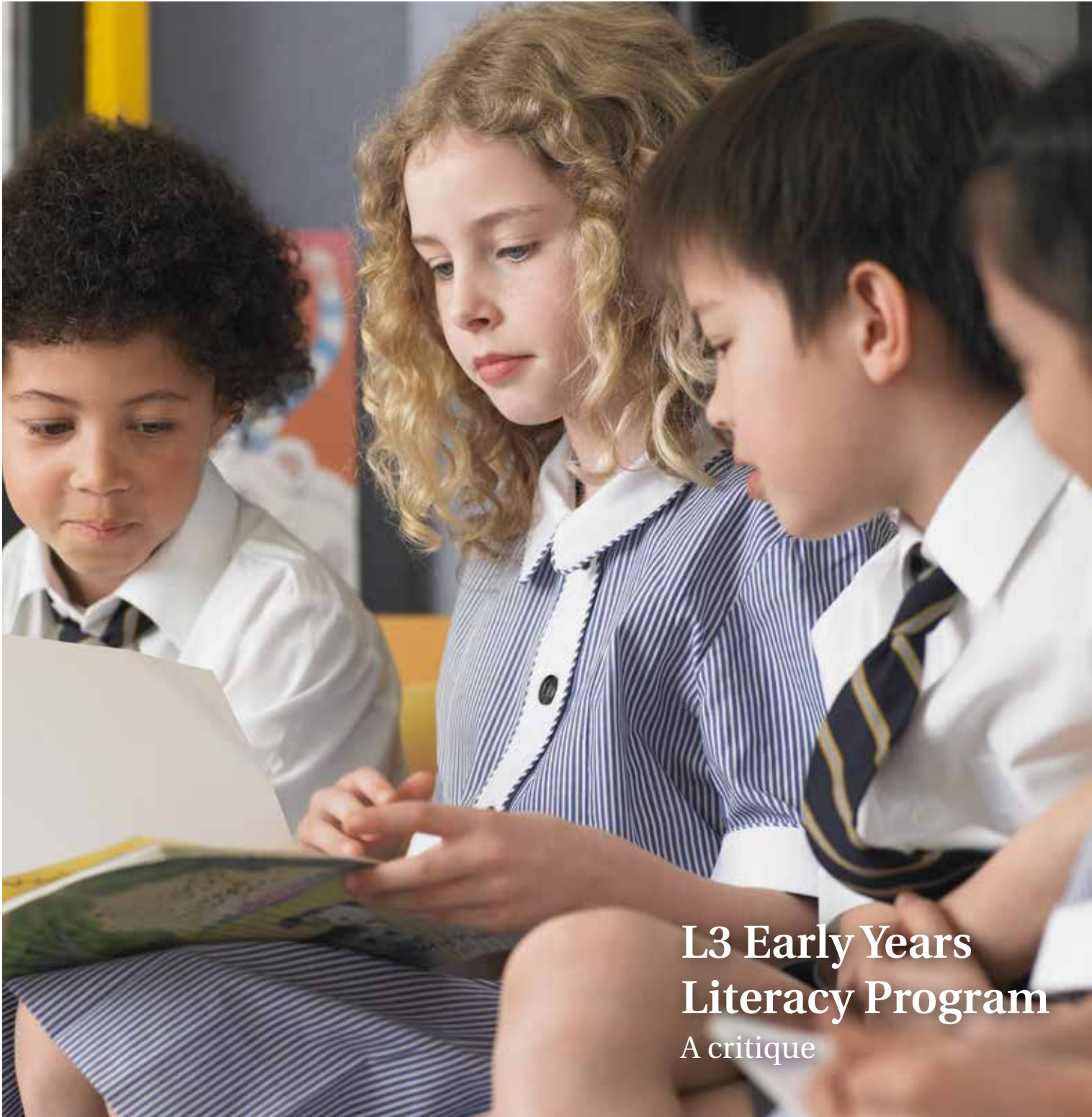


# Bulletin



**L3 Early Years  
Literacy Program**  
A critique

## LDA Council 2014-15

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## LDA Mission

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

## 3 From the President

Jan Roberts

## 4 Council Notes

## 5 Dr Louisa Moats

Alison McMurtrie writes about the national speaking tour of Dr Louisa Moats.



## 7 Cover Story L3 Early Years Literacy Program

Roslyn Neilson and Sally Howell explain their concerns about the L3 Early Years Literacy Program.

## 13 Approaches to Reading Instruction Supported by LDA

LDA's position statement on effective reading instruction

## 14 Phonemic awareness: Yea, nay? (Part 2)

Kerry Hempenstall reviews the research into the relationship between phonemic awareness and early reading and discusses the implications.

## 19 On Marx, parking fines and Positive Teaching

Kevin Wheldall looks at Positive Teaching to manage behaviour.

## The Development of Associations for Remedial Teachers in Australia

50th Anniversary Special: Christopher Davidson's 1979 article about the evolution of professional associations for teachers of students with LD.

## Book review AUSPELD's Understanding Learning Difficulties: A Practical Guide

Review by Jo Whithear

## Book review The New Zealand Dyslexia Handbook

Review by Peter Westwood

## Making time for vocabulary: One, Two, Three

Wendy Moore on using children's literature to support the planned and explicit teaching of vocabulary.

## 'To e or not to e': improving spelling instruction

Robyn and Kevin Wheldall look at improving spelling instruction through Spell-It.

## Consultants Corner

Diane Barwood discusses the Online Tutor Service.

# From the President

## Jan Roberts

2015 is a significant year for LDA. Fifty years ago, a group of teachers with training in Special Education realised there was a lack of professional assistance for students who seemed intelligent enough to learn normally but did not. These remedial teachers, with the aid of like-minded lecturers at Melbourne University, established an organisation that focused on promoting educational support for students with learning difficulties. Over time, there have been some name changes and now this organisation is known as 'Learning Difficulties Australia'.

One form of support the group developed was a referral service to enable parents to access a body of well-qualified, specialised tutors (Consultants). A high standard was set for acceptance as a consultant. As well as Special Education teaching qualifications, the criteria included ongoing professional development; at least three years' experience as a classroom teacher; and experience in teaching students with learning difficulties (LD). These criteria are even more valid today in a world of rapidly changing knowledge and a plethora of unsubstantiated 'miracle cures' advertised to parents. Consultants need to appreciate a classroom teacher's viewpoint; understand students with learning difficulties, and know the most appropriate teaching methods based on evidence-based research. A few consultants are themselves professional development presenters; and many consultants influence teaching practice through sharing strategies with parents. For most consultants, private individual teaching is their main work, generally from a home office, or perhaps going to the students' homes or schools. Sessions are conducted before and after

school and sometimes during school for primary children.

Teaching LD students individually and intensively is not easy but it is stimulating. Students can be very bright but many have associated problems such as attention disorders and autism. Consultants are jugglers, balancing firmness with encouragement to repair crumbled confidence, a common problem of these students, who fortunately become much happier as they make progress. Professional development in research keeps consultants up-to-date with an emphasis on phonics, explicit teaching and the value of assessment. Successful consultants establish good rapport with students, show patience, have a sense of humour and teach thoroughly. The one-on-one environment reduces distractions, one of the main problems in classrooms for these students.

What a variety of needs students have! In one day, a consultant might teach basic reading and spelling to a six year old, maths to an eight year old, more reading and spelling and maths to a nine then a ten year old, and finish off with honing essay skills with a fifteen year old. Deciding on methodology is thought-provoking because student responses vary so much. For instance, one particular literacy program works beautifully with one student but not another; or beautifully - but not for long. So consultants must be ready to teach one thing in more than one way

Like any worthwhile job, there are challenges when dealing with students with multiple problems and communicating effectively with parents and teachers, apart from the actual teaching. But, as it is for most businesses, many difficulties have little to do with the actual work and more to do with administration and finances. Decisions abound over buying computers, photocopiers, computer games and books (especially for those who teach a wide range of ages). It may seem trivial, but managing a timetable is a moveable feast. "Sorry, footy practice has changed to our tutoring afternoon", "I have camp next week"; "I'll be away because we are going skiing/to Bali/

around the world"; and students and their transport providers also become ill, often at the last minute. So many changes without a receptionist!



It would be so easy if students didn't have to go to school. The referral process has been streamlined through the Online Tutor System, a very successful by-product of our excellent new website. It is the most practical referral process for the modern era and will be increasingly valuable, especially to newer consultants, who appreciate this source of students. Those who have been in practice for some time often have a thriving consultancy mainly through word-of-mouth referrals. We hope LDA's consulting service will soon extend across all states.

Deciding to specialise as a practitioner is worthwhile and inspiring. Being able to make a real difference in the life of an individual is a powerful career aphrodisiac. Despite excellent classroom teaching programs we hope will become commonplace some day, there will always be some students who need the assistance of a tutor. Consultants and parents of students with learning difficulties must always be grateful to those pioneers of the organisation we now know as LDA.  
Jan Roberts  
Tutoring consultant since 1995

# Council notes

## Notice of AGM

The Annual General Meeting for LDA and 2015 Awards Presentation will be held on the 17th October in Melbourne, and all LDA members are invited. Immediately following the AGM, a special celebratory 50th anniversary afternoon tea will be served. All are welcome – please save the date.

## LDA Membership Website Upgrade

LDA will soon provide membership renewal and payment options online, with system-generated emailed membership renewal notices, reminders, and receipts for all online payments – including those for event registration. There will still be other member renewal and payment options for those who prefer not to pay online. All existing members who joined LDA in 2014 and before will be notified in December 2015 for their annual membership renewal due in January 2016. Renewal notices for all 2015 and future memberships will be on an annual basis from their date of joining LDA. This payment system will also apply for the annual Consultant Members' registration fee when choosing to register for the Online Tutor Search.

In preparation for this membership website upgrade, please make sure your contact details are up to date for LDA's member database, especially your email address. Please check your website Member Profile by logging in from the website homepage using your User Name and Password. Your LDA User name is your LDA Membership number. If you have forgotten your login details, please contact Kerrie McMahon at [Idaquery@bigpond.net.au](mailto:Idaquery@bigpond.net.au), and she will email these details to you. When you login, remember you can choose to have the website securely remember your login details for future reference.

### **Pye Twaddell**

*Convenor, Website Committee*

## Upcoming professional learning

### The Place of Explicit Instruction: An evidence-based approach to improving school outcomes

*Melbourne: Friday, 11 September 2015*

**Dr Lorraine Hammond** and high-performing school principals **Ray Boyd** and **Greg Sullivan** will give a presentation on how to introduce Explicit Instruction school-wide to raise school outcomes for all students. After setting a theoretical base, the principals will share their own experiences and results since introducing an evidence-based approach to instruction. This one-day workshop is suited to anyone interested in learning how to raise educational outcomes for all students. In particular, school principals and teachers in leadership positions will greatly benefit from this inspiring session.

Time: 9.30am–3.00pm (Registration from 8.45am), Mount Alexander College, 167-175 Mount Alexander Road, Flemington. See the LDA website for details and bookings.

### Instruct to improve: Creating better practice in the classroom

*Brisbane: Friday, September 18 and Saturday, September 19 2015*

This is a combined conference which is jointly presented by LDA, LSTAQ, and SPELD Qld to be held at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre. The keynote speakers will be:

**Professor Anne Castles – Head of Cognitive Science, Macquarie University:**

Identifying, understanding and treating reading disabilities

**Jackie French – Australia's Children's Laureate, author, once struggling reader:**

Is it time to ditch 'dyslexia'?

For more information about sessions, and to book online, please visit the LDA website.

### Maths Professional Development Workshop: Fractions and Decimals

Melbourne: 1st December 2015, 11.00am–1.00pm. Details to follow.

# The 2015 LDA national speaking tour of Dr Louisa Moats

**Alison McMurtrie** writes about the national speaking tour of Dr Louisa Moats.

An unreserved highlight of LDA's recent history has been the national speaking tour by Dr Louisa Moats, organised earlier this year. The tour was a perfect way to kick off the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of LDA, bringing together hundreds of teachers and other professionals interested in working out how to do a better job in teaching students to read and spell.

After much planning and email traffic over an 18 month period, Dr Louisa Moats arrived in Sydney on a perfect Autumn morning on the 1st March. The city was looking its best and set the scene for a hectic, but very successful series of speaking engagements in four capital cities and the Gold Coast. The ever gracious (but somewhat jet-lagged!) Louisa looked at the number of registrations on that first

**If we know so much about the scientific approach to teaching reading then why is it that the practice on the ground is still so very variable?**



(L to R) Tour organizers and award recipients: LDA Secretary Alison McMurtrie, LDA Vice President Dr Lorraine Hammond, 2014 Mona Tobias Award recipient Mandy Nayton, LDA Special Award recipient Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall, 2014 Eminent Researcher Award recipient Dr Louisa Moats, LDA member Maureen Pollard, and LDA Immediate Past President Dr Molly De Lemos at the Awards Ceremony organized as part of LDA's 50th anniversary celebrations.

morning and said with some surprise, 'What do all these people think I'm going to say?' What became increasingly evident during the month of the tour was that what Louisa had to say was exactly what many Australian teachers and administrators wanted, and needed, to hear!

Many of us were familiar with Louisa's work through her large body of publications, but to hear her speak in person was a treat that exceeded all expectation. Seasoned researchers, teachers and policy makers came away with renewed commitment to working for better results for all students. Less experienced teachers learned, perhaps

for the first time, how reading works and how best to teach it.

One of the one-day workshops offered in Sydney, Melbourne, Gold Coast and Brisbane was entitled *Language, learning and literacy: improving practice, delivering results*. This ambitious title encompassed an enormous amount of content which Louisa succinctly articulated over 5 short sessions during the day: *Why learning to read is difficult, Sorting out the 'Ph' factors, Why English orthography is not crazy, Vocabulary and Digging for meaning*.

Louisa began each workshop by posing a simple, but challenging

question. If we know so much about the scientific approach to teaching reading (which we do: as Louisa reminded us, it is the most researched area in psychology) then why is it that the practice on the ground is still so very variable and why is it that so many of us fail to teach reading effectively? This is a bold and confronting question for all of us involved in literacy education.

During the day Louisa illustrated how the English language was 'complex but not chaotic'. She emphasised how the code-based nature of our language requires systematic and explicit teaching of phonics, gradually moving from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. Children are not going to learn this by themselves!

Critical to good initial reading instruction is a teacher's understanding of what Louisa called the 'ph' factors: phonology, phonemes and phonics.

### Louisa Moats challenged the audience with a message to be strong and brave in our criticism of poor practice.

The link between our oral and written language was emphasized and Louisa's point that you can't teach what you don't know inevitably led to questions around teacher knowledge, teacher training and professional development.

She started her tour off with this message when, at her very first speaking engagement hosted by Jennifer Buckingham and the Centre for Independent Studies in Sydney, she made the point that we need to stop thinking about the teaching of reading as if it was a philosophical debate. She reminded the gathering that for over 30 years we have had a well-established scientific model of what effective reading instruction should look like and it is high time our practices in the classroom reflected this! It was a strong challenge to those who were present representing the different education departments and stakeholders.

During the month that Louisa was in Australia she formally presented at twelve events in Sydney, Gold Coast, Brisbane, Perth and Melbourne. Over 800 people heard her speak at these events and LDA sincerely hopes that those 800 spread her message in their spheres of influence, whether they are working in classrooms, research or policy. She also briefly met with Education Minister Christopher Pyne when she attended the launch of the



Dr Louisa Moats reminds us about the importance of forming coalitions. Her message was: *If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.*

documentary on dyslexia, 'Outside the Square' produced by Tanya Forbes. Her tour ended in Melbourne where Louisa was presented with the AJLD 2014 Eminent Researcher Award. In her acceptance speech she took the opportunity once again to challenge the audience with a message to be strong and brave in our criticism of poor practice.

The tour was a success for many reasons. Firstly, it was an opportunity for Australians to hear from a distinguished researcher and practitioner in person. It was also an opportunity for the work of LDA to be showcased to a far greater audience and it was excellent to be able to work with partner organisations such as SPELD, NSW and SPELD, QLD and the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation in WA as well as Macquarie University Special Education Centre and CCD. LDA also welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with representatives from the Centre for Independent Studies and Speech Pathology Australia who enjoyed a lunchtime meeting.

LDA would like to thank all those who helped to make the tour a success. A special thank you to Tanya Forbes from the Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group, who was instrumental in helping LDA run the Queensland events. Although the physical journey was arduous for Louisa, the impact she made over the month she was here will long be felt. In Louisa's own words as the tour closed, 'I think I have stirred the pot a bit!' And that is exactly what she did do. She made no apologies for criticising bad practice – we know

what should be done, let's do it! LDA is immensely grateful that she accepted the invitation to come to Australia and we do hope that she will one day return to stir the pot a bit more!

Alison McMurtrie is the Secretary of Learning Difficulties Australia.

Articles written by Dr Moats are available on the LDA website, [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org). Follow the links from the bottom of the home page under Professional Learning.



# A Critique of the L3 Early Years Literacy Program

**Roslyn Neilson**, Speech-Language Pathologist, Language, Speech & Literacy Services and **Sally Howell**, Principal, Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) School, explain their concerns about the L3 Early Years Literacy Program.



Education bureaucracies worldwide are remarkably gifted in their ability to produce rhetoric that includes fine words like ‘striving’, ‘excellence’, and ‘high quality’, especially when they are introducing a new program or initiative. Making a measurable difference to educational outcomes in this complicated world, however, is not easy. The stakes are very high: school educators have the responsibility of providing the best possible education to the next generation, of doing so equitably for all schoolchildren, and of ensuring the best possible use of taxpayers’ money. Education departments must therefore always be held accountable for their programs with reference to outcomes, and their comforting rhetoric must always be balanced by careful independent evaluation and research.

A case in point is the NSW State Government’s *Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan* (2011-2015), under which \$261 million has been allocated across public, Catholic and Independent schools according to need. *Early Action for Success (EaFS)* is the strategy adopted by the NSW Department of Education (NSW DoE) to implement this plan. To quote from one *EaFS* document:

The strategy relies on high quality leadership combined with a focus on the needs of each student, early intervention and ongoing monitoring of progress in literacy and numeracy. In this way, every student at risk of not achieving expected outcomes in literacy and numeracy in Kindergarten to Year 2 is identified and receives appropriate support. The key elements of the strategy are:

- hands-on instructional leadership
- personalisation that puts students at the centre of all classroom and school level action
- an emphasis on assessment for learning where teachers know precisely where students are and where they need to go
- high quality professional learning

- tiered interventions in literacy and numeracy in the early years. (NSW DoE, 2013b)

(Note that within the NSW

Department of Education the term ‘Kindergarten’ refers to the first year of formal schooling in NSW, in which children of about five years of age enter school and are introduced to formal literacy and numeracy instruction. Other parts of Australia use the terms ‘Prep’, ‘Reception’, ‘Transition’ or ‘Pre-Primary’ for this same grade, and the Australian Curriculum uses the term ‘Foundation’. Also note that although the numeracy aspect of the *EaFS* program is as deserving of careful scrutiny as the literacy aspect, it will not be discussed in this article.)

The implementation of the NSW DoE *EaFS* strategy with respect to early literacy is realised by the Best Start program, and the classroom early literacy component of this program is referred to as *L3*, where the three *L*s stand for ‘language’, ‘learning’ and ‘literacy’. Despite the official endorsement and promotion of the *L3* program by NSW DoE, anecdotal evidence suggests that *L3* has been proving to be somewhat divisive amongst the teaching fraternity in NSW, with many teachers approving of it enthusiastically, and many feeling extremely concerned about the way it works. It is clear that *L3* is in need of some careful objective exploration and evaluation, accompanied by strong independent examination of the literacy outcomes it is producing.

### What is the *L3* Program?

The *L3* program was originally written for implementation in the first year of schooling in NSW schools. The very title of *L3* suggests a focus on language, and the program begins with the acknowledgement that children’s oral language skills differ importantly at the point of school entry. The program’s stated aims involve providing a classroom teaching approach that ensures appropriate early literacy intervention for all children, including the more disadvantaged groups, thereby reducing the number of children who may need further intervention in later years of schooling. *L3* was introduced into some trial NSW Kindergarten classes in 2010, and it is now strongly recommended by NSW DoE, although not yet mandated across the whole State. *L3* is a core component of the *EaFS* strategy, with all literacy trainers, instructional leaders and participating

schools required to be trained in its use. *L3* has recently been extended into the early Primary school years.

The *L3* program consists essentially of a set of classroom guidelines for conducting early literacy blocks in the classroom and monitoring student progress. Extensive teacher training and ongoing collegial guidance are provided to ensure that literacy teaching is implemented according to the guidelines, and to support teachers’ understanding of the underlying philosophy and their confidence in their practices.

The underlying pedagogy of *L3* is strongly constructivist, with a focus on meaning rather than code in children’s first introduction to literacy; in almost all respects *L3* follows exactly the same principles as those underlying *Reading Recovery* (Clay, 2005a, 2005b). The printed materials thus abound with sentences like:

The words, letters and sounds chosen for explicit lessons in Word Work are drawn from the language of the text. There is not a predetermined sequence to follow. The text itself creates the gradient of complexity and determines the content for instruction. (*L3 Kindergarten training materials*, p.60)

The detailed guidelines of what happens in the teaching components of *L3* are a closely guarded copyright secret, with the manuals and many of the reports available only to teachers in schools that have signed up to the program, and not available to independent researchers. While this overall lack of transparency is unfortunate from both a taxpayer and a researcher standpoint, it is understandable in terms of protection of the *L3* intellectual property. At this stage, therefore, this present discussion has to be based on whatever information has been gleaned from available sources; comments will be welcome from those who have closer contact with the program.

The *L3* guidelines involve small group teaching within the whole classroom, with the classroom teacher focussing on groups of two or three children for short periods at a time in what is called the ‘engine room’, while the rest of the class are hopefully engaged in literacy-related self-directed activities. There is a strong emphasis on reading aloud to children, and the well-known ‘levelled’ books are used in both teaching and in assessment (note that these are not books that are controlled in terms of the introduction of letter-sound correspondences). Children are taught to read using the



three-cueing system promoted by *Reading Recovery* for the identification of words: look at the pictures, think about what the word might mean and how it might fit into the sentence, look at the first letter, and guess. If a child's guess is semantically inappropriate, the teacher may ask the child, "Does that make sense?" and might perhaps ask, "Does that look right?" Sounding out is not used, and semantically appropriate errors are not corrected.

Knowledge of the alphabet, letter-sound correspondences and phonemic awareness are addressed during Guided Writing and Guided Reading 'Word Work' components of *L3*, carried out in the 'engine room'. Phonemic awareness is the prime focus in these 'Word Work' sessions, and magnetic letters are often used for segmenting and phoneme manipulation tasks. All code-related skills are addressed using words that happen to crop up in the texts being used. When children are writing a sentence they have constructed together, for example, they are invited by the teacher to make selected words using magnetic letters. If they are able to identify an appropriate phoneme but not the corresponding letter they are encouraged to look for the letter on a picture alphabet chart. While phonemic awareness teaching moments certainly do happen, there is no planned sequence to the introduction of letter-sound correspondences, and no opportunity for children to practice to mastery the skills of letter-sound

### The underlying pedagogy of *L3* is strongly constructivist, with a focus on meaning rather than code in children's first introduction to literacy

identification, phoneme segmentation and blending. Teachers are required to be aware of which sounds individual children already know, and are expected to ensure that particular unknown sounds for each child will crop up in other writing experiences of other classroom material. It is difficult to be sure whether or not teachers are expected to be systematic in their assessments of individual children's phonemic awareness and knowledge of letters and sounds, apart from making incidental observations in the 'engine room' sessions and inspecting the children's 'artefacts' or writing samples.

It is made very clear in the *L3* guidelines that this program is all that is needed for early literacy instruction; in particular, no other formal phonics instruction, code-related teaching or decodable books should be introduced.

*L3* incorporates all aspects of the Department of Education and Training documents related to literacy learning in Early Stage 1. *L3* does not require additional programs. (*L3 Training Materials*, p.2)

Within the *L3* program, some sort of re-evaluation of children's progress takes place very five weeks, but it is not clear if this applies only to children who were identified as being at risk from the *Best Start* assessment tool applied at the beginning of Kindergarten (a tool which itself has not been independently validated), or if it applies to all children.

### How is the *L3* Program Evaluated?

The promotional material used to introduce *L3* to schools consistently claims that *L3* program 'goals' are being exceeded. The goals are described as follows:

*L3* Program Goals:

- 20 per cent only of all students reading at Level 5 or less (i.e. at or below minimum end-of-year expectations for kindergarten)...
- 20 per cent only of all students writing 5 words or more [sic] (i.e. at or below minimum end-of-year expectations for kindergarten)

(Commonwealth of Australia: *Teach, Learn Share*, 2014 pp. 3-4)

The in-principle acceptance of a 20% failure rate is surprising. *L3* is an intensive classroom program whose explicitly stated goals include the support of disadvantaged children, and it is problematic that it should be judged to have 'succeeded' when it produces a one in five failure rate - a rate that is even higher than what is anecdotally referred to as the 'instructional casualty' rate of children with early literacy difficulties. In a conventional response to intervention (RtI) model, it is commonly deemed appropriate that 15% of children may require Tier 2 intervention in addition to Tier 1 (e.g., Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). While it may indeed be reasonable for Tier 1 assessments to be subject to a 20% cut-off in order to select the children for Tier 2 intervention, particularly in well-resourced schools that can afford such an inclusive Tier 2 cut-off, an accepted failure rate of 20% seems to

be more like a statement of a problem than a goal.

The other concerning aspect of the stated program goals is that the literacy achievements that form the benchmarks are not only strikingly low, but are also of dubious reliability and validity. The major reading assessment tool used in *L3* consists of documentation of the book 'level' attained by the students. Using 'levelled books' has the advantage of not being demanding on teacher time and assessment resources, but there is little research available on its efficacy (Madeline, 2007), and it cannot be argued that the 'levels' of 'levelled books' are sufficiently reliable or valid to be used as the only ongoing assessment of student reading levels (Deno, Mirkin & Chiang, 1982; Pitcher & Fang, 2007). The procedure of using 'levelled books' is also vulnerable to the problem of under-estimating students' potential difficulties, especially when it is implemented in the early stages of reading. This is because the 'levelled' books in question are predictable picture books, and children who have no phonemic awareness but good guessing skills or sight word reading are allowed to slip through the cracks. Yet another concern is the fact that for *L3* purposes, children's end of year assessment is made using books that they have already read, rather than material that evaluates their independent reading skills on unseen material.

The writing benchmark criterion stated within the *L3* goals is puzzling, too. It is difficult to imagine how the guideline of 'writing five words or more' can be seen as a reliable and useful assessment criterion, with no reference to the structure of the words learned. One wonders why the number five was chosen as the benchmark - it would be comforting to be referred to empirical evidence that a five word cut-off at the end of a year of schooling served to distinguish between those children who were likely to succeed in the following year and those who were not.

It seems no surprise, overall, that in the *L3* promotional material the program can be reported to exceed expectations. The bar has hardly been set at a reasonable height.

In the past few years, however, the NSW Department of Education has been attempting to produce evidence of efficacy for *L3* by reporting considerable detail about student progress in the participating schools. The 2014 *EARS* report remarks that there are various reasons, including small cohort

numbers, that make it difficult to make reliable judgments about changes in school NAPLAN scores (p. 11; pp.13-14). The focus is therefore largely on progress ratings made by teachers of individual students in their own classes, using the NSW K-10 Literacy continuum. When student progress performance is evaluated using the NSW K-10 Literacy Continuum, teachers make ‘on balance’ decisions against school-selected work samples of average performance.

...Once there is a shared understanding of the grade expectations, the teacher can identify for each student if they are ‘below’, ‘at’ or ‘above’ the expectations. (NSW DoE, 2013a pp.1-2).

The NSW K-10 Literacy Continuum is an interesting tool to be used for this rating purpose. It is a well-regarded document in educational communities, but there is no evidence that it has been yet subjected to the validity and reliability scrutiny that is required of a research instrument for evaluating intervention programs. The Literacy Continuum provides broad ‘cluster’ guidelines for learning outcomes at regular points during the school years, along several different dimensions. The data used by the *L3* evaluation team involve teacher ratings made on only three of the available dimensions: the continua for ‘Reading Texts’, ‘Aspects of Writing’ and ‘Comprehension’. Interestingly, for a program that has ‘language’ as one of its title terms, teacher ratings on the ‘Aspects of Speaking’ Continuum are not used. Unsurprisingly, for a program that is not code-based, the data in the Continuum on ‘Phonics’ and ‘Phonemic Awareness’ are not used either. Given the well-established predictive value of phonemic awareness with respect to early reading progress, and the fact that there are many standardised phonemic awareness assessments available, this is a lamentable omission.

The data within the NSW DoE (2014) report is all summarised in terms that refer to highly successful outcomes (p.8). The report claims quite clearly, for example, that the proportions of



The ‘word work’ component of the *L3* program occurs in the ‘engine room,’ with the teacher working with 2-3 students at a time.

students in the very lowest levels of the continua have been reduced since the introduction of *EaFS* (p.12-13). Mention of possible ‘Hawthorn’ effects is relegated to a footnote, and the report never comes to grips with the fact that there are no control groups involved. To present another example: reproduced in Table 1 below (taken from data presented on p.30 of the 2014 report) is a set of data representing mid-year rates of improvement in the Kindergarten, Year 1 and Year 2 cohorts in 59 schools that started implementing *L3* in 2012 (NSW DoE, 2014, p.30). The results are based on teacher ratings made against the reading, writing and comprehension scales of the Literacy Continuum, with students being ‘on track’ or ‘anticipated to achieve end of year standard’.

The data in Table 1 do indeed indicate a trend towards an increase in the percentage of students in each cohort who are ‘on track’ in 2014 relative to 2013, but statistical significance is not reported. There is some devil in the detail, moreover, when one inspects the table for the information it reveals about follow-up of the students in same cohort from 2013 to 2014. That is, by the end of 2013 74% of Kindergarten students were anticipated to be ‘on track’, but in June 2014 only 58% of these students were in fact on track in Year

1. Similarly, by the end of 2013, 64% of Year 1 students were anticipated to be on track, but in 2014 only 47% were deemed to be on track when they were in Year 2. The teacher judgements of the progress of their own students on the Literacy Continuum are, of course, not independent of possible bias, but even if one accepts their validity and reliability, the data indicate that a large proportion of students who were anticipated to reach end of year standards were in fact not on track the following year. The information reported therefore actually seems to provide a testimony to the ineffectiveness of *L3* intervention for a large proportion of students as well as some indication of overall improvement in the cohorts as a whole.

Overall, the nature of reported data collected within the literacy aspect of the *EaFS* strategy makes it very difficult to draw any conclusions about the efficacy of the interventions. Despite its best intentions to provide evaluations, NSW DoE may be using internal assessment practices that fail the test of objectivity, and the reliability and validity of the program’s monitoring and ‘success’ criteria may be questionable.

### Discussion points

It is easy to see why so many teachers feel enthusiastic about the *L3*

	Kinder June 2013	Kinder June 2014	Year 1 June 2013	Year 1 June 2014	Year 2 June 2013	Year 2 June 2014
On track for end of year standard	26%	51%	38%	58%	28%	47%
Receiving intervention to achieve end of year standard	49%	42%	27%	25%	25%	24%
Anticipated to achieve end of year standard	74%	92%	64%	82%	53%	71%

Table 1. NSW DoE outcomes, measured in terms of the NSW K-10 Literacy Continuum standards, for cohorts of students receiving the *L3* program, 2013 to 2014.

program. The in-servicing and ongoing support, and the explicit instructions about what to do in the literacy block, must be a welcome relief to the large number of teachers who seem to feel that they were never taught how to teach children to read while they were doing their Education degrees. The underlying constructivist philosophy must sit well with teachers who were trained during the height of the Whole Language era. The *L3* trainers are presumably sincerely passionate about their theory of literacy teaching, and they no doubt convey this certitude strongly to other trainers and to classroom teachers. *L3* involves a wealth of literature-based activities, which clearly makes the classroom teacher's day relatively interesting, and does indeed ensure that children are exposed to a rich range of English vocabulary and sentence structures. This is a particularly commendable aspect of the program. If the teachers are themselves unsure about the ins and outs of phonics, *L3* permits them to work well within their comfort zone (apart, perhaps, from in the writing component of the 'Word Work' sessions; this will be returned to below). The permission that *L3* gives teachers to work with very small groups of children must be a huge relief for professionals who routinely have to work so hard at maintaining control over a classroom full of children with disparate skills, interests and maturity. *L3* gives teachers the chance to let those students who are very strong language learners blossom at their own accelerated rate, and this no doubt would be a rich source of very positive testimonials.

Those teachers who are uncomfortable with *L3* uniformly lament the fact that it makes no provision for systematic phonics instruction, and that it perpetuates the 'Whole Language' based three-cueing approach to reading, where students are encouraged to guess words from context without sounding them out (Rose, 2006). Many NSW schools have in fact been following the strong lead of current research data that suggests that systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction is highly beneficial in the early years of schooling, enabling as many students as possible to master the alphabetic code, read with accuracy and automaticity, and free their cognitive resources for comprehension (NITL, 2005; Rose, 2006; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998, etc.). Systematic instruction clearly benefits children who come to the literacy learning process

with very few independent resources that they can use to figure out the alphabetic code on their own. And there is evidence that systematic phonics instruction, if well presented, is just as interesting and challenging for the strong language learners as is it supportive of the children with more need for explicit teaching (Johnston, Watson & Logan, 2009). The *L3* in-services are very likely, however, to steer teachers away from the existing research literature that provides alternative, more systematic, and in fact more evidence-based approaches to the teaching of reading and writing.

The interactive Guided Writing sessions are the most obvious aspect of *L3* that might allow teachers to work with letter-sound correspondences and phonemic awareness, and they are potentially very powerful. They are, however, particularly difficult to conduct if children do not themselves bring strong phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge to the task. Teachers need to be highly skilled in terms of their own sensitivity to phonemes and their own understanding of the English alphabetic code if they are to avoid having the weaker students flounder and get confused. The constructivist teachers who were themselves taught in whole language classrooms are not likely to bring this prerequisite knowledge to the 'engine room'. Furthermore, it is very unlikely that the meaning-centred approach in the *L3* training manuals would enrich teachers' skills in this area.

It is not clear in the Departmental reports what specific adjustment to the program is available for the students who are not anticipated to achieve end of year standards, and the even larger group who in fact have not reached them by the following year. It is particularly concerning that if a school principal is thoroughly committed to *L3*, he or she will very likely also be committed to *Reading Recovery*. If, therefore, students do 'fail' in the first year of schooling in *L3*, and are offered further individualised intervention at school, all they have in store for them is *Reading Recovery*, which will involve yet more of the same pedagogy. It is recognised that the students who do best in *Reading Recovery* are those who bring strong phonemic awareness to the learning task (Tunmer, Chapman, Greaney, Prochnow & Arrow, 2013). There is a danger that, as is the case with *Reading Recovery*, children who are strong language learners will blossom in *L3*, and the divide between the haves and the have-nots will grow. From this

vantage point, therefore, it might be concluded that *L3* does not seem to be a program with a focus on those children who have difficulty learning. It is potentially a recipe for disaster for at-risk students.

## Those teachers who are uncomfortable with *L3* uniformly lament the fact that it makes no provision for systematic phonics instruction

In 2013 a review of current Australian early literacy interventions carried out by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) commented:

Based on the criteria used for the review, among the literacy interventions reviewed there is no research evidence or very limited evidence available for the efficacy of:... Best Start... [or] Language, Learning and Literacy. (Meiers et al., 2013 p.xi)

It was a risky move for the NSW Department of Education to choose and promote *L3*, ignoring current research evidence about the importance of systematic phonics teaching in favour of the promotion of the *Reading Recovery* philosophy. Having taken this step, it is absolutely essential that the Department should be prepared to use independent evaluation tools, basing their accountability on measurements that are more reliable, valid and comprehensive than the ones they are using now. Fine words and testimonials are not enough. NSW schoolchildren and teachers are entitled to expect that the *EALIS* strategy within the *Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan* should be producing appropriate research with which to evaluate their program.

Interested readers will find the LDA Position Statement on the teaching of reading on the LDA website, at <https://www.ldaustralia.org/client/documents/LDA%20Position%20Statement.pdf>.

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## Recommended Reading:

### Behavioural Interventions to Remediate Learning Disorders: A Technical Report, by George Dawson and Stephanie D'Souza

A review of the efficacy of some current LD brain changing interventions, undertaken by a team of academics from Auckland University's Centre for Brain Research and School of Psychology for SPELD New Zealand. This review provides an objective overview of the efficacy of a number of popular brain-training interventions, including Arrowsmith, BrainGym, CogMed, and Fast ForWord. Highly recommended by LDA. This report can be accessed at <http://www.speld.org.nz/downloads/Report%20on%20behavioural%20interventions.pdf>

# Approaches to Reading Instruction Supported by LDA

LDA position Statement released 12 May 2015 and updated 7 June 2015.

Given appropriate instruction, most children learn to read quickly and efficiently in the first year of school. Some children find it more difficult to learn to read, and require more focused instruction over a longer period of time. A few children, estimated to be about 3 to 5 per cent of the total school population, have persistent and ongoing problems in learning to read, and require ongoing help and support with their reading. Decades of research have established that the most effective way of teaching children to read is through explicit, systematic instruction in the basic skills required for reading.

Education Departments, teachers and parents are faced with a bewildering number of programs, interventions and treatments which claim to help students who struggle with reading and related skills.

The following Position Statement on Reading Instruction has been developed by LDA to provide a guide to schools, teachers and parents to identify programs that adopt an explicit structured approach to the teaching of reading and are therefore likely to be effective both in the teaching of initial reading and in assisting students with reading difficulties.

LDA supports approaches to reading instruction that adopt an explicit structured approach to the teaching of reading and are consistent with the scientific evidence as to how children learn to read and how best to teach them. This approach is important for all children, but is particularly important for children who have difficulty in learning to read. Programs that follow an explicit structured approach to the teaching of reading include as an integral part of the teaching program specific instruction in phonology (phonological and phonemic awareness), sound-symbol associations (letter-sound correspondences), as well as syllable structures, morphology, syntax and semantics (the structure, use and meaning of words) as a basis for developing accurate and fluent word reading and reading comprehension.

Such programs conform to the definition of 'structured literacy programs' as adopted by the International Dyslexia Association in July 2014, and place emphasis on the importance of learning the alphabetic code and the twin processes of blending and segmenting as the basis of learning to read. They do not include programs that follow a whole language or 'balanced literacy' approach, which place emphasis on the three cueing system and guessing from context as acceptable strategies for identifying words, or on programs which include the practice of asking children to memorise lists of words before they have received instruction in phonological and phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondences and blending and segmenting.

Examples of programs that follow an explicit structured approach to the teaching of reading include but are not limited to programs such as Jolly Phonics, Read

Write Inc., Sounds-Write, Get Reading Right, International Phonics, the MultiLit suite of programs, the DI Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading programs, and the various programs based on the Orton-Gillingham approach. Examples of programs that follow a whole language or 'balanced literacy' approach include but are not limited to programs such as Reading Recovery and the literacy approaches developed by Fountas and Pinnell, including Levelled Literacy Intervention and Guided Reading. LDA does not support or endorse programs that place emphasis on the exercise or training of underlying brain processes including working memory as the basis for improving reading or other academic skills. Such programs include Brain Gym, Fast ForWord, CogMed and the Arrowsmith program.

For further information on the IDA definition of structured literacy and recommendations for effective reading instruction see <http://dyslexia-ncbida.org/2014/09/09/ida-introduces-structured-literacy/> and <http://eida.org/effective-reading-instruction/>. For an Australian guide to recommended reading strategies used in Australia see the AUSPELD publication, *Understanding Learning Difficulties: A practical guide*. For a more detailed overview of the knowledge required by teachers for effective teaching of reading see Louisa C. Moats, *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers* (second edition). For a discussion of the use of the term 'balanced literacy' in relation to programs that do not provide an explicit structured approach to the teaching of reading, see Louisa Moats' paper, *Whole Language Lives On: The Illusion of Balanced Reading Instruction*.

# Phonemic awareness: Yea, nay? (Part 2)



**Kerry Hempenstall reviews the research into the relationship between phonemic awareness and early reading and discusses the implications.**

This article is the second of a two-part series on phonemic awareness adapted with permission from Dr Kerry Hempenstall's blog post of the same name. The first part was printed in the previous (Autumn 2015) edition of this Bulletin. The original post can be found at <http://www.nifdi.org/news/hempenstall-blog/456-phonemicawareness-yea-nay>

**T**he phonemic awareness concept has had a significant influence on understanding reading and its acquisition. Students with it tend to become better readers than those without it. This feature has led to interest in teaching it prior to reading instruction. However, this focus raises several issues about phonemic awareness that are as yet not fully resolved. There remains the niggling concern that the relationship has not yet been definitively determined as causal.

The arrival of phonemic awareness acted as something of a circuit breaker to the acrimonious battles between Whole Language and phonics approaches. Educators who were unwilling to contemplate phonics teaching saw phonemic awareness as a less rigid, more friendly, literacy option – sort of game-like, without drill or worksheets. Over the past four decades, but particularly in the last 30 years, there has been an increasing acceptance that phonemic awareness plays an important role in beginning reading success, and also in specific reading disability or dyslexia (Hatcher, Hulme, & Ellis, 1994; Melby-Lervåg, Lyster, & Hulme, 2012; National

Reading Panel, 2000; Nelson, Lindstrom, Lindstrom, & Denis, 2012; Share, 1995; Stanovich, 1986).



The interest in phonology is unsurprising when one considers that phonological abilities (of which phonemic awareness is a subset) are recognised as the most powerful predictors of reading success. A number of researchers have noted that the predictive power of measured phonological abilities exceeds that of more general cognitive abilities such as intelligence, vocabulary, and listening comprehension (Adams, 1990; Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Juel, 1988; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987; Yopp, 1988). However, see Blomert and Willems (2010) for a contrary finding. The predictive quality has been reported not only for the English language but also for Swedish, Spanish, French, Italian, and Russian (Adams, 1990) and even Chinese (Perfetti & Zhang, 1995). Indeed, Frost (2005) argued that skilled reading, even in shallow orthographies, requires the use of phonological skills. “The preschool child’s rapid mastery of the spoken language does not automatically confer the awareness of phonemic structure necessary to penetrate the written language code.” (Lieberman, Shankweiler, & Lieberman, 1989; Rayner et al., 2001). But every new learner who would grasp the alphabetic principle must somehow make the discovery that words come apart into phoneme units. “Difficulty in attaining phoneme awareness is arguably the price we pay for having evolved to speak (and understand speech) rather than to write and read” (Shankweiler & Fowler, 2003, p.4)

## So, what is phonemic awareness?

Various terms have been employed to describe phonemic awareness, such as phonological awareness, acoustic awareness, phonetic awareness, auditory analysis, sound categorisation, phonemic segmentation, phonological sensitivity, and phonemic analysis. Most authors such as Goswami and Bryant (1990) reserve the term phonemic awareness to imply awareness of individual phonemes; whereas, phonological awareness is considered a more global term that includes the earlier developing aspects, such as rhyme and syllable awareness (Melby-Lervåg, Lyster, & Hulme, 2012).

It has been argued that these skills are hierarchical, and it's true that the correlations with reading increase as the complexity of the tasks increases – from low level skills such as syllable recognition to high level skills such as blending sounds (Manolitsis & Tafa, 2011). It may also be that the sequence is at least partly dependent on the experiences of individual students. The more focussed and structured the experience, the more likely a student will have progressed to higher levels compared with same-age peers (Samuelsson et al., 2008). Additionally, there may be genetic effects that influence the ease with which individual students make phonological progress (Soden-Hensler, Taylor, & Schatschneider, 2012).

Phonemic awareness is clearly more complex than auditory discrimination, which is the ability to perceive, for example, that *cat* and *mat* are different speech productions or words. To be able to describe how they are similar but different, however, implies some level of phonemic awareness. Auditory discrimination entails hearing a difference; whereas, phonemic awareness entails a level of analysis of the constituent sounds. Young children are not normally called upon to consider words at a level other than their meaning, although experience with rhymes may be the first indication for children that they can play with the structure of words.

### Word level analysis

Prior to these finer intra-word discriminations, children need to appreciate that spoken sentences (a rather continuous stream of sound without clear pauses) are separable into discrete words (Lieberman & Liberman, 1990). It seems surprising that such

an obvious distinction may elude children; however, Adams (1990) and Blachman (1984) pointed out that word consciousness (the awareness that spoken language is composed of words) should not be assumed even in children with several years schooling. Fortunately, they report evidence that it may be taught easily enough, even at a pre-school level. That school age children can lack such fundamental knowledge may be difficult for adults to accept, but it highlights the need in education to assume little, and assess pre-requisite skills carefully. Their warning also challenged the view, held by some Whole Language advocates (Goodman, 1979, 1986; Smith, 1975, 1992), that speaking and reading involve equivalent “natural” processes for all children. The implications of the Whole Language view are that the same environmental conditions that occur during the development of speech are those best provided for children learning to read. Liberman and Liberman (1990) among others (Gough & Hillinger, 1980; Hirsch, 2001; Liberman, 1997) have provided a forceful rebuttal of this equivalence perspective, and the equivalence view has few supporters today.

### Syllable level analysis

Having discovered that sentences are composed of words, the next logical unit of analysis is intra-word, at the syllable level. However, syllables can be represented by any number of letters from one to eight. The word *understand* has three syllables, each of a different number of letters. *Un* has two, *der* has three, and *stand* has five letters. This variability makes the syllable unit of limited value in analysing the reading task (Bradley, 1990), and the catch is that one needs to have awareness at the level of the phoneme in order to determine where best to decide the syllable junctions. So, syllable awareness may have limited value as an early curriculum focus.

### Rhyme and Alliteration

A recognition of rhyme may be the entry point for many children to phonemic awareness development (Bryant, 1990). To be aware that words can have a similar end-sound implies a critical step in metalinguistic understanding - that of ignoring the meaning of a word in order to attend to its internal structure. This leads to a new classification system, one in which words can be classified according to end-sound rather than meaning. Bryant (1990) points to the considerable

amount of evidence indicating that children as young as three or four years can make judgments such as when words rhyme, and when they begin with the same sound (alliteration). Other studies, such as by Braze, McRoberts, and McDonough (2011) report rhyme sensitivity prior to age two years.

Bryant argues that sensitivity to rhyme makes both a direct and indirect contribution to reading. Directly, it helps students appreciate that words that share common sounds usually also share common letter sequences. The child's subsequent sensitivity to common letter sequences then makes a significant contribution to reading strategy development. Indirectly, the recognition of rhyme promotes the refining of word analysis from larger intra-word segments (such as rhyme) to analysis at the level of the phoneme (the critical requirement for reading).

## Awareness at the level of the phoneme has particular significance for the acquisition of reading

There is some evidence that rhyme contributes to the prediction of subsequent reading problems (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Bryant et al., 1989; Savage & Frederickson, 2006; Wood, 2000), but others (Castles & Coltheart, 2004; Rathvon, 2004) consider its independent role is minimal, and its apparent significance in some studies is better subsumed under phonological awareness. Additionally, confirmatory studies have been criticised for methodological problems, such as ceiling effects on measures, and also the low reliability of the oddity tests employed. Unsurprisingly, whether an instructional emphasis on rhyme is beneficial has been questioned in several studies (Wood, 2000).

This is not to suggest that rhyming activities are to be avoided, as they are enjoyable literacy activities. Engaging in rhyming activities with stories may have strong motivational influences on children's attitudes to books and reading. The point is that such oral activities cannot be expected to transfer to reading text without the relationship between phonological skills and text reading being made apparent.

### Onsets & Rimes

Treiman (1991) has suggested a further level in the development of

phoneme awareness - the intra-syllabic units of onset and rime. The onset of a syllable is its initial consonant(s), and the rime is its vowel and any subsequent consonants in the syllable. Thus, in the syllables sip-slip, the onsets are s and sl, and the common rime is ip. Treiman's research has argued for a stage between syllable awareness and phoneme awareness in which children are much more sensitive to the onset-rime distinction than the phoneme distinction. It was asserted that this research held promise for programs of educational intervention in reading disability because of the greater regularity of onset-rimes over individual letters (Felton, 1993). Thus, rime phonograms such as ing, ight, ain have much more regularity than the letters that form them. Knowing that strain and drain rhyme, may allow for reading main and brain by analogy.

### If reading development is not phonologically informed then students may adopt less viable strategies, such as guessing and memorisation of shapes

This apparently generative strategy has led some researchers (Bowey, Cain, & Ryan, 1992; Hulme & Snowling, 1992) to suggest that an emphasis on onset-rime may be an especially valuable approach to teaching students with dyslexia, as they tend to have relatively undeveloped phonological skills. Further, Bowey and Francis (1991) considered onset and rime the most effective focus for phonological activities intended to promote beginning reading and spelling for all children. They noted that since most onsets in English are single consonants, an early emphasis on the intra-syllabic onset/rime distinction in the study of word structure was likely to hasten the development of awareness at the more difficult phoneme level.

#### Phoneme Awareness

Awareness at the level of the phoneme has particular significance for the acquisition of reading because of its role in the development of the alphabetic principle - that the written word is simply a means of codifying the sound properties of the spoken word. In order to decode the written word, the child needs to appreciate the logic of the writing system and, as a prerequisite, the logic of oral word production.

There are two requirements of beginning reading for which phonemic awareness becomes immediately relevant: phonemic analysis (segmentation) and phonemic synthesis (blending). For most children, the ability to produce the finer discrimination of phonemes begins in about Year 1 of their schooling (Ball, 1993). Individual phonemes are more difficult to specify because their acoustic values vary with the phonemes that precede and follow them in a word (a phenomenon called co-articulation); whereas, syllables have relatively constant values in a word and hence should be more readily recognised. The fact that consonants are "folded" into vowels can be understood by noting the different tongue positions for the beginning /d/ sound when it is followed by /oo/ and by /i/.

In most children the ability to synthesise (blend) sounds into words occurs earlier than analytic (segmentation) skills (Bryen & Gerber, 1987; Caravolas & Bruck, 1993; Solomons, 1992; Torgesen et al., 1992; Yopp, 1992). Thus, it is easier to respond with the word *cat* when presented with the sounds *c - at* or *c-a-t*, than it is to supply *c-a-t* when asked to tell what sounds you hear in *cat*.

As indicated above, deeper levels of awareness (i.e., at the phoneme level) tend to develop during first grade upon exposure to reading instruction. Some have argued then that phonemic awareness may be a consequence of learning to read rather than a causal factor in its development (Morais et al., 1987; Morais, 1991). There is increasing consensus that the data are best explained by considering the relationship between phonemic awareness and reading development as a reciprocal one (Duncan et al., 2013; Stanovich, 1992).

#### A typical sequence for phoneme awareness?

Thus, there may be a typical developmental sequence of phonological awareness. It begins with awareness of words as a unit of analysis; then proceeds to the awareness that words can share certain ending properties that we call rhyme, to an awareness that words can be decomposed into syllables, then (possibly though not definitely) more finely into sub-syllabic units called onsets and rimes, to beginning, final, and medial properties, and then (and most importantly for reading) into awareness of individual phonemes, the smallest unit of sound

analysis. A further developmental sequence involves the movement from recognition of such properties to a capacity to produce examples of them. Thus, at one level one can nominate which pairs of words rhyme when presented orally; at a higher level one can produce examples. It should be noted that the description of the process as developmental does not imply spontaneous development - for many students it needs to be taught (Lindamood, 1994).

The issue of putting ages to levels is problematic partly because of the great variation in the experience of children. Some children play with word structure for several years before school; some have had no experience. The degree of emphasis placed on phonemic awareness in preschool and school adds additional variation, whilst the quality and explicitness of the instruction also make significant contributions (National Reading Panel, 2000). There appears also to be genetic predisposition toward ease or difficulty of acquisition among children (Olson, Wise, Conners, Rack, & Fulker, 1989; Rack, Hulme, & Snowling, 1993; Soden-Hensler, Taylor, & Schatschneider, 2012).

Thus, these levels may be better considered as markers on the road to skilled reading, rather than as a natural developmental sequence, and as susceptible to environmental manipulation, such as early experiences and instruction. Similarly, the rate with which students progress through the levels may vary, and some levels may even appear to be skipped.

#### A focus on onset-rime or phonemes?

If the levels represent a typical sequence, then approaches to teaching might benefit from taking it into account. There may be some theoretical justification for an interest in onset-rime, but it requires support from intervention research before becoming a suitable component of the curriculum. So, is an emphasis on teaching students to recognise onset-rime distinctions (rather than at the phoneme level) more productive in initial (and, perhaps, remedial) reading instruction than is teaching directly at the phoneme level? A computer program developed by Wise, Olson and Treiman (1990) focussed on onset-rimes in teaching beginning reading skills to normally-developing readers and children with dyslexia. In this and the Olson and Wise (1992) studies, the authors noted an advantage for the children taught in this manner



over an approach that segmented words after the vowel. The effect however was ephemeral, and least pronounced in the more disabled students. Ehri and Robbins (1992) findings were similar in that the poorer readers did not use sub-syllabic units larger than the grapheme. This led them to suggest that the onset-rime distinction is really the province of the more skilled reader, and hence not a candidate for instruction prior to that at the phoneme level.

A number of researchers now have questioned whether an onset-rime emphasis has any useful role to play in beginning reading instruction. Nation and Hulme (1997) express concern that such tasks are not predictive of reading and spelling success. McMillan (2002) argues that it is alphabet knowledge rather than rhyming ability that underpins any causal link to reading ability. Further, Nation, Allen, and Hulme (2001) have questioned the benefit of emphasising analogy as a worthwhile early strategy for reading unfamiliar words. The intent of analogy reading is to allow children to decode an unfamiliar printed word by observing that its spelling is similar to that of a known word. In their study, however, children were not able to see such orthographic similarities at all, leading to a conclusion that the analogy technique is only able to be employed by those readers who already have attained more advanced phonemic awareness (Wood, 2000).

Thus, the results of research suggest caution regarding calls for introducing an initial emphasis on onset-rime distinctions for beginning readers. It would be judicious to ensure that beginners (and disabled readers) have,



or develop, a grounding in grapheme-phoneme relationships, either before (or simultaneous with), such onset-rime emphasis (Munro, 1995). Wise and Olson (1995) reported a study indicating that adequate phonemic awareness skill was necessary if children were to benefit from onset-rime instruction. When readers with dyslexia were provided with phonemic awareness training through Auditory Discrimination in Depth (Lindamood & Lindamood, 1969) simultaneously with onset-rime computer-based training, reading results were markedly improved by this addition of instruction at the level of the phoneme.

The National Reading Panel Report (2000) indicated that large effect sizes were possible when instruction was directed systematically and explicitly at one or two types of phonemic awareness activities provided to small groups, and involved associating phonemes with letters (such as segmenting and blending). “Research evidence indicates strongest gains in PA skills are observed when no more than one to two PA skills are taught at any one time” (Ehri, Nunes, Willows et al., 2001), emphasising phoneme segmenting and blending sounds in spoken words as key foundation literacy skills. Furthermore, PA training is most effective in facilitating early PA skill and accelerating early word reading, when combined with letter knowledge training (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1991; Ehri, Nunes, Stahl et al., 2001; Ehri, Nunes, Willows et al. 2001; Hatcher et al., 1994, 2006), and when instruction includes exercises to teach the application of PA in reading (words and connected text) and writing tasks (Cunningham, 1990; Hatcher et al., 1994, 2006).

Nation and Hulme (1997) and Hulme et al. (2002) also argue that it is likely to be more profitable to emphasise phoneme awareness even from the beginning reading stages. As is often the case, when several options are available and the evidence is not adequate to clearly support one or the other, the emphasis is most judiciously placed on the alternative that is most closely related to the reading process. Thus, studies up to this stage have raised more questions than answers about the instructional usefulness of onset-rime as a means of gently approaching the difficult phoneme concept.

### And what about the student who is resistant to the activity-based curriculum?

As to who might require more intensive and extended assistance,

Torgesen (1998) recommends an identification procedure involving administration of a test of knowledge of letter names or sounds and a measure of phonemic awareness. Students who do not do well on these tests are likely to struggle with reading unless additional support is provided. The National Reading Panel's view was that this focus was so important that all students should have the opportunity to benefit from phonemic awareness activities in their first year of school. Those studies that provided activities for less than a half hour per day to a total of about 20 hours were likely to be effective and efficient.

Some students may have other phonological problems such as slow naming speed (Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2002) or issues with phonological memory (Wagner & Torgesen, 1987). “The results of this study suggest, as do those by Kuhn and others (2006), that the critical factor for oral reading development in children with reading disabilities, including those with naming-

### Real expertise in phonemic awareness skills is not present until students can effortlessly and quickly perform the tasks

speed deficits, is time-on-text, meaning simply that students from this population must spend significant time engaged in structured, monitored reading in order to develop the necessary automaticity in phonological and word identification sub-processes that are required for proficient reading” (Paige, 2011, p. 307).

The issue of when best to introduce phonemic awareness activities/ instruction has also been investigated. Byrne, Fielding-Barnsley, and Ashley (2000) report that it is not only the attainment of phonemic awareness that is important in learning to read, but also its speed of acquisition. In a longitudinal study, they noted that poor readers in fifth grade were those who, though they eventually achieved reasonable levels of phonemic awareness, were slow to grasp it. These students tended to be those whose initial language and literacy levels were also low at school entry. Perhaps there is a window of opportunity when phonological processes can become a driving force for initial reading development. In the Griffiths and Stuart (2013) study, subsequent reading fluency improvement from phonologically based interventions was

significantly better in younger students than in older students.

So, the indications are for programs to commence on school entry, following screening for pre-existing phonemic awareness and letter sound knowledge. In a Response to Intervention model, Tier 1 instruction would involve a well-designed, systematic and explicit program that integrates blending, segmenting and letter-sounds/letter names. Whether this is presented as whole class or in smaller groupings depends upon the results of the screening. There will be some children who continue to struggle even with this evidence-based regimen, and the need for small group and individual instruction of greater intensity and longer duration is likely (Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions). If reading development is not phonologically informed then students may adopt less viable strategies, such as guessing and memorisation of shapes. If that occurs, phonemic awareness may subsequently develop, but will not necessarily be employed by the student whose alternative, less effective, strategies have become entrenched. Perhaps this is the reason why it can take four times as much intervention to improve a child's reading skills if help is delayed until the fourth grade than if it is begun in the first year of school (Hall & Moats, 1999).

The role of oral reading fluency in promoting reading comprehension was brought to the attention of many because of its status in the report of the National Reading Panel (2000). Less well known is an increasing interest in promoting fluency across a range of basic skill areas (Binder, Haughton, & Bateman, 2002; Lindsley, 1996). Binder et al. suggest that while mastery is important, real expertise in phonemic awareness skills is not present until students can effortlessly and quickly perform the tasks. Thus, they suggest teachers should aim to have students able to blend sounds to form words at a minimum of 10 per minute, segment words into sounds by moving coloured blocks to indicate the sounds at a rate of at least 40 per minute, and construct new words through substituting one phoneme for another at a minimum rate of 15 per minute. This suggestion certainly offers another dimension for teachers wishing to ensure all their students develop a strong phonological basis for literacy.

## Implications

- Assess all students on arrival using a combination of phonemic awareness and letter-sounds/names fluency measures. Assume that those students who struggle with these tasks will require intensive intervention from the beginning.
- Adopt a Response to Intervention model to ensure these students are not left to languish and plan for extended oversight and intervention for this cohort. Maintain a regimen of continuous evaluation.
- Explicitly tie phonemic awareness activities into your initial phonics program. For any students who struggle with blending and segmenting, first increase practice opportunities by increasing allocated time. If this is ineffective, consider introducing simpler phonological activities, such as rhyming and alliteration before returning to blending and segmenting. Teach all relevant skills to fluency.
- Encourage parental participation with regular teacher-parent contact and shared programming to increase engaged literacy time.
- Provide additional training in content and method to those teachers in need. Anticipate initial teacher resistance, but develop an evidence-based culture in the school that values data.
- Expect that it will be a long, but worthwhile endeavour. Bear in mind, too, that phonology ain't everything. Due attention must also be paid to other important aspects of literacy, such as comprehension, reading fluency, and oral language, including vocabulary.

## References

Full bibliographic details for all in-text references in this article can be found at Kerry Hempenstall's blog entry of the same name at <http://www.nifdi.org/news/hempenstall-blog/456-phonemicawareness-yea-nay>

Dr Kerry Hempenstall (B.Sc., Dip.Ed., Dip.Soc.Studies, Dip.Ed.Psych., Ph.D.) is a practitioner and researcher in the areas of beginning reading instruction, reading difficulties, and phonemic awareness. He spent more than twenty years as a teacher, social worker, and Guidance Officer, then lectured in psychology and consulted to the RMIT Psychology Clinic, providing clinical training in the assessment and remediation of children's educational problems. He received LDA's Mona Tobias award in 2006 in recognition of his services to people with learning difficulties. He is now partly retired, but continues to publish, and remains active on discussion lists. Kerry has long been committed to evidence-based practice in education, and his work has been recognized by the National Institute for Direct Instruction (NIFDI), who in 2012 invited him to produce a regular blog for them.

# On Marx, parking fines and Positive Teaching

**Kevin Wheldall looks at Positive Teaching to manage behaviour.**

**I**nscribed upon his tomb in Highgate cemetery in London, are these words by Karl Marx:

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”

Have you ever had the experience of being flagged down by a traffic cop and when you wind down the window, he says: “Mate, I just wanted to congratulate you on a great piece of driving back there” ...? No...? Me neither. Mind you the other day, when I got back to my car, there was a note under the wiper that said ‘Parking Fine’ – so that was nice.

## The most common and troublesome behaviours are relatively trivial

Why do we laugh at stories like these? Simply because society tends to work the opposite way around, most of the time. We don't seek to approve and applaud desirable behaviour; we expect it, and when we don't get it, when we become aware of behaviour of which we do not approve, then we punish it with barbed comments, dirty looks, reprimands, penalties, social ostracism, deprivation of liberty and, in some countries, even death.

So we expect people to behave well, in a socially responsible way, and we punish them if they don't. Almost certainly not the most effective way

of controlling adult behaviour, it is a downright cruel way of treating young people – particularly children of school age – who are still trying to learn how to behave appropriately.

### Our findings on classroom behaviour management

Over the years, my wife Robyn and I have been involved in a number of studies, carried out both here and in the UK, with both primary and high school teachers, that have looked at the ways in which teachers respond to students' behaviour in the classroom.

If you talk to teachers about their use of praise and approval in the classroom, they say that they use praise a great deal in their day-to-day interactions with students. And, to a degree, they are right; about 50% of the responses of primary school teachers to their students are positive comments offering approval and praise statements.

When we look more closely, however, at the types of behaviour that they are praising and reprimanding, a different picture emerges. For responses to student academic behaviour – answering questions, written work, completion of maths problems and so on – teachers typically give nearly four times as much praise as they give reprimands and disapproval.

But when we look at their reactions to students' classroom social behaviour – keeping to the rules, not disturbing others, getting on with their work quietly, for example – teachers typically give four times as many reprimands as they give praise and approval. In fact, they hardly ever praise students for behaving well; in some classes, it is a total non-event.

Sadly, this is particularly the case for boys. Even though the amounts of time boys and girls spend appropriately academically engaged, or 'on-task' as we call it, is not that dissimilar, with boys being a little less engaged, they receive *twice as many reprimands* for their perceived inappropriate classroom

social behaviour. According to our calculations, boys in primary school are reprimanded for their behaviour about 40 times per week.



Most Australian primary teachers, then, while frequently praising academic work, hardly ever praise students for behaving well in the classroom. But they often reprimand students for behaving inappropriately, especially boys.

### Identifying common challenges

When we look at what Australian primary school teachers think about children's classroom behaviour, there are a few surprises. First, according to our research, about half of them feel that they spend more time on problems of order and control than they feel that they should have to. In an average class of 28 students, they typically report four (about 15%) to be behaviourally troublesome, of whom three are typically boys. In fact, over 90% cited a boy as their most troublesome student in the class.

But what was it that the students actually did that teachers typically found to be most problematic? Surprisingly, more serious misbehaviours such as physical aggression were cited by less than 10% as being a problem. Nearly 50% of teachers cited 'Talking out of Turn' (or TOOT) as the most troublesome behaviour in their classes, followed by 'Hindering Other Children' (or HOC). These surprising findings replicate what we also found in the UK and what other researchers have subsequently found too.

To summarise, most Australian primary teachers are bothered by the behaviour of some of their students, but the most common and troublesome behaviours are relatively

trivial, like TOOT and HOC. They are not particularly serious, but they are time-wasting, irritating, stressful and, ultimately, exhausting for teachers.

### Using Positive Teaching to manage behaviour

The good news is that these sorts of behaviours, from boys or girls, are relatively easy to manage using the methods and procedures of Positive Teaching, one of the foci of our research for many years now.

Achieving effective classroom behaviour management is as easy as ABC; that is, if we consider the Antecedents, the Behaviour, and the Consequences. By the careful control of the antecedents or the context in which behaviours occur and the consequences following behaviour, disruptive classrooms can be brought into a state where they are more pleasant and positive for both teacher and students, and where real learning at least has the opportunity to take place. By becoming more positive in their interactions with students, everybody benefits.

### A word on praise and reward

A great deal of damage has been done by educational critics such as Alfie Kohn by perpetuating the myth that praise and rewards are actually harmful. The key to the successful use of praise and reward is *contingency*: who is being praised by whom for what under which specific circumstances. Non-contingent and undeserved praise and reward, scattered like confetti with no thought to the contingencies, might indeed do more harm than good. But positive teachers know that to be effective, their use of praise and reward strategies has to be carefully thought through and delivered with skill, tact and subtlety. This is what our new course aims to do.

To conclude, it is almost impossible for effective classroom learning to take place where disruptive and inappropriate behaviour is frequently exhibited by students. Moreover, initial teacher training is commonly criticised for providing inadequate training in methods of effective classroom behaviour management. Teachers typically claim that they had to learn how to manage a class by trial and error 'on the job', having been given vast amounts of theory but precious little advice on what to do actually do.

As Marx chided us, it is not enough merely to attempt to interpret the world, the point is to change it. This is precisely what Positive Teaching aims to do: to



Most Australian primary teachers frequently praise academic work, but hardly ever praise students for behaving well in the classroom.

change student behaviour by changing teacher behaviour.

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Disclosure: As a director of MultiLit Pty Ltd, Professor Kevin Wheldall has a financial interest in the Positive Teaching Workshops.

# Positive Teaching Workshop

## For effective classroom behaviour management (primary schools)

- Soundly based on empirical classroom research
- Specifically developed for primary schools
- A reliable behaviour management system
- Increases time spent on-task, facilitating improved academic performance
- Creates a more positive classroom environment

The Positive Teaching Workshop has been developed to train teachers in the skills and methods necessary for creating a positive learning environment and implementing a clear behaviour management strategy. Classrooms that lack a clear behaviour management strategy risk losing students before instruction is delivered. The research and skills-based Positive Teaching Workshop ensures that students are ready to receive instruction, focuses on maintaining maximal opportunities to learn and facilitates an effective and positive learning environment.

By using Positive Teaching methods, teachers can build less stressful and more effective teaching and learning environments. The methods are straightforward but for student behaviour to change, teachers must first change their own behaviour. The Positive Teaching Workshop, based on research carried out by Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM and Dr Robyn Wheldall of Macquarie University in Australian schools, provides a reliable behaviour management system that is the crucial first step in the delivery of effective instruction.

Most teachers are well aware of the importance of using positive reinforcement strategies in their classrooms to manage student behaviour. Our research indicates, however, that most teacher praise is largely focused on academic performance. Positive Teaching emphasises the importance of contingent praise related to classroom social behaviour which increases the time spent on-task, leading to improved academic performance.

### What the workshop covers (One day – 6 hrs of PD)

- Identifying troublesome classroom behaviours
- Focusing on appropriate classroom behaviours
- Setting the classroom context to encourage more appropriate behaviour and increase academic engagement
- Understanding the importance of contingent praise and appropriate reprimands in improving classroom behaviour.

The Positive Teaching Workshop introduces participants to a comprehensive behaviour management system designed to ensure students are ready to receive instruction, to help teachers to focus on maintaining maximal opportunities to learn and to facilitate an effective and positive learning environment.

### Supported by research

The Positive Teaching Workshop is based on the extensive research of Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM and Dr Robyn Wheldall (Beaman) of Macquarie University and on the earlier research of Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Frank Merrett at the Centre for Child Study, University of Birmingham. Research areas included identifying the most troublesome disruptive classroom behaviour in Australian primary school classrooms, observing primary teachers' use of approval and disapproval for academic and social behaviour in the classroom, quantifying the effect of classroom seating arrangements on student time spent 'on task' and measuring the effect of implementing the strategies of Positive Teaching classroom behaviour management.

### Who should attend?

- School leaders
- Classroom teachers working in primary schools
- Learning support staff and teacher aides
- Those in their first five years of teaching may find it particularly beneficial

For more information about the MultiLit Positive Teaching Workshop or to register, visit [www.multilit.com/professionaldevelopment/positive-teaching-pd/](http://www.multilit.com/professionaldevelopment/positive-teaching-pd/)

# The Development of Associations for Remedial Teachers in Australia

The following article was first published in the *Dyslexia Review*, Vol 2, No 1, Summer 1979.

This article has been reprinted here as part of LDA's 50th anniversary celebrations because it provides a fascinating historical perspective on the development of resources in Australia for specialist services for students with learning difficulties.

Readers will be interested to reflect on whether, despite changes in terminology in the past thirty-five years, the status of support for students with learning difficulties may have changed very little indeed.

The article outlines the formation of a number of remedial teachers' associations including the Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers' Association of Victoria, which is now Learning Difficulties Australia. The author of this article, Christopher Davidson, is a long standing member of LDA, and was the Editor of the LDA Journal for 36 years, from 1969 to 2005. We sincerely thank both *Dyslexia Action*, publisher of the original article, and the author, Christopher Davidson, for permission to reprint it here.

Christopher Davidson, is head of the Remedial Centre at Glamorgan, which is the preparatory school in Melbourne for Geelong Grammar School. He is the founder editor of the *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, was a member of the founding management committee of SPELD-Victoria and co-author of 'Spelling, a Phonic Approach' and 'Spellout'.

As stated by Professor Jonathon Anderson in his article *The Place of the Remedial Teacher in the Educative Process* in the *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, Vol. 8, No 1. "In Australia, the remedial education movement was given impetus by the appointment of Schonell as Professor of Education at the University of Queensland. In 1952 he established the Remedial Education Centre with Dr. Richardson (now Professor of Education at Flinders University, South Australia) as the first director, to continue the work he had been doing at Birmingham. Courses in remedial teaching and diagnostic testing were initiated at the Centre and teachers from all states and from overseas enrolled." Graduates from this course (of whom I am one) were absorbed back into their schools full of hope and enthusiasm that they could implement the principles and practices learnt. These graduates faced a formidable task convincing schools and their staffs of the necessity for certain facilities and procedures to be adopted and establishing a professional rapport with other disciplines. Many of

these remedial teachers were accused of 'empire building' and many schools regarded the remedial teacher as an expensive luxury, being a political stop-gap measure to deal with the growing concern of the community over the large number of school leavers, of average to above intelligence who were virtually illiterate.

Remedial Education or remedial teaching in Australia means different things to different people. To some it embraces all special education, attempting to rehabilitate, as far as possible, the child so he can take his place in the community and contribute happily to it. While the majority, if not all, remedial teachers would support these general sentiments, they would be more specifically involved in the rehabilitation of the intelligent underachiever, through diagnostic testing and prescriptive teaching. Remedial Education is gradually being merged into Special Education and the line of demarcation is becoming increasingly blurred. The Resource Teacher (the remedial teacher in an advisory capacity) is very much in evidence in 1978 especially in Queensland and New South Wales.

Many schools were using retired teachers as remedial teachers while others were employing young teachers straight out of training college or teachers who could not hold down a position as a classroom teacher to run their 'remedial' programme. As the fate of the intelligent underachiever received more and more publicity, numerous self-styled 'remedial teachers' appeared. The Victorian Education Department, during

this time, took a very negative attitude, expressing that there was no such thing as a 'dyslexic' child and that any child with learning deficits should and could be handled by the classroom teacher. No department teacher was granted leave to attend the Schonell Course in Queensland; those wishing to obtain specialist training were restricted to the Trained Special Teacher's Certificate Course, run by the Melbourne State College which provided the trained personnel for the Special Schools in Victoria. This course, of a year's duration, was a general course covering all manner of handicaps, excluding the deaf and until recently, paid only lip service to the teaching of the intelligent learning disabled child.

The graduates from the Schonell Course became increasingly concerned with the way remedial education was developing. They were concerned with the lack of unified direction, the lack of professional standards and ethics and the lack of communication or mutual respect between disciplines.

In 1965 the Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers' Association of Victoria was formed and later the Remedial Teachers' Association of Queensland came into being in 1970. Both associations drew their members and their inspiration from the Schonell Course and the Victorian Association gained added strength and determination from the fact that almost all members were employed in Independent Schools.

Towards the end of 1968 SPELD (Specific Learning Difficulties Association) branches were formed. Their Management Committees comprised of parents and teachers and all other disciplines interested in the problems of the intelligent under-achiever and the adult illiterate. The role of SPELD was two-fold, education of the general public, along with an advisory service for parents and teachers and applying political pressure to government bodies to obtain firstly, recognition of the problem and secondly to obtain better provisions for these children. The remedial teachers' associations worked very closely with SPELD bodies and over the next decade a significant impact was made on Special Education in Australia.

During 1968 the Remedial Teachers' Association of Australasia began its short life with a few excellent newsletters attempting to link remedial teachers in New Zealand and Australia. When the Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers'

Association of Victoria published their new journal *Remedial Education* (later to be called the Australian Journal of Remedial Education) in 1969 these newsletters ceased appearing and the Remedial Teachers' Association of Australasia faded from the scene. In publishing the journal Remedial Education it was hoped to improve the professional status of remedial teachers within the community and to generally educate teachers and other professionals in diagnostic and remedial techniques currently in use to help the learning disabled child. In Volume 2 No. 3 of that journal the Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers' Association published a statement under the following headings: (1) What are the requirements of the Remedial Teacher? (2) What kind of work is expected of the Remedial Teacher? (3) How should the school provide for the Remedial Teacher? (See Appendix 1). Later in Volume 4, No. 3. the aims of remedial teaching were stated. (See Appendix 2).

With the publicity from the journal, the activities of SPELD, the running of many successful seminars and workshops and finally with the formation of a national association for remedial teachers (Australian Remedial Education Association, known as AREA) with the mounting of national conferences, the remedial teacher through his professional association was gradually being accepted by official bodies. As new courses in Learning Disabilities sprang up, AREA was invited to comment on course content or send representatives to be on committees planning new courses.

The AREA Council soon found necessary to revise its criteria for Full Membership, as it was becoming more and more difficult separating the 'trained' from the 'untrained'. The council also realised that they were losing valuable expertise by denying membership to Teachers of the Deaf, Psychologists, Speech Therapists and Occupational Therapists who also held a trained teacher's qualification. Graduates from these disciplines and others had received quite intensive training in the teaching of the Learning Disabled Child. In Victoria (all States had different ideas on membership. See Appendix 3) four levels of membership were written into the constitution of the Victorian Brand of AREA.

1. Full Membership (under current review) available to those who have completed a recognised course of teacher training and an additional

qualification from a recognised course in some area of special education for one year, full time, or more or the equivalent part-time.

2. Student Membership\* available to all bona fide full time students at a recognised college (carries no voting rights).
3. Associate Membership available to all those interested in remedial education (carries no voting rights)
4. Corporate Membership available to schools, institutions, business houses etc. (carries no voting rights).

In May 1977, there were 175 Full Members, 155 Associate Members, 7 Student Members and 27 Corporate Members of the Victorian Branch of AREA. To enable us to produce an expensive journal, rent an office, and part time administrative secretary, we endeavour to make up our budget by running a big programme of seminars and by running a book selling outlet Australian Special Book Services. Through ASBS we visit schools and centres, putting on displays of books and materials relating to remedial

## The majority of practicing and graduating primary teachers know little of the reading process and the place of linguistics in it.

education and taking orders for them. This is proving very successful and we are very fortunate in being able to employ someone who has had a wealth of experience in selling books, on a part-time basis. Apart from activities already mentioned, the Victorian Branch of AREA runs a referral service to enable parents, doctors or psychologists to obtain trained remedial teachers to teach their children. It is also involved in conducting surveys on aspects of remedial education for official bodies and completing submission to government inquiries into special education.

There have been many who have criticised the remedial teaching model. Professor Anderson states the argument very clearly in the Australian Journal of Remedial Education, Volume 8, No. 1. The point of view expressed in this article, and shared by most administrators, has done nothing to improve the remedial teacher's temporary or stop gap status. Integration is now back in vogue and it is felt that the classroom teacher "can do the job". If the remedial teaching of the

future is to be done by the classroom teacher, class numbers will need to be reduced, teacher training will need to be drastically improved and much more lecture time devoted to the reading process. Despite the prominence given to linguistics in Australia and the availability of a high level of expertise in this area in the country, the majority of practicing and graduating primary teachers know little of the reading process and the place of linguistics in it. There seems to be little hope of improving success rate in school when only lip service is given to the catering of individual differences in schools. Education Departments and State Governments have never fully recognised the status of remedial teachers -their function or value in the classroom.

In the present depressed state of the economy, teachers' colleges, in order to maintain their courses, and their government grants, are reluctant to refuse applicants for training, who would never have been accepted under normal circumstances and resist attempts by staff to fail unsuitable students in order to keep their quotas up. So like our 'temporary' prefabricated classrooms, the remedial teacher seems here to stay, filling a stop-gap position under stop-gap conditions. One must not overlook the

### Reading, writing, spelling and maths are the basic subjects which a child needs to achieve to tackle all other subjects

small group of children whose problems are too complex to be dealt with solely in the classroom. It is my experience that the more I look into the social/emotional/learning patterns of individual children I am asked to see, I find very few 'problems' that are 'simple'. Fortunately training courses for remedial teachers in Australia have increased in number but are of uneven quality, even so, rather than look towards a growth industry, I would hope that education would progress to the point where our 'industry' would become a self-destructive one.

\* Student Memberships are no longer available due to lack of response and the increase in costs of subsidising them.

#### Appendix 1

A statement from the Diagnostic and

Remedial Teachers' Association of Victoria.

- 1 What are the requirements of the Remedial Teacher?
  - a. Qualifications  
Degree and/or teaching certificate, plus additional certificate particularly dealing with diagnosis and remediation
  - b. Pre-Requisites
    - i. Personality - must have a genuine interest in children as individuals, patience, sympathy and a sense of humour is most desirable.
    - ii. Flexibility – no child is same.
    - iii. Creative – no lesson is same.
    - iv. Communicative – able to communicate with own teaching profession and others i.e. psychologists, doctors etc.
    - v. Stamina – it is very demanding work!
- 2 What kind of work is expected from the Remedial Teacher?
  - i. Preliminary diagnostic testing – to be responsible for group tests and personally responsible for individual tests.
  - ii. To be responsible and prepared to refer any particular case to an educational psychologist indicating the kind of tests he feels would be useful to the child and to the teacher concerned. e.g. Binet – W.I.S.C - I.T.P.A – The Marianne Frostig Testing Programme etc.
  - iii. To plan and carry out a programme suited to the individual.
  - iv. Ideally to teach on a one-to-one basis, thus establishing a close personal relationship and providing the opportunity for intensive sessions designed to for that individual. This in the long run, is much more effective, the results are lasting, and the time required for remedial work is shorter. These sessions should be when the boy is doing **least** well in school, that is, if he reads badly – during an English period, he is not going to miss much if he can't read.
  - v. To enlighten all those directly concerned with the child in all areas of his school curriculum and at home, of his specific problems and to ensure that the child is not expected to do something he is incapable of understanding. e.g. A boy with

- visual perceptual disabilities will not be able to reproduce or understand geometric symbols; those with poor auditory memories not to be asked to pass on a verbal message.
- vi. To keep abreast with research and practical ideas in the remedial field and with normal teaching procedures.
- 3 How should the school provide for the Remedial Teacher?
  - i. A well-lit, quiet, resource room adequately equipped with telephone, filing cabinet, storage cupboards and shelves. Funds provided for further acquisitions, books, testing materials, teaching aides and materials.
  - ii. Give the remedial teacher full responsibility for his work. Allow full-time for this, but ensure he takes at least one spare period a day if he wishes, it is sometimes beneficial for both the teacher and pupils to take some time handling groups of children in ordinary situations e.g. sport or extra-curricular activities.

Finally, from the experience of many Remedial Teachers, that to carry out one's work in this area, it needs the cooperation and understanding of all those within the school frame-work, particularly from those in authority. A good remedial teacher is of more value than a host of psycho-therapists who may have to be called upon for treatment of emotional problems and ordinary teachers who are without specialised training and time. In schools today, it is estimated 10% of children with average to above average intelligence have a specific learning disability that affects the ability to learn. Reading, writing, spelling and maths are the basic subjects which a child needs to achieve to tackle all other subjects and in a career – he has every right to become a good citizen.

#### Appendix 2

Aims of remedial teaching – as suggested by The Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers Association of Victoria

##### Aim

To assist the intelligent under-achiever to reach his true educational potential

##### Qualifications

It is recommended that a Remedial Teacher should be a fully qualified Primary or Secondary Teacher and have a minimum of three (3) years classroom



experience – also Specific Training in such areas as Diagnostic Testing, the Theory and Practice of Remedial Teaching Techniques and in the Psychology of Backwardness which should result in a further certificate or diploma.

#### Recommendations

- Children who are likely to present problems should be located at the earliest age possible, by use of School Commencement Check Lists, Reading Readiness Tests and observations of Kindergarten Teachers.
- Through group testing all children should be measured for intelligence and attainment in the basic subjects.
- Any child who appears to under-achieving should be seen by a Remedial Teacher and given pertinent diagnostic tests.
- Relevant information should be gathered from parents, teachers and, where necessary, from Doctors, Social Workers, Speech Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Psychologists and Psychiatrists.
- All information should be collected and an individual programme of remediation drawn up and implemented by the Remedial Teacher.
- Ongoing tests should be given to ensure the effectiveness of the programme.
- Accurate and up-to-date records should be maintained by the Remedial Teacher and kept in a secure place.
- A Remedial Teacher needs to be readily accessible to discuss a child's development with teachers and parents.
- To initiate Seminars and Panel discussions, inviting specialists in their various fields to promote awareness and education in the various aspects of Remedial Teaching.

- A Remedial Teacher is expected to uphold the high standards befitting his profession.

### Appendix 3

Minimum requirements for full membership to remedial teacher associations in various states

#### Queensland:

Remedial Teachers Association of Queensland: Teacher registration and an additional qualification in diagnostic and remedial techniques from an approved University or College of Advanced Education courses.

#### New South Wales:

AREA (New South Wales Branch):

Trained Teacher

#### South Australia:

AREA (South Australian Branch):

Trained Teacher

#### Victoria:

AREA (Victorian Branch): Trained teacher plus an additional qualification from a recognised course in some area of special education of one year, full-time, or more or the equivalent part-time.

Special Teachers Association: Trained teacher plus approved qualification in special education.

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# AUSPELD's Understanding Learning Difficulties: A Practical Guide

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Review by Jo Whithear

**U**nderstanding Learning Difficulties: A Practical Guide (48 pp., with attached CD) lives up to its title. This is an excellent resource for teachers, psychologists and speech pathologists in both primary and secondary settings and, ideally, should be made available to staff in all Australian schools. It has been designed to raise awareness of the potential impact of both learning disorders and learning difficulties on student outcomes. It includes detailed information on evidence-based intervention and effective accommodation strategies, many of which can be immediately implemented in the classroom. This immediacy is perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of the Guide.

**This handy go-to booklet is recommended for anyone seeking to improve the learning outcomes of all their students**

The 48-page highly readable format is sectioned into specific topics and includes a CD with an additional 33 downloadable information sheets and resources, some of which are five or six pages in length. The additional resources are designed to be shared across school settings and, again, are

predominantly comprised of practical and effective strategies. To detail every section of the Guide in this brief review is not possible and, as such, there are some sections that have been given more attention in this review than others.

The Guide begins by making a distinction between learning difficulties and learning disabilities, suggesting that only a small percentage of students are likely to have persistent and enduring developmental learning disorders. The causative factors for the much larger group of students experiencing learning difficulties are described as varying widely and includes the group of students often referred to as being instructional or curricula casualties. This section is followed by an overview of the three specific learning disabilities (SLDs) - dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia - and includes both definitions and the visible signs at different ages. The lists provide examples of how each of the SLDs can impact on a child's learning. For example, a child with dyslexia in lower primary may have 'difficulties with oral rhyming, syllabification, and the oral blending and segmenting of words' whereas a student in upper primary school may be 'slow to complete literacy-related tasks' or have 'trouble decoding unfamiliar words'. A student in a secondary school setting may present with 'difficulties writing in a structured manner (i.e. poor sentence and paragraph construction)...' or 'a lack of interest in, or an avoidance of, reading and writing tasks'.

The following sections of the Guide focus on common processing weaknesses and the possible link between learning disabilities and low self-esteem. A detailed explanation of the meaning of the terms phonological processing, orthographic processing and working memory, and their relevance to successful literacy and numeracy development, is provided. In addition, the likely functional impact of poor processing capabilities and

low self-esteem is considered. This is immediately followed by a discussion on the current SLD diagnostic process and an overview of the criteria required for identification. These criteria are drawn from the recently released *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fifth Edition* (commonly known as DSM 5) which has incorporated the Response To Intervention (RTI) Model into the diagnostic process, rather than the previously used 'discrepancy analysis'. One of the most important aspects of this model is that students must receive at least six months of appropriately delivered, targeted intervention in the identified area of academic weakness before a learning disorder diagnosis can be made.

The AUSPELD Guide reflects the organisation's own aims, which make reference to the importance of utilising strong research evidence in education. This overwhelmingly supports a code-based approach to early literacy instruction. This has been clearly outlined in the section 'Implementing the Response To Intervention (RTI) model' where 'the needs of all students, including those with learning disabilities, can be catered for by implementing a three wave approach to instruction, assessment and intervention'. Eight tables of 'Recommended Teaching Strategies' are presented, providing excellent ideas for teachers on phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, written expression and number work. Each strategy is identified as being either first wave, second wave or third wave (these are sometimes referred to as 'tiers') and allows teachers to choose appropriately. Further information is included on the CD.

In the following section, eight effective teaching approaches that have been found to improve learning outcomes are reviewed. Again, these strategies are recognised as being of benefit to all students, not just

those with learning disabilities. They include: maintaining high expectations, ensuring access to the curriculum, reducing tasks into small 'chunks' or steps, teaching skills and concepts to mastery, providing support/scaffolding, introducing two-way feedback, emphasising the strategy 'revisit/ repeat/reinforce', and differentiating assessment. As in previous sections, these strategies are supported by research and are referenced for the user. Numerous examples are provided with implementation ideas.

It was pleasing to see that the guide addresses the often-misunderstood but particularly salient topic of 'Accommodations'. Included is an excellent list of teaching suggestions for students exhibiting weaknesses in Working Memory, Processing Speed, Reading, Spelling, Written Expression,

Handwriting, Copying Information, Mathematics, Attention/Concentration, Organisation/planning, Anxiety and Study skills/ note taking. The CD provides further ideas for different age levels. There are examples of software applications included in the final section 'Assistive Technology', which also references the additional information that can be found in the CD information sheets.

The final section is the reference and recommended reading section which provides readers with links to current publications and a suggested list of references that will not exhaust the reader.

Perhaps one caveat to mention is that a number of the information sheets on the CD include references to the DSF library, which is obviously located in Perth, as well as WA-based DSF tutors.

Teachers may wish to contact Learning Difficulties Australia or their local SPELD organisation for assistance with products, resources and/or advice and assistance.

The AUSPELD 'Understanding Learning Difficulties: A Practical Guide' is undoubtedly one of the most useful and up to date publications available for teachers and schools in Australia. This handy go-to booklet is recommended for anyone seeking to improve the learning outcomes of all their students through the introduction of high quality early literacy instruction and evidence-based intervention.

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# The New Zealand Dyslexia Handbook

Nicholson T. & Dymock, S. (2015). Wellington, NZ: NZCER Press. 276 pages + DVD Talking about dyslexia.

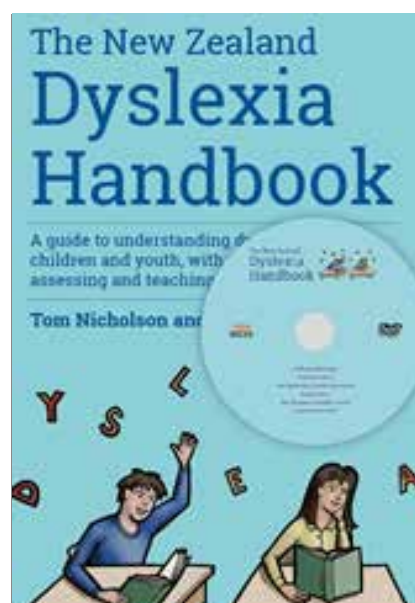
Review by Peter Westwood

I first encountered the work of Tom Nicholson in 1974 when I was connected with the Reading Development Centre in Adelaide.

At that time he was a research officer for the Education Department of South Australia and had written a very useful little book with the title *The anatomy of reading*. It is good to note that he is still writing helpful material four decades later (together with co-author Susan Dymock).

*The New Zealand Dyslexia Handbook* will be welcomed by parents as well as teachers. It is written in a very clear style and presents a range of important issues related to reading disability. It identifies and describes in detail the needs of students with literacy problems. The stated purpose of the authors is to bridge the gap between research and school and community understanding of dyslexia. In this they have been generally successful.

The book is organized into eleven chapters covering themes of:



understanding the nature of dyslexia; the impact dyslexia has on the life of individual students; assessment and screening; and effective teaching. The first four chapters clearly present the reader with essential information concerning what dyslexia is and is not. I personally found Chapter 4 to be the most important and insightful, dealing as it does with the ‘human face’ of dyslexia. Here the authors not only describe clearly how dyslexic individuals feel about their literacy difficulty and the impact it has on them, but also suggest how teachers can make a positive difference in raising students’ self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation.

In Chapter 5 the ‘simple view of reading and writing’ is used to help teachers understand the area in which dyslexic students need most support. The simple view suggests that fluent reading involves effective and accurate decoding together with good language comprehension. The simple view of writing suggests that it involves skill in spelling and the ability to generate ideas. The authors suggest that the main characteristic that sets dyslexic students apart from others with literacy problems is that those with dyslexia are generally good at using and comprehending oral language, and in generating ideas for writing. Their areas of difficulty are in decoding and spelling. Unlike most typical struggling readers they do not require intervention to improve expressive and receptive language, vocabulary, and general knowledge.

### The authors suggest how teachers can make a positive difference in raising students’ self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation.

Chapter 6 points teachers in the direction of screening strategies and tests to identify the main areas in which a student has strengths or is weak (e.g., phonemic awareness; phonic skills; listening comprehension; or reading comprehension) thus indicating priorities for teaching. Some test material is presented to help teachers probe more deeply when necessary into a student’s decoding skills. Suggestions are also made for remedying any weaknesses, and teachers are directed to specific teaching and testing materials presented later in the appendix. It is good to note that many of these specific exercises or activities can be linked

with authentic reading in context. The chapter also describes formal and informal assessment procedures for writing and spelling.

Chapters 7 and 8 address the important topic of applying teaching and tutoring methods that research has shown to be the most effective. Not surprisingly, explicit instruction, modelling, scaffolding, strategy training, and successful practice all figure strongly here. Chapter 7 also provides something that is often lacking in teachers’ own professional knowledge base, namely background information on the phonological and orthographic principles embodied in words from Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Greek origins that are now part of the English language. This knowledge can assist teachers when providing effective instruction in both decoding and spelling, particularly to students beyond Year 5. The chapter also provides many strategies for improving comprehension. Case studies are used to illustrate how assessment and teaching activities are closely interrelated.

Chapter 8 takes spelling and writing as the focus, and presents principles for effective teaching. A study in New Zealand suggests that during their initial training too many teachers do not receive information on how to teach spelling. This deficiency in teacher preparation will strike a very familiar note with teachers in Australia. The chapter contains much useful advice of a practical nature for improving spelling, and for developing different genres of writing.

Chapter 9 tackles the important issue of *fluency* in reading – something that is often difficult to achieve for dyslexic and other struggling readers. Lack of fluency has a detrimental effect on comprehension, as well as causing embarrassment when a student has to read aloud. The authors examine the relative merits of various strategies to increase fluency, such as repeated reading, sustained silent reading, computerized reading practice, reading aloud with corrective feedback and, for younger students, reading together from Big Book. Attention is also given to the importance of strengthening automaticity in sub-skills for decoding and word recognition in order to facilitate fluency.

Chapter 10 encourages teachers to create ‘dyslexia-friendly’ classrooms, where children with this problem are accepted and accommodated, and where a deliberate effort is made to avoid putting them in embarrassing

or stressful situations. The list of “Five things to avoid when you have a student with dyslexia” should be pasted in every teacher’s notebook. This chapter neatly complements Chapter 4 by addressing again the emotional and situational aspects of having dyslexia, and how teachers can really make a difference in smoothing the pathway. The theme is taken up again in Chapter 11 under the title ‘A final word’.

The book ends with 88 pages of resources for teachers, including tests, instructional materials, phonogram charts, and lesson plans for reading, spelling and writing. The use of these activities and resources must, of course, be based on accurate assessment of students’ specific instructional needs.

I recommend *The New Zealand Dyslexia Handbook*. It has practical advice and is well referenced with citations reflecting current research, theory, and practice.

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# Making time for vocabulary: One, Two, Three

## Wendy Moore on why the planned and explicit teaching of vocabulary so important.

In Australian schools, the systematic and explicit teaching of vocabulary has not featured strongly in official curriculum documents or in teacher education courses. Vocabulary development, although critical, has typically been left to chance or to the realm of incidental learning. This naturalistic or 'developmental' approach is inadequate, especially for students with learning difficulties. Teachers need to find time in their already busy days to actively teach word meanings, because without this intervention students who are already at risk will continue to fall further behind. Luckily, a vocabulary enrichment program can effectively be undertaken at a whole class level (Moore, Hammond & Fetherston, 2014), removing the need for students at risk to spend additional time away from regular literacy programs.

Literature for children and young adults provides an excellent context for the explicit teaching of vocabulary, but teachers need to be shown which books work best, and how to get the most value out of these books in order to boost students' vocabulary knowledge. Learning words through carefully

selected literature is enjoyable and, if approached correctly, highly effective in supporting vocabulary learning for both low and for high-achieving students. Classroom teachers need to understand why a change in practice is needed and how to make that change manageable. This article will outline both the *why* and the *how* of using children's literature to effectively boost vocabulary learning.

### Why is the planned and explicit teaching of vocabulary so important?

When school students experience learning difficulties, the challenges for a teacher of meeting their needs within a crowded school day is daunting. A three-tier response to intervention model - the gold standard for effective support for students with learning difficulties - demands that students with low reading levels should spend more time than their peers on specific literacy programs (Hempenstall, 2012). They might require additional small group and individual support with word-level decoding and spelling, as well as extra work on fluency and text comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). These valid and important demands necessarily limit the time available for teaching vocabulary, yet a planned and rigorous program of vocabulary instruction is of critical importance.

Some students with reading disorders have significant difficulties which are almost entirely due to the problems that they experience with word-level decoding and spelling. That is, these students have good overall cognitive ability, and also have normally developing oral language skills. For these students, it's just the 'sounding out' part of reading that gets them into

strife (Snowling, 2001). Over time, however, this difficulty with decoding may jeopardise the students' ability to acquire the vocabulary that good readers typically gain through independent reading.



Other students experience reading difficulties because their expressive and receptive oral language ability is limited, affecting reading fluency and comprehension from the outset (Dickinson et al., 2010). Poor oral language ability is often due to a combination of environmental and hereditary factors (Samuelson, Byrne, Quain et al, 2005), and many students arrive at school without strong verbal skills (Hay & Fielding-Barnsley, 2009). Certainly, the quality of the conversations that children take part in, both at home and at preschool centres, has a direct impact on their oral language development (Hart & Risley, 1995). Predictably, some students have difficulty because Standard Australian English is not their first language or dialect. In addition, some seven percent of students have specific language impairments which affect the rate at which they learn speech sounds, master grammatical structures, develop comprehension skills, and acquire new vocabulary. These students are at particular risk of experiencing reading difficulties (Catts et al., 2008).

Often, students experience difficulty in both of these realms; they struggle with narrow decoding and spelling skills, as

well as with broader spoken language, reading comprehension and written expression skills. Of all the different components of oral language that impact on reading ability by the time students reach middle primary, the size of a child's vocabulary is the single most powerful (Storch and Whitehurst, 2002). Indeed vocabulary has been shown to influence both decoding and comprehension (Tunmer & Chapman, 2012).

Knowing the meaning and pronunciation of words makes decoding from the letters easier, and the more words a student knows, the easier the process gets (Nation & Cocksey, 2009). In this way, the relationship between vocabulary learning and word level decoding is reciprocal (Verhoeven, van Leeuwe, and Vermeer, 2011). Crucially, text comprehension has been shown to be highly dependent on the breadth and depth of a student's lexicon (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Students who are reluctant or slow readers are very likely to fall behind in vocabulary acquisition, because written text is by far and away the richest context for the use of sophisticated literate language (Verhoeven et al., 2011). By the time students reach the middle of primary school, reading is both a) *dependent* on vocabulary knowledge and b) the principal *source* of new word learning. The result is a classic 'Catch-22' situation, and innovative solutions are required.

## Reading is both dependent on vocabulary knowledge and the principal source of new word learning

### Why should teachers use literature to teach vocabulary?

The sophisticated words that students will need for adequate reading comprehension as they progress through school can be found in both fiction and non-fiction texts, but will rarely be encountered in conversation. Story books are richer in sophisticated vocabulary than any TV documentary, court of law proceeding, or newspaper (Hayes and Ahrens, 1988). Children's literature is central to the study of English in the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2015), so encounters with story books can and should already be built into the learning programs of teachers in primary and secondary classrooms. Importantly, teachers generally agree that reading to students

is valuable, and that students enjoy it.

Some researchers argue that *motivating* students to read is the best way to improve their vocabulary. They point out that most of the words we learn come from our own independent reading (Nagy, Herman & Anderson, 1985). This is true for those of us who are avid, fluent readers, and it's certainly true for students who can't keep their noses out of books (Cunningham & O'Donnell, 2012). Children will always encounter unknown words in their independent reading, and this is both natural and desirable. But if the load of unknown words is just too heavy, then fluency, comprehension and motivation will plummet, and the reading process will come to a frustrating and self-defeating halt. By hearing quality literature read aloud, students who are not fluent readers have the opportunity to become 'bookworms' by proxy. Critically, a dedicated and effective teacher would simultaneously be supporting student to develop their decoding skills using a 'structured literacy' approach. A vocabulary focus needs to run parallel to a comprehensive literacy program supporting accurate, fluent and independent word and text level reading skills.

Reading aloud to children gives them the opportunity to hear the sophisticated words that they would otherwise miss out on while they are working to catch up with their peers in the independent decoding game. It minimises the otherwise widening gap between independent vocabulary learners and their peers who are struggling readers. Even more importantly, it gives teachers the chance to make these encounters with words much more powerful than they would be if students were reading independently, because it provides the opportunity to explicitly teach the meanings of challenging words as they are encountered (Biemiller, 2006). When sophisticated vocabulary is presented in the context of an engaging story or interesting report, a relevant context is already available, and students have an intrinsic reason for focusing on the meaning of the word. The text also provides an authentic, inbuilt, vocabulary selection procedure. Basing vocabulary learning on the words encountered in teacher-selected texts is practical, purposeful, and powerful.

### How should teachers use literature to teach vocabulary?

The *how* of using literature and subject area texts to boost vocabulary

is simple, but it is not typical practice in primary or secondary classrooms (Moore, 2013). It involves three elements. Firstly, if students do not regularly and independently read challenging books containing sophisticated vocabulary for themselves, then their teachers need to *read these books to them*. Secondly, as teachers read to their students, they need to *explicitly teach* them the meanings of the sophisticated words they encounter. This element is rare in primary classrooms, but it makes the difference between minimal vocabulary learning and significant and substantial vocabulary learning. Thirdly, teachers need to build on this initial learning by using incidental opportunities to *reinforce these word meanings* during their lessons and in conversations with their students. When these strategies are implemented thoroughly, they result in four times the amount of word learning that teachers achieve when they use typical shared reading activities. Research has confirmed that regular classroom teachers can achieve these gains with whole classes of low SES students with 20 minutes of planned daily attention to stories and words.

### 1. Read challenging books every day

Teachers not only need to read books to their students, they need to read linguistically rich ones. The books need to contain plenty of sophisticated language, as well as being engaging in their own right. This requires careful selection because many contemporary examples of children's literature are lexically sparse. Some award-winning children's books, valued as they are for the worthiness of their sentiments or the emotive power of their illustrations, are not ideal for the purpose of vocabulary learning. For example Shaun Tan's award winning picture books (e.g., *The Lost Thing*, 2000) are a visual delight, and offer a moving insight into the human condition and the value of tolerance. However, they offer little of benefit in terms of vocabulary learning; there is just too little text. *Possum Magic*, that perennial Australian favourite (Fox, 1983) has only one challenging word: visible. Luckily, if teachers select books purposefully and thoughtfully, there are great choices available which have both literary merit and lexical rigour.

When teachers choose books that contain plenty of sophisticated vocabulary, even the most able students in a class will be likely to struggle to read

them independently. Teachers should be able to locate at least a dozen or so words in their chosen books (or a single chapter) that most of their students might be unfamiliar with. I recently selected the 2013 Children's Book Council of Australia's short-listed picture book *Schumann the Shoeman* (Danalis, 2013) to read with students in Year One. Within the first few pages, the students experience gorgeous illustrations, a very modern take on sustainability and resilience, and words like *elegant*, *rickety*, *dangle*, *amble*, and *request*. Another example, the beguiling *There Once was a Boy called Tashi*, (Fienberg & Fienberg, 2003) contains rich language like *dwelt*, *stride*, *mournful*, *sly*, and *melancholy*. We know that young students are able to learn the meaning of these words and generalise them to new contexts if meanings are explained to them during reading and revised appropriately during planned and incidental activities (Moore, Hammond, & Fetherston, 2013). Sharing this knowledge empowers our students.

Spending twenty minutes a day on reading out loud to students and exploring word meanings is a very good investment for the long-term development of vocabulary and comprehension. Students in the early years and junior primary should preferably hear the same story several times so that comprehension of the text can develop and words can become familiar (Maynard, Pullen & Coyne, 2010). Reading the same story three or four times over a one- or two-week period, and then revisiting the book after an interval, is a good routine. When students get used to this practice, they typically enjoy the re-readings. They look forward to hearing familiar

stories and interacting with and using their special words.

For students in the middle and upper primary years, and for secondary students with literacy difficulties, daily oral reading of literature is just as important as it is for young children. Without teachers reading to them and explaining the meaning of unfamiliar words, many students will have limited exposure to literary or subject-specific language. I recently read the very contemporary zombie novel *Warm Bodies* to a group of 12 to 15 year olds. Along with love, gore and retribution, the students encountered, within the very first few pages, a plethora of wonderful and unfamiliar words: *irony*, *speculate*, *cogency*, *derelict* and *macabre*. In each chapter, new words were chosen for exploration: *nausea*, *coward*, *lope*, *emphatic*, *volition*; *static*, *rebuke*, *abrupt*, *inequity*, *deduce*... These are not words that the students would encounter in conversation or by watching the movie version of the story. Without having the text read aloud to them, these low-literacy students would never have had the opportunity to access the rich and witty language of this novel. Without specific teacher explanation, these words would have remained unknown and inaccessible.

## 2. Teach word meanings explicitly both during and after reading

Having established the value of selecting texts for reading aloud that offer plenty of opportunities for encounters with unfamiliar words, I turn to consideration of how best to explicitly teach word meanings. Here, the work of Biemiller (2006) and

Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2007) is relevant and helpful. These researchers offer different, but complementary, approaches to vocabulary instruction.

**The brief method:** Biemiller has argued that stopping briefly during reading to define a target word's meaning, and then applying that meaning back to the context in which it appears in the text, can boost students' comprehension of the text as well as heightening their awareness of that word in subsequent encounters. In this way, vocabulary instruction is immediate and minimally intrusive. The focus in this approach is on explaining most or all of the possibly unfamiliar words that arise during reading. Explaining six new words in each day's reading is very manageable using this approach, and it adds significant value to every encounter with a new word. Brief weekly quiz challenges are used to keep the words fresh in the students' minds.

**The robust method:** Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2007) have developed an instructional method that involves multiple encounters with five or six words over four or five days. Teachers are encouraged to carefully select the most appropriate words from a story book or book chapter previously read aloud. Appropriate words are referred to as *Tier Two* words to distinguish them from basic (*Tier One*) and subject-specific (*Tier Three*) words. Selected words should be complex or subtle in meaning, likely to be encountered in future reading, and of interest in the context of the story in which they appeared. The words listed above from *There Once was a Boy Called Tashi* and *Warm Bodies* are good examples.

In the robust approach, selected words are first defined by the teacher in 'student-friendly' language, and students are given examples of contexts in which the word could be used. Students are guided to think about alternative scenarios that fit the word, and to make judgements about examples and non-examples of correct use. They practise using the word, acting it out, combining it with other target words, and comparing it to near synonyms. They then look for opportunities to use target words in the classroom and at home, and are acknowledged for doing so.

In both of these approaches, teacher preparation is required. Selecting focus words beforehand is important, because coming up with suitable definitions to explain sophisticated words to students on the fly is much more difficult than



Explanation	Teacher talk	Student response
<p><b>DAY 4</b></p> <p>Engagement with target words – mixed words</p> <p><b>gleam</b></p> <p><b>exhausted</b></p>	<p>My two words for the “What Word” activity are <b>gleam</b> and <b>exhausted</b>. Something that <b>gleams</b> shines in the light. When someone’s <b>exhausted</b>, they are too tired to do anything.</p> <p>Which word goes with this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A diamond ring?</li> <li>• A child who’s run a race?</li> <li>• Someone who’s finished a long day’s work?</li> <li>• Moonlight shining on a puddle?</li> <li>• A medal that’s been polished?</li> <li>• A little puppy that was playing all day and has fallen asleep?</li> </ul>	<p>It <b>gleams</b> or they’re <b>exhausted</b></p>
<p><b>shudder</b></p> <p><b>terror</b></p>	<p>People shudder when they are frightened or disgusted, but sometimes other things can <b>shudder</b> too.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ground <b>shuddered</b> when there was an earthquake. Show me the ground shuddering.</li> <li>• The washing machine <b>shuddered</b> when the clothes were spinning. Show me a washing machine <b>shuddering</b>.</li> <li>• The ship <b>shuddered</b> when it hit a rock. Show me a ship <b>shuddering</b> when it hits a rock.</li> </ul> <p>Terror is a really, really frightening feeling. Has something ever frightened you and made you <b>shudder</b>? Tell me like this:</p> <p>I <b>shuddered</b> in <b>terror</b> when I saw the huge crocodile at the zoo. Your turn.</p>	<p>Students can perform these actions standing or seated on the ground.</p> <p>Allow 2-3 students to provide relevant examples, e.g. Sasha <b>shuddered</b> in <b>terror</b> when she was watching a scary movie.</p>

Figure 1. Examples of activities to teach target words using the ‘robust’ method.

it sounds. When teachers don’t do this preparation, the lesson’s flow is interrupted and the instruction is poor. The typical alternative, inviting students to define the words for each other, is ineffective. It results in wasted instructional time, inadequate definitions, and off-task students.

A sticky note inserted in the text is great for the *brief* method. A Powerpoint presentation or wall display with the target words and associated student-friendly definitions supports revision and student reference. For the *robust* method, more substantial lesson preparation is required, with definitions, contextual examples and prompts developed in advance. Figure 1 gives some examples of the kinds of activities that can be used.

### 3. Deliberately revisit words in a range of contexts

Moving from vague familiarity with a word to using it accurately and confidently requires multiple encounters over time. This is especially true for the challenging words that are most empowering for our students. When teachers deliberately look for opportunities to use sophisticated vocabulary in their lessons and their conversations with students, they can exponentially increase the exposure to, and interest in, these words. Keeping ‘special’ words on display in

the classroom is a great prompt for both teachers and students. Even very young children are typically excited about recognising and using new words, and will be more likely to use them spontaneously if they hear them used, see them written on the wall, and are praised for their attempts.

Revisiting focus words in the context of language study is also useful. An explicit focus on vocabulary instruction through literature is designed to complement, and not replace, good quality systematic instruction in phonics, morphology and grammar. These essential skills are critical for students with learning difficulties and are very valuable for all students. They underpin early reading and spelling and create the foundation for progressively more complex word study activities. Once students have mastered the basic phonic codes, linking vocabulary programs to word study lessons makes good sense (Stahl & Nagy, 2006). A focus on etymology as new spelling patterns are introduced helps students to gain an appreciation of the origins of words and the way they are structured. Planned attention to parts of speech (or functional grammar) helps students to understand how morphology and syntax interact to determine whether words are acting as nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs (e.g., *err*, *error*, *erroneous*, *erroneously* or *in error*). When combined with the

planned and systematic teaching of vocabulary and the deliberate display and use of focus words, activities which stimulate students’ curiosity about the structure and grammatical function of words help to ensure that they become confident wordsmiths.

### A commitment to improvement

Using literature deliberately and thoughtfully to increase students’ expressive and receptive vocabulary is a powerful teaching strategy with significant long-term benefits for



Pre-Primary (Foundation Year) students explore vocabulary from *There once was a boy called Tashi*



students' literacy, but it does require commitment from teachers. Careful pre-planning of appropriate texts is necessary to ensure that stories will be both appealing and high value. Thoughtful development of student friendly definitions which make sense to all learners is critical, and the robust instructional method requires teachers to develop examples and activities in advance. Finally, methods of displaying, using, and generalising vocabulary need to be considered. However this is no different to the preparation that good teachers willingly do to ensure that any of their lessons is of high value.

The three strategies outlined here – *reading challenging books, explicitly teaching word meanings, and revisiting words deliberately in context* – combine to help students to learn the meaning of new words more quickly and more thoroughly than they would do otherwise. This is essential to help at-risk student groups to catch up with their peers. Teachers who have embraced these strategies have demonstrated that they value and enjoy the dedicated time that they spend each day using literature to empower their students' word learning (Moore, 2013). This is very promising, because students with learning difficulties potentially have the most to gain from regular teacher read-alouds enhanced by the explicit teaching of challenging vocabulary.

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Wendy Moore is a member of LDA Council. She is a school principal with an interest in educational research, particularly in the areas of literacy, language and learning difficulties. She earned her PhD from Edith Cowan University in Perth in 2013.

# ‘To e or not to e’: improving spelling instruction

**Robyn and Kevin Wheldall** look at improving spelling instruction through Spell-It.

**B**aby boomers sometimes like to claim that they are the last literate generation. Almost all of us learned to read, and to read well. Our grasp of grammar may not be perfect but we usually *do* know the difference between an adjective and an adverb (“no, you’re not feeling good, you’re feeling well”). But as for our spelling... well, not so much! It is one of those curious ambiguities of life that, while few would admit to being illiterate, many of us will cheerfully admit that our spelling skills are a little shaky in some areas, whether it be the siren calls of double consonants or the bear trap of “to e or not to e” when constructing the plurals of nouns ending in a vowel.

Most of us were simply not taught very well, instruction comprising largely the rote learning of endless lists of spelling words with perhaps a few (a very few) rules thrown in, and even those of doubtful utility. (How often does ‘i before e except after c not work?') Many of us continue to inwardly chant “egg-wiped” when spelling Egypt or “Neck- ess- ari” when spelling necessary. Moreover, few would be willing to mount an argument that

spelling instruction has improved over the years or that today’s children can spell any better. Many of us fear that their spelling is even worse.

But learning to spell need not be the challenge it continues to be for most students. There is a systematic logic to the spelling rules of English that, once learned, takes away the strain of rote learning. The problem remains that we can hardly expect students to learn the logic of spelling if their teachers remain ignorant of it themselves. Just as few teachers are taught how to teach reading effectively during their own teacher education courses, the same applies to the effective teaching of spelling.

What is needed then is a resource to assist teachers to learn the inherent rules of spelling logic for themselves and to apply this knowledge in teaching their students how to spell. And this is what Joy Allcock attempts to provide in her excellent spelling resource kit that MultiLit has adapted for Australian teachers and students, now known as *Spell-It*. Joy is one of those inspirational people who have spent thousands and thousands of hours passionately putting together ways to help teachers teach children.

Unlike other instructional materials MultiLit has developed for teachers and others, *Spell-It* is not a prescriptive program of instruction as such, but rather an *approach* to the teaching of spelling. We describe it as a resource; a *resource* upon which teachers may draw to provide effective instruction in spelling for their students. By attending the professional development course that is an essential prerequisite for the effective use of *Spell-It*, teachers will acquire the skills and knowledge that form the bedrock of effective spelling instruction.



One of the compelling reasons we decided to embark on the *Spell-It* project was that our dear friend and colleague, Dr Coral Kemp, advised us that, if teachers came to grips with the content that Joy had put together, then they would learn, not only about the spelling system that underpins written English, but, put simply, they would find out how words work. Apart from being essential to be able to teach spelling, this knowledge will also teach teachers how to teach *reading*.

According to Dr Google, Aristotle said, “*Those who know do, those that understand, teach*”. Our sincere hope is that *Spell-It* will become an invaluable resource to thousands of teachers across Australia in assisting students to understand how to spell written English.

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Disclosure: As directors of MultiLit Pty Ltd, Dr Robyn Wheldall and Professor Kevin Wheldall both have a financial interest in the *Spell-It* Workshops.

# Spell-It

## An explicit approach to teach spelling

### What is it?

Spell-It is a flexible resource that assists teachers to plan and implement spelling instruction based on assessment of students' current knowledge. Designed for upper primary and secondary students, Spell-It teaches the rules, conventions, structure and logic of the English language, to enable teachers to plan effective spelling lessons based on the needs of their students. Spell-It, which was written by Joy Allcock from New Zealand, has been adapted for use in Australian schools. Spell-It comprises a high-quality one-day Professional Development Workshop and a comprehensive Kit with the necessary resources to implement the program.

### Who is it for?

Spell-It is suitable for use with students from upper primary (Year 4 onwards) through to secondary and tertiary levels. Students who may particularly benefit from the program include those who:

- have average reading skills but poor spelling
- rely on visual images of words but do not understand the system behind the patterns
- over-rely on known sound-spelling relationships to write words because they do not know about alternate spelling conventions.

As an adaptable and flexible program, Spell-It can be used for a whole class, small group or even one-to-one instruction. It can be delivered within a Response to Intervention framework, for use in Tier One or Tier Two. Spell-It also assists teachers seeking to increase their own knowledge regarding the spelling system that underpins written English. (In an Australian study by Loudon and Rohl (2006), only 42% of beginning teachers felt their teacher education course had adequately developed them to teach spelling.)

### Key features

Spell-It provides an explicit and structured approach to teaching spelling within a whole class or small group framework. The program provides assessment tools for teachers to identify the spelling skills that are needed most, and to develop a teaching program to target these areas.

Specific teaching strategies are included for each teaching topic, with alternative 'routes' for differentiated instruction, extensive examples and word lists for use within lessons.

The program's content can be delivered over time, and through practical activities and targeted written exercises, students' ability to generalise their newly learned spelling skills to their writing can be monitored.

Students taught using Spell-It will benefit from:

- improved writing quality and fluency
- expanded vocabulary through improved word knowledge, and
- confidence in their own ability as they learn to apply spelling strategies to unknown words and work out relationships between words.

**Important note:** *Spell-It is a resource that provides a framework and suggested activities for teachers to plan and implement spelling lessons targeted to fill gaps in students' knowledge. Unlike MultiLit's other programs, which use detailed, sequential lessons to teach initial reading skills, Spell-It is a program that enables teachers to effectively accommodate the diverse spelling needs of older students.*

For more information about pricing and PD workshop registrations. Visit the MultiLit website at [www.multilit.com/programs/spell-it](http://www.multilit.com/programs/spell-it).

# Consultants Corner

**Diane Barwood provides information and advice especially for consultant members of LDA. In this issue, she focuses on the Online Tutor Service.**

**T**he Online Tutor Search (OTS) is now well established with a number of consultants making use of it. Our biggest concern is that we don't have enough consultants currently registered to meet the needs of those requiring services. Some people registered for the service have now taken off their names because they are fully booked. This is obviously a good thing for them, but it has led to reduced numbers available on the service.

Parents sometimes find there are no consultants who fit the criteria their child requires. One of the big needs is Mathematics, especially in the upper primary and secondary levels. As a working consultant, I have noticed that more parents are requesting assistance with Maths. So, if there are any registered consultants who have the relevant expertise and wish to offer Mathematics tutoring, please consider joining the OTS. Visit the consultants' link on the website and the LDA Consultant Membership page will lead to a link on how to join the OTS.

Consultants are urged to promote the OTS through their Network of parents and any school or community group to which they are connected. It is amazing how powerful 'word of mouth' is. Also be aware of social media. The Dyslexia Support Group on Facebook is one site with many followers, keen to learn more about how to assist their children. Often, parents share stories of their successes and concerns and recommend good providers. One must keep eyes open with the way the world is moving.

It must be remembered that LDA consultants are committed to the use of evidence-based practice so I urge all LDA members, especially consultants, to check the website and read the LDA Position Statement, *Approaches to Reading Instruction*, at <https://www.ldaustralia.org>. This will provide all with a clarified view of the expectations that LDA has of all consultants.



In a recent development, LDA Council has decided that any LDA consultants who are taking students and not just those who are on the OTS will be required to have proof of both Public Liability and Professional Indemnity Insurance at the time of joining, or of renewal. LDA is able to broker an excellent group rate for this insurance and the greater the number involved, the cheaper the rate. We are living in a litigious world and clients expect the security of services being fully covered.

Diane Barwood is a long-standing LDA Council Member and Convenor of the Consultants' Committee

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

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

Please submit articles, correspondence about the Bulletin, or letters for publication to the Editor. For questions about content, deadlines, length or style, please contact the Editor. (Email: [wendy.m.moore@gmail.com](mailto:wendy.m.moore@gmail.com))

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