Why Jaydon can't read

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Jennifer Buckingham

In his 1955 book *Why Johnny Can't Read*, Rudolph Flesch explained that quality of instruction was the key to improving children's literacy. Almost 60 years later, children's names may have changed, but the story remains the same.

Billions of dollars have been spent in the last decade alone on programs aimed at improving literacy, yet thousands of children still struggle with basic reading skills. In the 2013 National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), 11.5% of Year 3 students achieved at or below the (very low) minimum standard for reading. This means that 32,000 cognitively-able children, the equivalent of 100 average-sized primary schools, are poor readers after four years of full-time schooling and approximately 1,200 hours of reading instruction. There are thousands more non-readers in the higher grades.

The problem of low literacy is not one of funding and it is not intractable. The problem is an entrenched gap between research and practice; despite what we know about teaching reading, too many children are not receiving effective, evidence-based reading instruction. The scientific research is robust on how children acquire reading skills early and quickly. Effective evidence-based reading instruction has five essential components – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Each of these skills is necessary to produce proficient and engaged readers.

The so-called 'reading wars' are portrayed as an academic debate over phonics, which teaches children the alphabetic code, versus a whole language approach, which encourages development of higher order literacy skills. This is a false dichotomy. Reading researchers do not claim that phonics is a complete approach to reading instruction. Phonics is one essential part of a high quality, comprehensive reading program. It has been the focus of particular attention because it is the component most often neglected or poorly taught. High quality phonics instruction is explicit, systematic and structured. Pointing out letter sounds during shared reading activities is not phonics instruction.

Why are children not receiving effective evidence-based reading instruction, including phonics? First, many teachers have personal literacy skills that are inadequate to teach reading effectively. Studies of trainee and practising teachers in Australia (and in the US and UK) have repeatedly shown that a large proportion of teachers had insufficient knowledge of meta-linguistics – basic language constructs such as morphology and phonological awareness – to be able to use it in their teaching. For example, only 38% of pre-service teachers and 52% of in-service teachers in a Victorian study could identify the correct definition of a 'syllable'.

Second, teacher education degrees have not adequately prepared teachers in effective reading instruction. The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL) in 2005 found that less than 10% of time in compulsory units of primary teaching degrees was devoted to reading instruction (and less than 5% of time in half of the degree courses). Subsequent surveys and inquiries indicate that not much has changed. The little time that is spent on reading in teacher education courses is weighted towards theories of

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literacy, especially whole language philosophies, rather than proven, effective practice.

The major influences on teaching methods in schools are the university education faculties that produce teachers and the government education departments that produce literacy policies and programs. There appears to be an ideological hegemony among these two agencies of influence that actively or passively works against implementing effective evidence-based reading instruction. For some people, there is a vested or professional interest in preserving the whole language status quo while, for others, whole language philosophies are inseparable from a broader economic and political ideology.

Another key factor is that scientific techniques are not privileged in education research, practice or policy. Few teacher education courses provide teachers with the statistical skills to evaluate and interpret data or to critically appraise research. Attitudes to scientific studies in education research and policy-making vary from disdain to indifference. Of the 137 papers published online from the 2012 Australian Association of Research in Education, only one was a study using scientific methodology, but even it did not use random allocation.

The problems in educational academia might be mitigated if government policies and programs were rigorous. Unfortunately, policy is often based on flawed information from people without expertise in the highly specific, scientific disciplines of initial and remedial reading research. Literacy policy has been consistently undermined by the vagaries of the political cycle, a reliance on non-expert 'experts', and misallocation of resources into ineffective programs, partly because of a failure to evaluate programs properly.

The cycle of poorly conceived policy and inadequate standards of teacher education must be broken. There will always be some children who struggle with reading, but with effective instruction and timely intervention, the number of children who miss out on the fundamental skill of literacy can be drastically reduced.

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