

# An open letter to student teachers

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

**D**ear Student Teachers

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of the teaching profession for those who come after you.

Good luck!

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

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

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

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

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

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