledge. Such findings should challenge our very idea of who is or is not good reader: if reading is the means by which we receive ideas and information, then the good reader is the one who best understands the author's words.

You have probably experienced the uncomfortable sensation of feeling like a poor reader when struggling to understand a new product warranty, directions for installing a computer operating system, or some other piece of writing where your lack of background knowledge left you feeling out of your depth. Your rate of reading slows. You find yourself repeating sentences to make sure you understand. If this happens only rarely to you, it is because you possess a broad range of background knowledge – the more you know, the more you are able to communicate and comprehend. The implications of this insight for teaching children to read should be obvious: the more domain knowledge our children receive, the more capable they will become as readers.

The message has not yet reached American classrooms. A stubborn belief in reading comprehension as a transferable skill combined with the immense pressures of testing and accountability results in ever more time being wasted on scattered, trivial, and incoherent reading. A study sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that only 4 per cent of first-grade class time in American elementary schools is spent on science and only 2 per cent, on social studies. In third grade, about 5 per cent of class time goes to each of these subjects. Meanwhile a whopping 62 per cent in first grade and 47 per cent in third grade is spent on language arts.

Most young American children spend anywhere from 90 minutes to two-and-a-half hours a day in something educators call “the literacy block”, an extended period that might include reading aloud, small-group “guided reading”, independent writing, and other activities aimed at increasing children's verbal skills. Reading instruction largely focuses on teaching and practising reading comprehension strategies, helping students to find the main idea of a passage and make inferences or identify the author's purpose. The general idea is to arm young readers with a suite of all-purpose tricks and tips for thinking about reading that can be applied to any text the child encounters. Careful readers may be thinking, “If the ability to understand what you read is a function of your domain-specific background knowledge, then how is it possible to teach all-purpose reading strategies?”

Reading strategies figured prominently in the 2000 report of the National Reading Panel, based on evidence that reading strategies work – which they do, to a point. Reading comprehension scores tend to go up after instruction in strategies, but it's a one-time boost. The major contribution of such instruction is to help beginning readers know that text, like speech, is supposed to make sense. If someone says something you don't

understand, you can always ask that person to repeat, explain, or give an example. Reading strategies offer similar workarounds for print. They're not useless, but repeated practice seems to have little or no effect on scores.

“The mistaken idea that reading is a skill – learn to crack the code, practise comprehension strategies, and you can read anything – may be the single biggest factor holding back reading achievement in the country,” Daniel T. Willingham, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, recently wrote in *The Washington Post*. “Students will not meet standards that way. The knowledge base problem must be solved.”

If our schools understood and acted upon the clear evidence that domain-specific content knowledge is foundational to literacy, reading instruction might look very different in our children's classrooms. Rather than idle away precious hours on trivial stories or randomly chosen non-fiction, reading, writing, and listening instruction would be built into the study of ancient civilisations in first grade, for example, Greek mythology in second, or the human body in third. Recently, the Core Knowledge Foundation has been piloting precisely such a language arts program in a small number of schools in New York City and elsewhere. Initial results are promising; however, building domain knowledge is a long-term proposition. All reading tests are cumulative. The measurable benefit of broad background knowledge can take years to reveal itself.

At present, teachers are tacitly discouraged from taking the long view. Indeed, what incentive would second-grade teachers have to emphasise content that might not show up on a test until sixth grade, if even then? There is more upside for teachers in doing exactly what they chiefly do now – test prep, skills, and strategies – unless we actively promote a domain-specific approach to language arts.

Consider a reasonable, simple, even elegant alternative to replace the vicious circle of narrowed curriculum and comprehension skills of limited efficacy, which over time depress reading achievement. By tying the content of reading tests to specific curricular content, the circle becomes virtuous. Here's how it would work: let's say a state's fourth-grade science standards include the circulatory system, atoms and molecules, electricity, and Earth's geologic layers and weather; and social-studies standards include world geography, Europe in the Middle Ages, the American Revolution, and the U.S. Constitution, among other domains. The state's reading tests should include not just fiction and poetry but non-fiction readings on those topics and others culled from those specific curriculum standards. Teachers would still teach to the test, emphasising domain-specific knowledge (because it might be on the test), but no one would object, because it would help students not only pass the current

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year's test but build the broad background knowledge that enables them to become stronger readers in general.

The benefits of such 'curriculum-based reading tests' would be many. Tests would be fairer and offer a better reflection of how well a student had learned the particular year's curriculum. The tests would also exhibit 'consequential validity', meaning they would actually improve education. Instead of wasted hours of mind-numbing test prep and reading strategy lessons of limited value, the best test-taking strategy would be learning the material in the curriculum standards – a true virtuous circle.

By contrast, let's imagine what it is like to be a fourth-grade boy in a struggling South Bronx elementary school, sitting for a high-stakes reading test. If you do not pass, you face summer school or repeating the grade. Because the school has large numbers of students below grade level, it has drastically cut back on science, social studies, art, music – even gym and recess – to focus on reading and math. You have spent the year learning and practising reading strategies. Your teacher, worried about her performance, has relentlessly hammered test-taking strategies for months.

The test begins, and the very first passage concerns the customs of the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. You do not know what a custom is; neither do you know who the Dutch were, or even what a colony is. You have never heard of Amsterdam, old or new. Certainly it's never come up in class. Without background knowledge, you struggle with most of the passages on the test. You never had a chance. Meanwhile, across town, more affluent students take and pass the test with ease. They are no brighter or more capable than you are, but because they have wider general knowledge – as students who come from advantaged backgrounds so often do – the test is not much of a challenge. Those who think reading is a transferable skill and take background knowledge for granted may well wonder what all the fuss is about. Those kids and teachers in the Bronx struggle all year and fail to get ready for this? Why, all the answers are right there on the page!

It ends, as it inevitably must, in the finger-pointing that plagues American education. But do not blame the tests. Taxpayers are entitled to know if the schools they support

*Researchers have consistently demonstrated that in order to understand what you're reading, you need to know something about the subject matter.*

are any good, and reading tests, all things considered, are quite reliable. Do not blame the test writers. They have no idea what topics are being taught in school and their job is done when tests show certain technical characteristics. It is unfair to blame teachers, because they are mainly operating to the best of their ability using the methods in which they were trained. And let's not blame the parents of our struggling young man in the South Bronx. Is it unreasonable to assume that a child who dutifully goes to school every day will gain access to the same rich, enabling domains of knowledge that more affluent children take for granted? It's not unreasonable at all. That's what schools are supposed to be for. The only unreasonable thing is our refusal to see reading for what it really is and to teach and test accordingly.

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# The recent history of government initiatives in the teaching of reading in the UK

*A talk by Jennifer Chew, presented to the Reading Reform Foundation Conference at Birkbeck College in London on 19 March 2010, reproduced in an edited form from the Reading Reform Foundation website, with permission.*

## Background

I'm going to take the 'recent history' as starting about 21 years ago, as that was when we first had government guidance on the curriculum generally and the teaching of reading in particular – the National Curriculum, with the English Order representing the wisdom of the time on the teaching of reading. As everyone knows, history is all about documents and dates, so I'll be referring to quite a lot of those.

My focus will be on Wave 1 teaching, past and present – the way that children are started off on reading and spelling. Before 1989, primary schools had been free to do very much their own thing – secondary schools were rather more constrained by exam requirements. During the few years leading up to the first National Curriculum English Order, the 'Whole Language' influence had mushroomed in primary schools in England in the form of the 'real books' movement. Many people in education had come under the spell of Frank Smith, Ken Goodman and others, and had come to believe that children learn to read naturally – they start school already knowing a number of 'sight' words as wholes and when they encounter words that they don't already know, the more they rely on 'wholes' for clues the better – whole sentences around the unfamiliar words, and whole pages, including pictures. The view was that only in this way could children go beyond merely decoding the black marks on the page and really read for meaning:

Reading is much more than the decoding of black marks upon a page: it is a quest for meaning, and one which requires the reader to be an active participant... In their quest for meaning, children need to be helped to become confident and resourceful in the use of a variety of reading cues. They need to be able to recognise on sight a large proportion of the words they encounter and to be able to predict meaning on the basis of phonic, idiomatic and grammatical regularities and of what makes sense in context; children should be encouraged to make informed guesses. (1988: English for ages 5 to 11: Proposals of the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the Secretary of State for Wales. This was the first part of the 'Cox Report', which formed the basis for the National Curriculum

English Order.)

Phonics was downplayed because it involved breaking whole words into parts and according to the gurus, that made learning very hard for children.

The Whole Language influence is clear in the 1990 National Curriculum English Order: picture and context cues first and foremost, then 'sight' words, then phonic cues, with the suggestion that this means just initial letters:

[at Level 2 – the expected level for 7-year-olds] Pupils should be able to... use picture and context cues, words recognised on sight and phonic cues in reading... Use a picture to help make sense of a text... use initial letters to help with recognising words (1990: English in the National Curriculum).

One document from which I'm not quoting directly was called *Language in the National Curriculum*, which arose from a project which ran from 1989 to 1992. The early reading section was dominated by the theories of Ken and Yetta Goodman, Frank Smith, Margaret Meek and Don Holdaway, and there was a section on how to do a miscue analysis. The reason why I haven't quoted from it is that it was never published – the government (Conservative at the time) had funded the project but blocked publication, though this seemed to be more because of the line it took on grammar than because of the line it took on early reading. Unofficial copies of the document were nevertheless widely circulated.

During the early 1990s, there were some attempts at revising the English Order, probably because of pressure from phonics advocates, but the Whole Language influence continued:

[under the heading 'Initial reading skills'] Level 2 pupils should be able to: ... use more than one strategy (phonic, graphic, syntactic, contextual) when reading unfamiliar words (September 1993: *National Curriculum Council Consultation Report*).

By 1994, there was increased emphasis on the 'relationships between print symbols and sound patterns', but more at the level of onset and rime and syllables than of phonemic units.

In the extract below the first four points stress phonological awareness, alliteration, rhyme and syllables,

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though phonics gets a look-in after that:

Phonic knowledge focuses on the relationships between print symbols and sound patterns. [Children] should be made aware of the sounds of spoken language, and taught how symbols correspond to those sounds. Opportunities should be given for:

- Listening to sounds in oral language to develop phonological awareness;
- Recognising alliteration, sound patterns and rhyme and relating these to patterns in letters;
- Considering syllables in longer words;
- Identifying initial and final sounds in words, including sounds which rhyme;
- Identifying and using a comprehensive range of *letters and sounds* (including combinations of letters, blends and digraphs), and paying specific attention to their use in the formation of words;
- Recognising inconsistencies in phonic patterns; and,
- Recognising that some letters do not always produce a sound themselves but influence the sound of others, for example, final 'e', soft 'c' (May 1994: *English in the National Curriculum: Draft proposals*).

### The National Literacy Strategy

Labour came to power in 1997 and introduced the National Literacy Strategy in 1998. David Blunkett was Secretary of State for Education at the time and set a target of 80 per cent of children reaching Level 4 in the Key Stage 2 tests by 2002. He was confident that this target would be met and said he would resign if it wasn't. It wasn't, but he was saved from the fate of resignation as he was no longer Education Secretary in 2002 – he was Home Secretary.

Whatever its faults, the NLS did allow a much greater role for phonics than there had previously been. The following makes it clear that that reliance on context and grammar is not such a good thing after all – children need phonics:

When pupils read familiar and predictable texts, they can easily become over-reliant on their knowledge of context and grammar. They may pay too little attention to how words sound and how they are spelt. But if pupils cannot decode individual words through their knowledge of sounds and spellings, they find it difficult to get at the meaning of more complex, less familiar texts... At Key Stage 1, there should be a strong and systematic emphasis on phonics and other word level skills. (1998: *National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching*).

So far so good, but unfortunately the NLS still included an emphasis on 'sight' words – it gave lists which were headed 'High frequency words to be taught as "sight

recognition" words', and there was nothing to suggest that they should be taught otherwise than as wholes, with no attention to any decodable parts, despite the fact that 18 of the 45 Reception words could be decoded by children who had gone no further than learning 26 letters and a sound to say for each. Several years later claims were made that a whole-word approach to the list of 'sight recognition' words had not been intended:

...I make the following recommendations... Make it clear that, within the 100 most frequent words, only those that are irregular should be taught as sight words (August 2003: *Sound Sense: The phonics element of the National Literacy Strategy* – report by Greg Brooks on the DfES Phonics Seminar of March 2003).

...Ofsted report that some teachers ... teach the 100 most frequent words in English as though they were all irregular. Clearly there is further clarification needed here. (Autumn 2003: DfES response to Brooks paper).

The high-frequency words listed in the back of the NLS Framework for Teaching are not intended to be taught by rote... Many of these words are phonically regular and thus perfectly decodable. A proportion are irregular and practitioners teach these as "words with a tricky bit in" (2004: *Playing with Sounds: A Supplement to Progression in Phonics*).

It was inevitable, however, that sight word teaching would be done as it was. Frith had said back in 1985 that the first stage in reading was logographic – that theory had a huge following and had appeared to be supported by the National Curriculum documents. Another problem with the NLS was that there was still quite a lot of emphasis on onset and rime, which also assumes a sight-word start. A third problem was the 'searchlights' model. There is some evidence that the original intention was that only two of the four searchlights should be used for word identification: these two were phonics and what is called 'word recognition and graphic knowledge', where 'word recognition' meant the ability to read familiar words 'at sight' and 'graphic knowledge' evidently meant 'shape, length and common spelling patterns'. The other two 'searchlights' (grammatical knowledge and knowledge of context) were apparently supposed to be used for comprehension. The extract below implies that children should first apply 'word level' skills to read the text, and should only then use other reading cues to check for meaning and self-correct:

Shared reading provides a context for applying and teaching word level skills and for teaching how to use other reading cues to check for meaning, and identify

and self-correct errors (1998: *National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching*).

Unfortunately, however, teachers were not used to making this distinction – they were used to teaching children to use context and grammar (and, indeed, pictures) for word identification, and many assumed that the searchlights model was just more of the same.

Within a year of the rollout of the NLS, it was realised that phonics was still not being taught as intended, and a supplement was produced – this was *Progression in Phonics*, published in 1999. The authors of this tried to incorporate the thinking of Diane McGuinness, in the sense that they included many activities designed to teach children about the phonemes in spoken words and how they are represented by letters: “The most effective phonics instruction teaches children to identify phonemes in spoken language first, then to understand how these are represented by letters and letter combinations (graphemes)” (1999: *Progression in Phonics*).

There were, however, too few activities on blending for reading. Of the 28 activities suggested in *Progression in Phonics* seven activities involved just identifying phonemes in spoken words with no reference to letters, an eighth had two versions, one of which involved letters, and a further 10 involved identifying phonemes in spoken words and representing them by letters. A total of 18 activities therefore stressed the identification of phonemes in spoken words; against this, only six activities involved any blending, and the blending aspect was not stressed in all of these. That accounts for 24 out of 28 activities – the other four involved practice just on grapheme-phoneme correspondences without blending or segmenting, or else practice on rhyming. Moreover, the searchlights remained at the heart of the approach, which was surely not in line with McGuinness thinking.

By 2004, it was clear that the NLS had still not raised standards as expected among children who had had it from the start of their schooling. The Parliamentary Education and Skills Committee then heard evidence on the teaching of reading from November 2004 until February 2005, including evidence from several synthetic phonics advocates. The Committee recommended that a proper study be carried out in England, comparing synthetic phonics with other methods: “We therefore strongly urge the DfES to commission a large-scale comparative study, comparing the, National Literacy Strategy with ‘phonics fast and first’ approaches (April 2005: *Teaching Children to Read – the report of the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee on its inquiry conducted between November 2004 and February 2005*).

A study of exactly this type was not done. The nearest we got, which was not very near, was the Early Reading

Development Pilot, which had plenty wrong with it but did at least show that phonics teaching could be sped up.

### The Rose Review and the development of *Letters and Sounds*

The most important outcome of the Select Committee’s report was that Jim Rose was appointed to carry out a review. He and his team considered existing research and visited many schools teaching by different methods, including schools using synthetic phonics. The Rose Review, published in March 2006, concluded that synthetic phonics was the most effective approach:

Despite uncertainties in research findings, the practice seen by the review shows that the systematic approach, which is generally understood as “synthetic” phonics, offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers (March 2006: *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading – Jim Rose’s final report*).

The government undertook to provide a new programme to replace previous NLS guidance. Before I go on to that programme, which of course was *Letters and Sounds*, I need to mention a publication known as the ‘core position papers’ which I first saw in the summer of 2006 but which I think had been around for several months before that. I didn’t know who had written it and still don’t know, but I thought it was very much on the right lines, though not perfect. It was addressed to head teachers, literacy leaders, teachers and others, and among its plus points, it made clear to such people that the simple view of reading was to replace the searchlights model. Another plus-point was that it advised firmly against teaching children to use cues from context and pictures in order to identify words – it said they should tackle unfamiliar words by decoding them phonically. There were also some minus-points – I’ll give examples as I go along.

A team was assembled in the autumn of 2006 to write the new programme, and I was very surprised to be asked to be part of it. I hesitated at first because I would have preferred schools just to be left free to use good commercial programmes and said so, but I was told that a government programme would be produced whether or not I helped with it, so I thought it better to be involved than not. It was made clear that we had to follow the core position papers. In spite of feeling that these were not perfect, I felt we could still produce a good synthetic phonics programme which would provide far better Wave 1 teaching than there had been until then.

So what is synthetic phonics? ‘Phonics’ is from the Greek word for ‘sound’ but ‘phonics’ is not just about sounds: it’s about the relationship between sounds and written symbols, mainly at the level of the smallest units

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– that is, the individual phonemes of spoken words and the letters and letter-groups that represent them. The ‘synthetic’ part of ‘synthetic phonics’ comes from the Greek, meaning ‘put together’ and refers to the fact that a key characteristic of this approach is its emphasis on putting sounds together in reading. In reading, we say sounds in response to the letters on the page and then put those sounds together or blend or synthesise them into a seamless whole word. So the term ‘synthetic’ comes firmly from the reading side of things, though in the UK, all or most synthetic phonics programmes also teach children to spell by the reverse process of splitting the spoken form of the word into its component sounds and choosing letters and letter-groups to represent the sounds. It’s interesting, though, that this way of teaching spelling is not part of synthetic phonics in German-speaking countries – that’s according to an article by Wimmer and Mayringer published in 2002 in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Volume 94, No. 2.

Phase One in *Letters and Sounds* is letter-free, so involves no phonics. I would have preferred this letter-free phase to be omitted, but this was not allowed – and in fact I’ve heard of one school where teachers are saying that letter-free blending and segmenting in the nursery is paying off when children go into Reception.

Phase Two starts by introducing a few letter-sound correspondences which lend themselves to the formation of a reasonable number of simple two- and three-letter words, so that blending for reading and segmenting for spelling can be introduced very early. Starting blending after just a few letter-sound correspondences have been taught is in line with synthetic phonics practice in Austria, where, additionally, the first consonants which are introduced are continuants such as /m/, on the grounds that these make blending easier – so they take blending very seriously. Starting blending early is also in line with the Clackmannanshire approach and with what happens in tried and tested programmes such as *Jolly Phonics* and *Read Write Inc.*

*Letters and Sounds* then covers the remaining letters of the alphabet and one sound for each at the rate of four correspondences per week, with some longer words being introduced quite early. There are banks of suitable words as each new correspondence is added, and, in due course, phrases and sentences are suggested for decoding.

The core position papers had laid down that we should start with one spelling of each of 44 phonemes, but *Letters and Sounds* takes some slight liberties with this, both on the ‘one spelling’ front and on the ‘44 phonemes’ front – for example, the need to teach all letters of the alphabet makes it sensible to teach both ‘c’ and ‘k’ for the /k/ sound, and teaching ‘ck’ is a logical extension of this, so that children can start reading and spelling words

such as ‘duck’ and ‘ticket’ as well as words beginning with /k/. So three spellings of the /k/ sound are taught very early, as are also double consonants as in ‘fill’, ‘puff’ and ‘mess’. The need to cover all letters of the alphabet also makes it sensible to teach the sounds that ‘x’ and ‘qu’ represent in ‘fox’ and ‘quick’, despite the fact that each of these sounds is technically two phonemes rather than one and that they duplicate sounds represented by other letters. The teaching of digraphs then starts in Phase 3. The core position papers had laid down that enough digraphs should be taught to take the number of sounds to 44 before words with adjacent consonants were introduced (as in ‘stop’ and ‘hand’) – we didn’t like this and tried to get the order of Phases 3 and 4 changed but were unsuccessful. We advised flexibility in the Notes of Guidance, however, and apparently some teachers have taken this on board.

We did manage to get the number of phonemes covered in Reception reduced from 44 (as laid down in the core position papers) to 42. We pointed out that teaching 44 would entail teaching the /zh/ and /oor/ sounds, for which there is no beginner-type spelling – there is an additional problem with the /oor/ sound, which is that it does not feature in everyone’s speech. *Letters and Sounds* includes assessments for Phases 2, 3 and 4 which should enable teachers to see if any children are falling behind – this should mean that Wave 2-type help can start as early as the first term of Reception. In Phase 5, which should start in Year 1, alternatives are taught – alternative pronunciations for graphemes and alternative graphemes for sounds. If *Letters and Sounds* is properly taught, most of what children need to know for reading should have been covered by the end of Year 1 and children should have a good grounding in spelling. With Phase 6, in Year 2, the emphasis moves more to spelling, though anything that children learn about spelling should also continue to help their reading development.

### The implementation of *Letters and Sounds*

I’m going to say a bit now about how *Letters and Sounds* seems to be working out in practice, though here I am not claiming to have an extensive overview. The nearest I can get to an overview of the take-up by schools is a recent survey conducted by Schoolzone for Oxford University Press. Eighty-one per cent of the schools which responded said that they used *Letters and Sounds*, but of these only 60 per cent said that they set aside time for it every day and followed the guidelines closely; 29 per cent said that they had adapted and modified it and 11 per cent said that they were still getting to grips with it. If the sample is representative, this would mean that just under half of all schools are using *Letters and Sounds* systematically, roughly a third are using it not very systematically, and about a fifth are not using it at all.

I myself have managed to visit only two schools using *Letters and Sounds*. This is in spite of having phoned

seven schools within half an hour's drive of my home – only one of these was using *Letters and Sounds*, though two said that they referred to it a bit and one of these said that although it had continued to use *Jolly Phonics* as it had done for many years, it had changed the order in which it introduced grapheme-phoneme correspondences to fit in with *Letters and Sounds*. These schools may be typical of the ones which say they are not using *Letters and Sounds* systematically. I then visited the school which had said it was using *Letters and Sounds* and found some use of *Jolly Phonics* there too. I also visited another school much further afield – that visit was arranged for me by a Primary National Strategy Regional Adviser. Again I found evidence of continuing use of *Jolly Phonics* alongside *Letters and Sounds* – for example I saw the children doing *Jolly Phonics* actions and noticed that the first spelling for the /i/ sound was 'ie' as in *Jolly Phonics* rather than 'igh' as in *Letters and Sounds*. In both schools, the discrete phonics teaching was good, as far as I could see. In one school, however, the reading books were from Book Bands and gave the children very little scope for applying phonic knowledge – I was told in so many words that the children were expected to rely quite heavily on picture cues, though when I pointed out that *Letters and Sounds* advised explicitly against this, the school seemed willing to reconsider. The other school provided books from two reading schemes, one being Rigby Star, where the books are a good match for *Letters and Sounds*, but the other was Oxford Reading Tree, which is not a good match. The Reception teacher said that the children seemed to take both kinds of books in their stride – I'd have liked to check that by hearing children read, but that wasn't possible. It was clear that the Rigby Star readers were also used in at least some other schools in this local authority. The Schoolzone survey also suggested that schools were moving more towards decodable books.

As far as test results are concerned, information is thin on the ground, but I know of one school using *Letters and Sounds* where the children had an average word-reading age about nine months above chronological age by half-way through Reception in spite of some elements in the teaching not being ideal.

I have also been able to get feedback from a Primary National Strategy Regional Adviser and a local authority Communication, Language and Literacy consultant on the way *Letters and Sounds* is working:

- Some schools started Reception children on *Letters and Sounds* from 2007 onwards but didn't start Year 1 and Year 2 children on it at the same time. In these schools, September 2010 may be the first time that any impact from *Letters and Sounds* will be able to be seen at Key Stage 2.
- In schools using *Letters and Sounds*, about 60 per cent of children are thought to be secure at Phase 2 by December of Reception – that means that they know

about 19 letter-sound correspondences and can blend and segment with them.

- There seems to be no firm information on whether there has been any reduction in the need for *Reading Recovery* in schools using *Letters and Sounds*. The consultant said that in her local authority, 18 schools were involved in the Communication, Language and Literacy project but only three had *Reading Recovery*. Three out of 18 is about 17 per cent, which is about the same as the percentage in two other local authorities that I've heard about. This suggests that if schools need Wave 3 intervention, most may be using something other than *Reading Recovery*.

At least on paper, I think that *Letters and Sounds* represents a big step forward in government initiatives. Quite a lot of schools are probably using it alongside commercial programmes or at least resources from these – this may at first sight seem to go against advice given about 'Fidelity to the programme' in *Letters and Sounds*, but in fact the advice there is about following just one sequence in introducing phonic content, and it's stated that "Adhering to the sequence of the phonic content of the programme does not... prevent settings and schools from supplementing their chosen programme by using additional resources... which they make themselves or purchase from commercial sources".

One final point: it seems that many more teachers are realising the need for decodable books – this was indicated by the Schoolzone survey done for Oxford University Press, where 42 per cent of respondents said that it was 'very important' to have phonics reading books and 47 per cent said that it was 'quite important' – a total of 89 per cent. It may be that the existence of *Letters and Sounds* has helped to prompt this realisation. In any event, publishers of reading schemes do seem to be responding, and the availability of more decodable books may turn out to be a big factor in raising standards.

*Jennifer Chew started her teaching career in South Africa in the 1960s, but finished it in England, where she taught English Literature and Language to Surrey students aged 16 and over. Her Surrey students had been taught much less phonics as beginners than her South African students, and this showed particularly in their weaker spelling. From 1990 onwards, she wrote a number of pamphlets and articles urging that primary schools should put much more emphasis on phonics. She was awarded the OBE for services to literacy in 2000, the year in which she retired from teaching. She has continued to work in the literacy field, however, helping voluntarily with reading at two schools. In 2006/07, she helped to write the government programme Letters and Sounds.*  
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# Using phonics to teach reading and spelling

Fay Tran

**E**ver since the beginnings of mass education, teachers and academics have studied and experimented with various methods of teaching children to read and write. Research has consistently shown that direct instruction of reading and spelling strategies, including systematic phonics instruction, is the most effective method of teaching children literacy skills. Other methods have been tried over the years, but all have resulted in a high percentage of failure.

All children benefit from direct instruction in phonics, as it gives them the 'code' with which to unlock the system underpinning our language. Some children acquire skills quickly and learn to read with a minimum of practice, but others, particularly those who have a learning difficulty, need systematic teaching and practice over an extended period. The children who need the phonics teaching the most are often those for whom it is the most difficult. Some children struggle with phonemic awareness in their first and second years of school, while others find it hard to remember the links between letters and sounds. If they are encouraged to compensate for their difficulties by relying on visual memory or guessing from context, then they are likely to be in real trouble later on, when they need the phonics skills to be able to read fluently and accurately. What they need is effective phonics in the early stages; more direct and systematic teaching, more practice in an enjoyable form and more encouragement to use their developing skills.

There are many reasons that children experience difficulties with literacy. The most common difficulties are related to problems with short-term auditory memory, speed of processing words, language delay and attention problems – or a combination of these. Some children also experience more subtle difficulties related to memory and processing of information that may be difficult to diagnose accurately, but can make learning in the classroom extremely challenging. The good news is that, no matter what is causing their difficulties, they can all be overcome with good teaching. In fact, there is no reason – or, indeed, excuse – for schools today not to teach all children to read and write. All that is needed is systematic, direct instruction of the required skills, particularly phonics, in the classroom, ample opportunity and encouragement to apply the developing skills in reading and writing activities, and individual support in

the early years for those who have a special difficulty.

When I first started teaching, nearly 50 years ago, reading was taught by a mixture of phonics and 'sight words', as high-frequency words such as 'said' and 'the' were called, using graded readers, each with a workbook. Normally I would divide the class into three groups, taking a group at a time for direct instruction of a page or two in the book, while the other groups worked on exercises in the workbook or other reading activities. Spelling and mathematics were taught using the blackboard for direct instruction and workbooks for practice, with the mandatory test on Fridays. Individual reading, spelling and maths help was given mostly at my desk during other lessons, which probably meant that subjects such as art, music and nature study (now science) were probably neglected a little.

Because of the direct instruction and the use of graded readers, almost all children learned to read. Of course, there were no learning support teachers, so those children who fell behind due to a learning difficulty (not in my class, of course) repeated a year and sometimes two, and then left school at age 14 to get a job that did not require literacy.

I remember as a child how everyone was afraid of failing at the end of the school year, and it must have been devastating for those who did. At the time I – and no doubt other children and parents – thought that those who failed were probably not very bright and therefore not suited to secondary schooling beyond a year or two. Now I know that almost all of them would have been intelligent children with a specific learning difficulty that could have been addressed at school.

## The emergence of Whole Language

Apart from the advent of technology, and the arrival of school libraries and subject specialists, not much changed until the 1980s, when the direct teaching of phonics was declared outdated, unnecessary and even harmful, and the 'Whole Language' movement took over the classrooms.

Anxious to keep up with the trends in curriculum, our school decided to bring the staff up to scratch and train us how to use the Whole Language method of reading, writing and spelling. To the surprise of the senior teacher in charge of the operation, another teacher and I mounted a challenge to the idea, and we were supported by a couple of the more experienced early primary teachers. We all knew that the new method, which discouraged instruction in phonics and the use of graded readers and workbooks,

would spell disaster for many, if not all, of our students.

There were many meetings and papers presenting opposing views, all backed up by research findings. The main argument of the Whole Language movement was that children could learn literacy skills the same way that they learn language, through plenty of exposure to and interaction with good quality text. My opposing camp worked hard to convince the rest of the staff that direct instruction in reading strategies and phonics skills were essential for all children, but particularly for those with learning difficulties, who could not learn by osmosis.

Eventually, common sense prevailed and the most important elements of both methods were retained. Phonics was still to be taught and direct instruction was allowed, but the graded readers were gradually replaced by lots of little books with ungraded vocabulary. Of course, I kept my graded readers in the learning support room, and actually gained some from the classrooms. Spelling and grammar were still to be taught, although the emphasis in written language moved to writing creative and lengthy drafts, which were to be self-edited. I have to concede that the whole language method did some good, by stimulating the production of masses of small story books and the class-sized 'Big Books'. However, it is a pity that vocabulary controlled, graded readers were discarded altogether, as they can be useful, particularly for use with children who, at first, find the application of phonics skills and the development of automatic recognition of words quite difficult.

We were lucky that, as an independent school, we were allowed to make curriculum decisions like this, as I think most schools had no choice and obediently changed over to the Whole Language method. Within a few years, we started getting children enrolled in Years 4 and 5 who had very low literacy skills, and we knew that we had been right to oppose the introduction of this disastrous method of teaching literacy in our school. At about the same time, standardised testing was frowned upon and discarded by

most schools, so that many children with difficulties were not identified at all until the government testing program began a few years ago.

### **The National Curriculum**

Now, however, there is some light at the end of the tunnel with the arrival of the National Curriculum, which will help countless numbers of children if the stated requirement to teach phonics skills for reading and spelling is implemented. The National Curriculum clearly states that children must learn phonemic awareness and phonics skills from the first year of school. In Prep, letter-sound relations are introduced, with the children expected to read and write consonant-vowel-consonant words and some high-frequency words. In Year 1, the requirement is for the children to "recognise and write sound-letter correspondences, including some less common sound-letter matches, consonant and vowel digraphs and consonant blends" and also to "recognise morphemes in word families". In Year 2 the children are expected to be able to "use morphemes and syllabification to break up and read some simple multisyllabic words" and be aware of "spelling and pronunciation rules including silent letters, vowel-consonant digraphs and many less common sound-letter matches".

I don't expect it will happen overnight, but as the teaching of phonics and spelling rules is resumed in classrooms after an absence of many years, there should be a noticeable reduction in the numbers of children struggling to acquire basic literacy.

*Fay Tran is a specialist literacy teacher with over 25 years experience in teaching children with learning difficulties. This article has been abstracted from the Introduction to her recent book on Teaching Kids to Read, published by Wilkins Farago, 2010. It is reprinted here with permission. See page 18 for a review of the book. Email: fay.tran@microwavepower.com.au*

## **READ WRITE INC. TRAINING IN MELBOURNE**

**27 – 28 January 2011**

Oxford University Press, publishers of the UK Read Write Inc. literacy teaching program, will be presenting a Training Workshop on the use of this program in Melbourne on 27 and 28 January 2011.

The Read Write Inc. program is a phonics-based program developed by Ruth Miskin and widely used in the UK.

See [www.oup.com/oxed/primary/rwi/aboutrwi/](http://www.oup.com/oxed/primary/rwi/aboutrwi/) for further information on the program.

For further information on the Melbourne Training Workshop, email [delemos@pacific.net.au](mailto:delemos@pacific.net.au)

## Reviews of Books and Resources

### Book Review

#### *Teaching Kids to Read: Basic skills for Australian and NZ parents and teachers*

By Fay Tran  
Wilkins Fargo Pty Ltd., 2010  
Cost: \$29.99  
Reviewed by Peter Westwood

**T**here are three main reasons why I strongly recommend this book to teachers and parents. First, the author unashamedly advocates a systematic and explicit approach to the teaching of phonic knowledge and decoding skills. Second, the content of the book actually covers very much more than the teaching of phonics, for example, the author briefly explores difficulties in learning basic mathematics, writing, the use of computers, specific problems associated with ADHD, and many other topics. She also describes clearly many of the cognitive, emotional and motivational factors that can cause certain students to experience learning difficulties. Third, the author has used an anecdotal case study and lesson plan approach, a style that readily brings her practical advice alive for teachers and parents.

The teaching methods for literacy advocated in this book are applications and adaptations of the long-established Spalding Method\* (sometimes referred to as the Orton-Spalding Method). An essential element of this approach is the explicit teaching of a set of phonograms. This author defines a phonogram as, "The written equivalent of a sound unit using either a single letter or small group of letters to represent each pronounceable part of a word". Examples of phonograms include units such as: 's', 'oy', 'dge', 'tch'. On pages 165-172, the author presents a list of all phonograms, with examples of words in which they occur. Children need

to know these units thoroughly in order to decode and encode words swiftly and confidently as they read and write. The author clearly describes the many ways that children can practice and learn these important units, and she illustrates these points in her sample lesson plans tied to each particular student's needs.

Parents, beginning teachers, and those in training, will find the lesson notes and the resource materials (word lists, word families, phonograms) particularly helpful. The lists make up the final third of the book, and they cover specific information that is rarely, if ever, provided now for primary school teachers within their pre-service teacher education courses.

The format and style of *Teaching Kids to Read* will appeal to teachers and parents; it is bright, welcoming, and easily read with understanding. The only very minor criticism I will make is that I think the book would have been even more user-friendly if a detailed index had been provided at the end. The list of contents at the front of the book is comprehensive, but it is not very helpful for locating specific information quickly, because page numbers are not indicated.

*Teaching Kids to Read* is likely to appeal strongly to all LDA members. The practical suggestions contained within it represent a practitioner's lifetime of experience in helping students with learning difficulties and of putting learners on the right road to literacy. Moreover, the methods advocated are entirely compatible with what we now consider to be effective, evidence-based instruction, and with the National Curriculum.

\*The Spalding Method is fully explained in Romalda Spalding's text *The Writing Road to Reading*, first published in 1957 and now in its fifth edition. Readers can also find many descriptions of the Spalding Method on the web.

*Peter Westwood is an education consultant and freelance writer.*

### Literacy Resources

#### *The Monster of Huntsman's Lodge*

##### **A literacy resource for struggling readers**

Melvin and Jean Bolton, illustrated by Alexandra Clarke.  
Ribbonwood Publications, 2010  
Reviewed by Margaret Cameron, Senior Lecturer, Tabor Adelaide.

**F**or children who are still mastering basic literacy skills at the upper primary or lower secondary stage, it can be difficult to find suitable interesting materials that can be used either by tutors or classroom teachers. Jean Bolton, a learning support teacher from Queensland, has developed a resource specifically

for this age group, particularly from Year 5 to lower secondary. Based on the adventures of a community of spiders in a deserted house, the kit includes the story (in 12 chapters), two workbooks of activities based on the language and themes of the main story book and a collection of board games for grammar and syllabification.

As explained in the teachers' notes in the activity books, the program has been trialled over several years in classes in Central Queensland. The author wrote the materials for struggling readers, but with a flexible approach to age groups, they have been used successfully across a wide range of abilities. With varying degrees of teacher direction, they have been found suitable for individual tutoring and for small cooperative

learning groups of mixed abilities. In one trial, cooperative learning provided a supportive structure for skills development for a wider range of children than would normally access support for literacy skills. In one teacher's unit plan (for a small group), the Huntsman materials were suitably applied to address a wide range of curriculum outcomes in Speaking and Listening, Reading and Viewing, Writing and Shaping. Another teacher mentioned the cross-curricular links to Science as the story encourages interest in spiders.

The story is a creative, cartoon-like tale that is not age-specific in its appeal. While the language is generally simple, with large, clear print and lively illustrations, it is far from simplistic. Jean found in her research trials that vocabulary was an area of strong growth for many students. The activities to be completed after reading each chapter of the story are designed to require frequent reference to the text of the story to find answers, with re-reading, skimming and scanning, adjusting reading rate and strategies for different purposes. Such repeated practice is recognised as effective for improving reading for children with learning difficulties. The provision of games focusing on aspects of grammar also provides for meaningful repeated practice needed for mastering these concepts.

A wide range of language skills are included in the activities. There are comprehension questions, cloze, phonics and word study, spelling, and proofreading. Depending on students' skill levels, some teacher direction may be needed to ensure that

students use appropriate strategies for spelling, applying the syllable and phonic skills they are learning. The activities are not all focused on word level, with additional reading provided in short passages of a variety of genres (usually enriching knowledge of spiders) and some short writing response tasks. Teachers may choose to work through the full range of activities with students, or be more selective to suit individual needs. In trials, teachers sometimes discovered unexpected gaps in students' knowledge while working through the activities. The materials lend themselves to other teaching and learning strategies also, such as shared reading (with a Big Book version) and Readers' Theatre. The Monster of Huntsman's Lodge and its associated activities are worth considering if you are teaching students whose reading skills are developing, but not yet at a high level of proficiency. The highly structured approach to reading and skills development is adaptable for a range of teaching situations, from individual tutoring to classroom reading groups.

Prices vary according to items included, with discounts for multiple sets, and range from \$33.50 for a set of three items (Story plus Activity Books 1 and 2) to \$295.00 (for 10 sets of three items). The cost of the games (eight games plus other resources) range from \$33.95 for one set to \$107.00 for three sets. The kit is available from Ribbonwood Publications, email [ribbonwoodpubs@gmail.com](mailto:ribbonwoodpubs@gmail.com) or visit [www.ribbonwoodpublications.com.au](http://www.ribbonwoodpublications.com.au).

## Books for Beginning Readers

### Little Learner Books

From *Little Learners Love Literacy* program  
Lorraine Lea, with illustrations by Danielle McDonald  
Learning Logic Pty Ltd, 2010.  
\$35 per set of five books, \$89.95 for Teacher Resource book, plus postage and packing.  
Contact: [www.learninglogic.com.au](http://www.learninglogic.com.au)  
Reviewed by Meree Reynolds

**T**he *Little Learner* books are a component of the Little Learners Love Literacy program, a beginning reading, writing and spelling program featuring synthetic phonics. The publishers, Learning Logic, describe the program as supporting "explicit and systematic development of skills in young children". The Little Learner books are comprised of four graded sets of beginning readers with five titles in each set. Each of these sets relates to a stage (1-4) in the sequence of phonic skills and sight word knowledge that is used in the beginning reading program. The books are well-presented with controlled vocabulary and uncomplicated stories. The illustrations are non-confusing and colourful. The texts are highly decodable, although a small number of high frequency words are introduced in three of the stages. Each set is colour-coded, making it easy to locate and store texts.

Stage 1 texts utilise eight single sounds and a second group of

letter-sound correspondences are introduced in the Stage 2 texts. Stage 3 introduces a further five sounds and the last five single letter-sound correspondences are introduced in Stage 5. The materials are designed so that learning is cumulative with new sounds being practised, while previously introduced sounds are used and revised. Each book contains a short story over 13 pages. The first page presents the title. On following pages, the left-hand pages have a full-page illustration and the right-hand pages provide accompanying text. This is a useful layout, providing the flexibility for a teacher or tutor to cover either page and to focus student attention on the text or the illustration. The text on each page in the Stage 1 and 2 books comprises single words or one or two short sentences presented as one line of text. In Stages 3 and 4 there is more text on each page with at least two sentences and from two to four lines of text on each right-hand page.

At the back of each book, there are two pages of information about how to use the book. In each case this includes a list of the sounds and high frequency words that have been taught in the stage and previous stages (if relevant), new vocabulary introduced within the text with simple meanings and questions to ask after reading the text. High frequency words are referred to as "heart words" because they need to be learned by heart and are presented on flashcards within a heart. This is a very helpful strategy as the heart shape provides support in orientation to

*Continued on page 20 ...*

... continued from page 19

words when presented on flashcards.'

While the *Little Learner* books are a component of a complete literacy program, they could be used as reading books in other circumstances. The Little Learners Love Literacy program comprises a number of resources apart from the beginning readers: a teacher resource book, a puppet, games, CDs containing songs and black-line masters and other teaching resources. The program revolves around a character Milo, who is having a birthday, and this provides a motivating context for beginning readers to gain literacy skills and knowledge.

The *Teacher Resource: Teaching children to read, write and spell: Milo's Birthday Surprise* provides background information about the approach and detailed information about teaching reading using the materials. Activities focus on the five key components of early reading identified in recent large-scale reviews of reading research: namely, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. The resource book provides concise information about these components and how they are related to activities in the sessions. The activities are presented within 26 sessions, each revolving around a character whose name begins with the letter for the sound being taught in the session. One letter-sound correspondence is taught in each session, with some revision of sounds taught in previous lessons.

Kindergarten\* teachers would benefit from using the strategies and resources provided in the program in their classroom literacy programs. It is likely, however, that they will need to allow for more than one session for students to learn each sound. Students who are at-risk will need many experiences and opportunities to practise skills taught previously and are likely to be left behind if each sound is taught in only one lesson.

The teacher resource book also contains information explaining how to introduce the *Little Learner* books for each stage, the associated high frequency words, concepts of print, vocabulary and comprehension questions. It also provides very brief information about supporting students in the reading of text. It recommends that the Stage 1 readers are introduced after the first eight letter-sound correspondences have been taught.

Stage 2 readers are introduced after a further eight letter-sound correspondences have been taught, Stage 3 after a further five sounds and Stage 4 after the last five single sound relationships.

While the reading books were designed for use with other program components, they could be used in other situations to provide practice in the reading of decodable texts for a range of beginning readers. If used in intervention programs for young struggling readers, the books could easily be incorporated into a systematic approach that features mastery before moving on to new learning. If this occurs, the sequence of introduction of letters and high frequency words in the *Little Learner* books may need to be matched to that used in the instructional program.

As there are only five books in each stage, the amount of practice that they provide for students in processing text using the sounds and heart words introduced during the stage may be limited. If used with young struggling readers, there may be a need to provide supplementary texts.

One concern is the sequence of introduction of sounds in both the program and the books. Among the letter-sound combinations introduced in Stage 2 books, some sounds have associated letters that are visually similar and are introduced in close proximity (for example, 'b', 'h' and 'n' are taught in succession). This may result in letter/sound confusions.

The font used in the books and materials may also result in some uncertainty. Many of the letters have tails (for example, 'i', 'l', 'h', 'n', 'm', 'a', 'u', 'k', 'd') that may not be familiar to young students learning letter formation in education systems that do not use these features in their handwriting scripts.

The *Little Learner* books are a useful resource for schools catering for classes of young beginning readers and for use in intervention programs catering for young struggling readers. The reading books are beautifully presented and highly motivating for young students. They are also well-suited for use as resources in a synthetic approach to the teaching of phonics.

\*Note that Kindergarten is the first year of school in NSW, and the equivalent of Prep in Victoria.

## Beginning Reading Instruction (BRI)

Piper Books, UK

Distributed in Australia by Spearwood Press.

\$40 per set (24 books in set 1 and 2 and 20 books in set 3).

Free delivery in Australia.

Contact: [www.spearwoodpress.com.au/](http://www.spearwoodpress.com.au/)

Reviewed by Meree Reynolds

**T**he *Beginning Reading Instruction* program comprises four sets of decodable books for beginning readers. There are 24 books each in the first two sets and the books that were reviewed were from these sets. Information provided by the

distributors indicates that there is a third set of 20 books and another 10 books in a 'Booster' set. There is also a guide for teaching assistants titled 'Back-up! Catch-up! Teaching assistant guide: Synthetic Phonics Back-up and Reading Skills Catch-up'. Additional information, including research, testimonials, examples of materials, downloadable additional resources, FAQs and costing, is available on the website of the Australian distributors.

The teaching assistant guide is photocopiable and is presented in a low-cost format with plastic-comb binding. The guide provides basic advice under the heading 'Do's and Don'ts' and information about using BRI to teach students

to read. The publishers recommend the use of the same procedure for each book. They advise that if new sounds are to be introduced in a book, the flashcards for those sounds be introduced first. Students are instructed to use their knowledge of letter-sound combinations to read the text. In the first lessons with the first set of books, teachers and teaching assistants are advised to use a notched card and slide it across a word, revealing one letter at a time. This is a useful strategy to teach students the blending process. It is suggested that the slider may be necessary only for the first three to four books. The developers recommend that each book is read until the student or students can read it “with ease and without the slider”. This may mean many replications for struggling readers at the early stage, but students should move through the books quite quickly once they have more practice in blending sounds and are able to make connections between letters and sounds automatically.

The teaching assistant guide also includes four pages with role-plays to assist teachers and tutors before using the first set of books. There are also 14 pages of notes made by a tutor over a period of time while working with books from Set 1, with some additional comments from a support group. This is interesting, especially for other tutors working with similar students on the same books. It is, however, not well laid-out and rather difficult to read, with some paragraphs containing a great deal of text. The guide also provides some photocopiable materials: sound cards and word cards for Set 1, a reference list of titles, new words and new sounds for Set 1, and student tracking and record sheets suitable for all BRI sets. It also indicates that reference lists for Sets 2 and 3 can be downloaded from the website.

The reading books are presented in low-cost format with black and white line drawings. They are relatively short (16 pages) with controlled vocabulary. The illustrations are uncomplicated and relate to the story. Each page contains the illustration in the centre of the page with one or two lines of text underneath in the Set 1 books, and one, two or three lines of text underneath in the Set 2 texts. In general, each line is a complete sentence. Each book has a synopsis of the story, a list of new words and new letter-sound correspondences at the front, and some simple questions about the story at the back. Each book has a colour-coded cover that links to the specific group of books. This will assist in the storage and location of the texts.

It is acknowledged that it is very difficult to write meaningful and simple stories using decodable text, especially when students know very few sounds. The program developers have done a commendable job of providing texts for students with very little phonic knowledge and extending these as students learn new skills. However, some aspects of the books may interfere with comprehension of the stories.

The texts focus on a number of animal characters that reappear throughout the stories. Students need to learn and remember the names of these characters. Another factor is the amount of direct speech in the text, and students should therefore be taught the function of speech marks early in the series of books. In order to assist comprehension, it is very important for teachers and tutors to read the synopsis first, introduce each book to students before reading, and discuss the story as suggested at the front of each book.

The sequence of introduction of sounds is slow and very controlled. In the first book, five new sounds are introduced. There are no new sounds in the following two books and, after this, only one or two, if any, sounds are introduced in each title. Twenty-five sounds are introduced in Set 1 books, the majority of these being single sounds. A small number of common vowel and consonant digraphs are also introduced within the first set. The sequence is unusual in that it does not focus solely on the sounds of single letters. For example, “ee” is introduced in the first five letter-sound correspondences. If used in the sequence and manner suggested by the program developers, the books are fully decodable, and therefore there is no need to teach any high frequency words. The new words that are introduced throughout Sets 1 and 2 are phonically regular and match the letter-sound correspondences taught.

In order to make use of the advice about new sounds and words in each book, students should be introduced to the texts in numerical order within the particular set. The texts within each set vary little in difficulty and could be introduced in a different order, but a program planner would need to reanalyse the texts and determine the new learning in each one prior to explicit teaching. Thus instructional planning will be easier if the recommended order is followed. One issue is the font used in the books and photocopiable materials. Many of the letters have tails (that is, ‘i’, ‘l’, ‘h’, ‘n’, ‘m’, ‘a’ ‘u’, ‘k’, ‘d’) that may result in uncertainty for students who are just learning letter formation in education systems that do not use these features.

The BRI reading books are excellent examples of decodable texts that are suitable for use in an approach that teaches synthetic phonics. A key feature of the series is the large number of books at each level, providing many opportunities for students to practise using their word attack skills on many different texts. They are especially suited to use with students who are struggling with processing of early texts and with letter-sound recognition and the blending process, as they provide many opportunities for practice and to build fluency and automaticity. Another factor that will make the series popular with schools, educational services and parents is the low cost of all the materials.

*Dr Meree Reynolds is an education consultant in NSW with an extensive background in working with students with learning difficulties. In previous roles, she has worked as a regular classroom teacher, support teacher working with students with learning difficulties and mild intellectual disability and in educational training and administration. She has recently completed her PhD investigating effective interventions for young struggling readers.*

## Consultant News

Your Consultants' Policy Committee (CPC) members are: Jan Roberts (Convenor), Elaine McLeish, Rosemary Carter, Joan Cooper, Jane McClure, Anne Barton, Anne Pringle, Olivia Connelly and we welcome Lyn Franklin as a new member.

### Consultant registration

Two new registrations have been approved since the last *Bulletin*. Current members are urged to join the group insurance scheme, which is most reasonable in cost. Your private public liability insurance does not cover business use of your premises and if you go into schools as a private consultant, then you need business insurance. Professional insurance is imperative, in case of the unlikely but possible event of litigation regarding your services. Consultant insurance is like any insurance – like taking an umbrella – you won't need it if you have it. Your renewal will be forwarded before the end of the year. Please remember to use the correct form for listing your PD activities, which is available on the website. Do not send a running record sheet.

### Referral Service

Elaine McLeish fulfils her role as Victorian Referral Officer extremely effectively and thoughtfully. She discusses parents' needs with them and this inevitably involves great patience in listening to their stories and suggesting appropriate Consultants. She keeps many factors in mind when allocating potential students to us. We appreciate the work of Kerrie McMahon, our Administration Officer, in both administering our activities and listening to parents who contact her. New flyers are now available to advertise the Referral Service, for distribution to schools and for parents to pass on to others.

### Weekend professional development

Andrew Fildes, of the Andrew Dean Fildes Foundation for language and learning disabilities, presented the Term 3 seminar. Jane McClure's report is as follows: Andrew Fildes presented us with a moving account of growing up with a language-learning disorder – Asperger Syndrome. He related some of the difficulties he encountered in school and in social situations. He was determined to help others cope with similar difficulties and in 1996 he established The Andrew Dean Fildes Foundation to provide services for people with language-learning

disabilities. The Foundation seeks donations and grants to fund the screening and intensive individualised programs. Andrew Fildes is this year's recipient of the Bruce Wicking Award, which was presented to him at the AGM on 16 October.

The Term 4 session (limited numbers) will be a demonstration of excellent new software for spelling, to be presented by Pat Minton and Mary Delahunty. Please bring a laptop if you have one. The CPC members are well into organising the program for 2011. Keep an eye out for them on the website at [ldaustralia.org.au](http://ldaustralia.org.au). Having found the SPELD venue available on Sundays, we will also be using it as much as possible next year as it is quite central and accessible. We try to offer a mix of Saturdays and Sundays to cater for the differing needs of Consultants, some of whom teach during the weekend. Olivia Connelly and Joan Cooper are coordinating these sessions.

Remember to book well in advance, please, to assist in the organisation of the event. No payments can be accepted on the day although you may still attend, incurring a late booking fee of \$10 if your circumstances unexpectedly allow you to be there. Booking forms are available on the website, [www.ldaustralia.org.au](http://www.ldaustralia.org.au). If you have problems downloading the booking form, you can contact Kerrie at [ldaquery@bigpond.net.au](mailto:ldaquery@bigpond.net.au).

### Zone groups

Zone leaders now report to Elaine McLeish, our Zone Coordinator, about a variety of activities. The CPC has begun discussions on the proposal of issuing certificates for formal Zone meetings, such as those with visiting speakers. Members wish to use certificates for 'Standards' points for VIT registration as well as for LDA Consultant registration points. Leaders are responsible for formal record-keeping of attendees and activities. Some members have been able to attend another Zone's meeting, which has been appreciated.

### Website

Olivia Connelly is responsible for our section of the website, and we have made a few amendments in the light of our own use. Molly and Pye follow up on our requests, for which we are grateful.

*Jan Roberts*  
Convenor  
Consultants' Policy Committee

## Report from Victorian Referral Officer

Since my last report, several Consultants have been in contact to let me know about referrals and to catch up on their payments. Thank you to those people and also to those who always let me know as soon as they take up with a new LDA student and who pay promptly after the first three sessions.

It's that time of year when I really struggle to place students. The

majority of Consultants are full, which makes the continuing demand impossible to meet. Even most of the new Consultants have informed me that they are full.

The number of enquiries received via the internet is continuing to increase, with the internet now becoming the second most important source of referrals, following SPELD. Enquiries via the internet more than

doubled over past six months.

I now have a supply of our revamped Referral Service flyers so if Consultants would like some, let me know and I'll mail them.

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### Summary of Referrals: April to June, 2005 to 2010

Period	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
April	40	61	41	66	63	73
May	89	75	77	77	89	70
June	77	73	66	48	58	90
<b>Total April to June</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>Total Jan to June</b>	<b>418</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>355</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>428</b>

### Source of Referrals: July 2008 to June 2010

Source of Referrals	July to Dec 2008	Jan to June 2009	July to Dec 2009	Jan to June 2010
SPELD	58	101	79	73
Independent schools	24	31	24	37
Paediatricians	24	38	46	41
Psychologists	30	53	43	37
Word of mouth	18	29	16	19
Consultants	29	26	23	28
Government schools	17	25	26	28
Used before	12	18	27	33
Agencies	13	14	9	11
Yellow Pages	21	11	11	13
Royal Children's Hospital	13	17	8	14
Internet	15	18	27	66
Optometrists	11	13	18	14
Audiologists	9	9	11	10
Speech pathologists	4	9	6	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>374</b>	<b>428</b>

### Referrals by Year Level: July 2008 to June 2010

Year level	July to Dec 2008	Jan to June 2009	July to Dec 2009	Jan to June 2010
Prep	14	8	17	7
Year 1	22	21	38	24
Year 2	33	36	57	52
Year 3	30	44	66	55
Year 4	38	63	45	54
Year 5	38	51	31	58
Year 6	30	48	33	41
Year 7	27	45	26	38
Year 8	24	30	15	21
Year 9	19	11	16	21
Year 10	9	13	13	16
VCE	3	20	12	24
Adult	11	22	7	17
<b>Total for Primary</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>291</b>
<b>Total for Secondary</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>Total for Adult</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>428</b>

