Welcome to our August edition of the Bulletin. 2013 has been a particularly busy year for LDA and I hope you’ve noticed some of the changes.

Have you been to our website recently? You’ll find new resources, new technology, and user-friendly site navigation at the same URL – www.ldaustralia.org. It’s hard to believe that just over a year ago, when we had already decided that our website needed revamping, LDA was approached by the Melbourne based Australian IT provider, Uniware, with a serendipitous pro bono offer to design our new website. Dr Pye Twaddell, LDA’s Treasurer, undertook the considerable task of managing the website project and I cannot begin to imagine how many hours she spent liaising with LDA Council and Uniware’s web solutions company, Xceed, to realise the launch of the new site in April. By early July, the number of visitors to the site exceeded the total of those who had ever visited our old site. New features include: new secure online membership and event registration processes, secure online payment system, member login and profile update, and Google maps to direct participants to LDA events. Put learning difficulties into Google and LDA’s website has top listing.

In accordance with LDA’s mission of assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research, we have featured a series of professional development sessions in Sydney and Melbourne on the theme of explicit as well as Direct Instruction. These have been in addition to the sessions we have offered on assessment and a speech pathology perspective on the role of oral language and learning to read.

In my research with schools in Western Australia taking up an explicit approach, I have come to the realisation that unless accompanied with a teaching demonstration, the ‘explicit’ referred to in the research is not always what teachers believe to be explicit. This is understandable because many Western Australian teachers completed their studies
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from the late 70s, at a time when the child-centred ‘whole language’ (synonyms include ‘constructivist’ or ‘top down’) approach was promoted by universities in Australia as the preferred method for literacy learning (de Lemos, 2002).

During the seminar held in Sydney in March, those attending had the opportunity to hear from two academics on the theory behind this approach, as well as meet a principal and an early childhood teacher of a high performing school, who demonstrated why the school’s explicit approach has led to many of the six-year-olds attaining the literacy skills required to pass the Year 3 NAPLAN test. The school boasts a significant shift in numeracy results too and provided an overview of the programs and approach they use. These included Dr Rhonda Farkota’s mathematics program Junior Elementary Maths Mastery and Elementary Maths Mastery, resources I am sure she would have discussed at the professional learning session she presented for LDA on Direct Instruction in Melbourne. LDA is offering a follow-up workshop in Sydney for administrators and lead teachers on ‘Creating a High Performing School’ and details are on the website for this 30 August event in Sydney.

In closing, I’d like to leave you with this thought: drops that gather finally make a sea. I was speaking at a conference recently on teaching spelling explicitly and a teacher approached me and thanked me for ‘giving her permission to teach’. She wasn’t a beginning teacher, and as I pondered her comment, I began to wonder if someone had revoked her right to teach in the past. Her point, however, was clear. Explicit instruction is a teacher-led approach that leaves nothing to chance. Teaching spelling explicitly makes significant demands on teachers’ knowledge of, and ability to teach, precursor spelling skills like phoneme segmentation, the identification of short and long vowels and syllabification. As well as understanding that the final phoneme in the word play is a long vowel and positional frequency dictates that it will be spelt in a particular way, teaching explicitly is also about knowing how to teach. This means sequencing instruction to gradually build a student’s spelling knowledge, skills and strategies, maintaining clear and consistent language and ensuring there is sufficient practice to result in mastery.

I have always found those who choose to specialise in the support of students who experience difficulty learning have the kind of knowledge and skills required to teach explicitly. Given the media attention in Western Australia and Queensland on explicit instruction, I am hopeful that the drops will turn into a tide and LDA will be in a position to support educators who have a renewed focus on teacher-led instruction.

Lorraine Hammond
President, Learning Difficulties Australia

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Education landscape: The next 10 years?

Jennifer Buckingham

When considering the education landscape over the next 10 years, it is difficult to ignore the fact that no one knows what’s going to happen in the next 10 days. Schools are facing a great deal of uncertainty. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some policy themes, both in Australia and overseas, and to describe some macro-trends. These are not necessarily policies or changes I endorse, just some observations and predictions.

The role of government

The federal government is increasingly influencing educational priorities and school practice through tied funding, to the point where state governments are sidelined in some of the most important aspects of school education. The Federal Government now controls curriculum and testing, and is dictating school governance arrangements. Both sides of politics are making noises about being more interventionist in teacher education. I see this continuing in the future, especially if the Gonski reforms are implemented, but also to a lesser extent even if they are not, with the extension of National Partnerships under a Coalition government. In Australia, the main areas in which state governments retain control are teacher employment and management of financial and capital resources, but even this may lessen in the long-term.

Funding

It is presently impossible to discuss funding figures with precision, but a trend in funding principles is evident. The common feature of the existing SES funding model for non-government schools, the Gonski funding model, group funding of Catholic schools, and most state education system models, is that they are student-centred. By this I mean that an allocation of money is attached to each child and a school’s funding entitlement is mostly a multiple of that figure. The NSW state education system has a variation on this that puts more weight on teacher numbers.

There will continue to be debates about how much funding each student should receive, but there is a growing acceptance of the notion that education funding should be about the needs of students, not the school they attend. At some point in the future I hesitantly predict sector-neutral funding, I don’t expect this will apply to all existing non-government schools because of the interplay between private and public funding, but I think there is scope for a different type of fully funded non-government school (more on that later).

There is also scope for increasing private funding into both school sectors. Based on the sorts of funding arrangements that have developed over the last decade, I envisage they will fall into three broad categories — philanthropic, partnerships and profit-making.

Non-government schools rely heavily on private funding, particularly in the form of tuition fees, but also in the form of philanthropic donations. The capacity of public schools to increase their revenue through private funding has been more limited and is an area of potential growth. Compulsory tuition fees in public schools are unlikely in the short term, but philanthropic funding is an underdeveloped area. Corporations and private trusts are keen to contribute to public schools, particularly those with high levels of disadvantage, but it is not always easy for them to do so, at least not in the ways such organisations prefer to work.

Another avenue for private resourcing of both public and non-government schools is partnerships with community organisations and businesses, often in the form of capital and human resources.

More controversially, the for-profit sector has been involved in higher and further education and in early education for some years, but Australian schools have so far been quarantined. There are a large number of commercial organisations profiting from school education in the area of teaching resources, information technology, sports and music equipment and so on, but for-profit schools do not yet operate within the mainstream school sector.

Accountability

Increased government funding tends to come with strings. The National Plan for School Improvement is a case in point. In exchange for increased funding, the federal government is seeking to set the agenda for education policy in a wide range of areas; from school autonomy, arguably a matter for states, to schools’ bullying policies, arguably a matter for schools.

The federal government’s approach to schooling is a tight-loose-tight paradigm. The inputs to schools – such as curriculum and teacher supply and education – are becoming more tightly controlled and centralised. The outcomes are also tightly defined in the form of NAPLAN and reporting to government. In between these things, though, is what schools do. Through the move to decentralisation, there is an attempt to give schools more freedom in how they achieve the outcomes expected of them. This is the ‘loose’ part of the paradigm.

In terms of public accountability, NAPLAN will continue and even possibly expand but My School in its current form is tenuous. NAPLAN will continue because governments like to collect data. What is in danger is the public availability of NAPLAN results, due to the opposition to My School from some vocal quarters. Governments may accede, as they are not averse to keeping information from the public.

School governance

Decentralisation/school autonomy
has been a distinct development in schools policy in Australia and internationally over the last 10 to 15 years. ‘Decentralisation’ refers to moving decision-making capacity away from central agencies in school systems to more local authorities or to schools themselves, within a centrally determined framework. This is somewhat different to ‘autonomous’ schools, where there is almost complete independence in governance. The only Australian schools to which the autonomous schools definition applies are independent schools, but they too must dance to governments’ tune to some extent.

Public schools in the Australian Capital Territory have had elements of financial self-management since the 1970s, around the time the Karmel report endorsed the approach. The Victorian state government implemented extensive school-based management reforms in the mid-1990s, with public schools gaining control of more than 90% of their budget, as well as the ability to hire their own staff. There are now 255 independent public schools in Western Australia, which is around one-third of public schools in the state. In Queensland, it is anticipated that there will be a total of 120 independent public schools over the next four years.4

Independent public schools have sometimes incorrectly been described as charter schools. They are not, the key difference being that independent public schools are still government-owned and operated; the principal and staff are still government employees and schools must still adhere to state industrial legislation and curriculum and other state and national policies. We do not (yet) have charter schools in Australia. They are schools that may or may not formerly have been public schools, but which are managed by a private organisation under a legislative contract or ‘charter’ with the government or charter authority. Charter schools usually cannot charge fees, but they are only ‘public’ to the extent specified in the charter. There are around 1.6 million students in 5000 charter schools in the US, across 40 states, which represents about 5% of all public schools.5

Many countries have funding and governance arrangements that allow

the establishment of privately-managed free schools, including the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands. The ‘free schools’ now operating in England are similar to charter schools. They receive public funding equivalent to similar public schools with the condition that they do not charge tuition fees, and there are some conditions around enrolment and access.6 New Zealand is also heading down this path with partnership schools.7 It is only a matter of time before these developments are debated seriously as a prospect in Australia.

Provision

All of this leads inexorably toward greater diversity in provision. There is likely to be increasing diversity of provision in all school sectors, and the potential emergence of a fourth sector, like charter schools or free schools, established to provide choice for parents who currently have none, or to provide a type of schooling currently unavailable. Of the 102 free schools approved in the UK last year, 12 were alternative provision schools for students who have behavioural problems, students with long-term health problems, and teenage mothers.4 Certainly, there are schools within the independent school sector in Australia that serve this purpose, but existing funding policies and regulations make it a difficult prospect.

Greater diversity in schooling will also be driven by the changing nature of students and the wider variety of options provided by technology. We are seeing this at the moment in the higher education sector. It would be surprising if the flipped classroom approach7 — where students watch lectures independently online and then do what we would think of as homework at school with a teacher’s support — did not begin to trickle down to the secondary sector in the next decade.

Technology is also enabling homeschooling and hybrid schooling, in which children are home-schooled a few days a week and attend school on the other days. More than 50 virtual charter schools in the US provide online curriculum. Another possibility is ‘micro-schools’ set up by cooperatives of families pooling their resources to open one-room schools, largely based around online learning.8 The home-schoolers of the future will be very different to the stereotype of today.

While ever we have a national curriculum, it will continue to be contentious and politicised.

Curriculum

Curriculum is now caught up in the tight part of the tight-loose-tight paradigm. While ever we have a national curriculum, it will continue to be contentious and politicised. Every new education minister, conservative and progressive, will potentially be able to imprint their own values and priorities. The content of the national curriculum at present has gone largely unscrutinised while we have been preoccupied with funding and the Gonski reforms. Curriculum will be a flash point again in the future.
Teaching

Identifying quality in teaching is a difficult and fraught exercise. Witness the very long time taken to develop professional standards that define high-quality teaching. Also witness the difficulty in using professional standards to differentiate teachers. The Age newspaper reported that 99.8% of Victorian public school teachers passed the annual performance review last year and progressed up the pay scale.\(^\text{11}\)

The majority of policy debate is now beginning to focus on the quality of teacher candidates before they get into the classroom, and the standard of their training.

Despite dozens of reviews of initial teacher education, all of which concluded pretty much the same thing, change has progressed at a glacial pace. Both federal and state governments are now turning their attention to recruitment and selection, influenced by the high performance in PISA of countries whose teachers are drawn from the academic elite. There are moves to limit both entry to and exit from teacher education courses by setting minimum achievement benchmarks. This will have a number of spin-off effects and I think we are only seeing the beginning of this trend.

Performance management is also a continuing problem. Some systems may experiment with forms of bonuses and performance pay but, due to continuing unionisation, they are likely to be marginal. Governments and unions will, however, be under increasing pressure to deal with under-performing teachers more effectively.

Jennifer Buckingham is a Research Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies. This is an edited version of a speech given at the Independent Schools Queensland State Forum, 23 May 2013.

Endnotes


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MultiLit is a research initiative of Macquarie University
The need for NAPLAN

This article is based on an invited submission to the Inquiry of the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations on: ‘The effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy’.

Robyn Wheldall

There has been considerable public debate about whether or not the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, or NAPLAN, is a good idea. As with many issues in education and educational standards, feelings generally run high. This brief article summarises some of the benefits from the standpoint of helping low-progress readers.

A good starting point

The introduction of NAPLAN has resulted in more systematic identification of students in need of additional support in terms of learning to read and write.

Clearly, the first step in offering services to students to improve their literacy skills is to identify those most in need of support. NAPLAN provides a scheduled (and therefore predictable) assessment structure that enables school leaders and teachers to identify those students who are struggling to make adequate progress against national benchmarks.

The utility of the NAPLAN assessment is that a common scale has been introduced across the nation that allows a common language that helps identify when and where targeted resources should be deployed. The result is a reduction in more subjective assessments of relative student performance. This is necessary because there is evidence that teacher judgment alone may not be an adequate means of identifying struggling students.

A highly desirable impact of NAPLAN is that teaching resources are more effectively deployed and students who need the most help are more likely to receive that help.

Parental empowerment

Information about individual children that is available from NAPLAN is also very important to their parents. NAPLAN has effectively given parents a clear window through which to see how their children are progressing in the development of their literacy and numeracy skills. Not only do parents have a right to this information, this is critical if schools and parents are to work together to enable children and young people to reach their full potential.

Parents are now much better informed about their children’s progress in the areas of basic skills learning since the introduction of NAPLAN in 2008. This represents a profound advancement in empowering parents to take a more active role in their child’s education. Moreover, with many families moving between states, and therefore education systems, the introduction of an Australia-wide assessment framework has reduced some of the issues associated with moving a child from school to school.

This increased level of information for schools and parents is especially important for students who are at-risk of, or who are experiencing, difficulties in learning how to read.

Parents are now much better informed about their children’s progress in the areas of basic skills learning since the introduction of NAPLAN in 2008. This represents a profound advancement in empowering parents to take a more active role in their child’s education. Moreover, with many families moving between states, and therefore education systems, the introduction of an Australia-wide assessment framework has reduced some of the issues associated with moving a child from school to school.

This increased level of information for schools and parents is especially important for students who are at-risk of, or who are experiencing, difficulties in learning how to read.

Transparency is important for parental choice

Furthermore, the publication of NAPLAN test results on the My School website provides parents with important information about what school they would like their child to attend. This type of information has not been available to parents previously and we consider it to be very important.

In addition, once a child is attending a certain school, his or her parents are able to monitor the performance of their school in relation to other schools with a similar profile and with the rest of the nation. Parents are typically the most passionate advocates for their children and having information about how their child’s school is performing in the areas of basic skills teaching is very important.

This increased level of information for schools and parents is especially important for students who are at-risk of, or who are experiencing, difficulties in learning how to read.

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Making it better
While national testing commencing in Year 3 is to be applauded, it would be prudent to introduce a further test earlier, in Year 1. An appropriate assessment at this point would enable school leaders and teachers to identify those students who may be having (or may be at-risk of having) difficulties in learning to read. Early intervention for students who are identified as having difficulties is much more effective and more cost-effective than allowing difficulties to persist into the primary school years.

Back up testing with the necessary resources
But, clearly, there is little point in identifying students in need of assistance if there are not the resources available to provide the help these students require to become proficient readers. The vital next step is to provide support to these students.

This will typically mean the student being taught more intensively, in small groups or one-to-one if small group instruction is not found to be sufficiently effective for a particular student. It is hoped that once a student begins progressing at a normal rate, then he or she can receive the same instruction as his or her typically developing peers. Subsequent NAPLAN performance of students who have required extra support is one way that these students can be monitored in the longer term.

The National Partnerships in Literacy and Numeracy initiative has provided funding for targeted assistance that has seen a great many students benefit. It is necessary that recurrent funding to support students who require additional support to develop their literacy skills is available so that schools can engage the personnel and use the resources they require to meet the needs of struggling students.

Ensuring evidence-based interventions are used
Teachers (and others) assisting students in need of additional support should use evidence-based programs to improve the literacy outcomes of their students. We know from the scientific research into reading acquisition over the last 30 years what an effective program should comprise. The five ‘big ideas’ of reading instruction are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. It seems, however, that approaches that have been found wanting continue to be used by many teachers and in many schools.

Teachers who may not have received an adequate grounding in the teaching of reading in their initial training should be retrained or, at a minimum, engage in professional development and mentoring in effective instructional approaches for teaching reading. Improving the quality of our teachers must be a priority if we are to see improvement in literacy standards in Australia.

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SPELD (QLD), LSTAQ and LDA Joint Conference
Pedagogy in Practice
Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre
20–21 September 2013

Nicole Todd, LDA Council Member, Conference Committee

Once again the exciting and informative national Joint Conference is on; an event developed from collaboration between Learning Difficulties Australia, Learning Support Teachers’ Association of Queensland and SPELD Queensland. Speakers will be arriving from all over Australia to provide practical workshops and the latest research in supporting students with learning difficulties. Held in fresh surrounds of the renovated section of the Brisbane Convention Centre, attendees will be provided with wonderful food (yes, we all know this is the most important aspect of a conference!), inspirational speakers, networking opportunities, showcases of the latest resources, and a gluttony of ideas to take back to their workplaces.

Keynote speakers for the conference will be Professor Andrew Martin and Dr Lorraine Hammond, both praised for their wealth of knowledge and enthusiasm – a treat for attendees. A wide range of sessions are on offer over the two days including a larger focus on the use of technology than ever before. On a personal note, I have attended this conference many times over the years (even before joining LDA) and have always recommended it highly to teachers and other professionals in the field. At the conference you hear people excitedly sharing information about the session they just attended (but not complaints).

This conference is only held once every two years so don’t miss out!

Further information regarding the Conference program, speakers, and registration details are available on the LSTAQ website, at www.lstaq.asn.au.

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Spelling, NAPLAN, and the Australian curriculum

Peter Westwood

Recent education policies in Australia and the UK seem to indicate (at the official level anyway – if not yet in classrooms) that the explicit teaching of spelling has once again become a respectable and highly desirable activity. This positive change in attitude has occurred because spelling standards had become a matter of some concern in both countries, and something had to be done.

Australia

The new Australian Curriculum acknowledges fully that teaching students to spell correctly is an important duty of all schools – both primary and secondary. The official guidelines for the new curriculum require that: “Spelling strategies, punctuation conventions, handwriting and word-processing skills should be taught across all years of schooling” (National Curriculum Board, 2009, p.7). Documents issued by the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA) now specify in detail the standards of spelling knowledge and skills expected of students at each year level (ACARA, 2011a; 2011b; 2012a), and spelling is assessed as part of the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) at school Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Within NAPLAN, spelling appears under the theme ‘language conventions’, and is tested and reported separately from performance in other aspects of writing.

In the period between 2008 (when NAPLAN testing began) and 2012, there has been a very slight increase in the number of Australian students reaching or exceeding the set minimum standards in Year 3 (up by 1.5% in 2012), Year 5 (up by 0.9%), and Year 7 (up by only 0.5%), but no significant improvement in Year 9 (ACARA, 2012b; ACARA, 2012c).

It will be interesting in coming years to see if the stronger emphasis recommended for teaching spelling across the age range in Australia, including secondary schools, results in fewer students failing the minimum standards.

The format used for testing spelling in NAPLAN involves recognition and correction of errors as presented on the test sheet. For example (at Year 3 level): “Here is a kookaburra. It has long tayl feathers”; and at Year 7 level: “Tiny particlals of dust were floating in the sunlight.” Some critics have argued that this format used in NAPLAN is unsuitable, and provides an inaccurate measure of students’ true spelling ability when writing (Wigglesworth, Simpson & Loakes, 2011; Willet & Gardiner, 2009). Some experts suggest that using a list of unseen words dictated by the test administrator is a better method for appraising students’ genuine orthographic knowledge and recall.

Britain

In Britain, all students aged between 7 and 11 years undertake statutory grammar, punctuation and spelling tests in connection with the UK National Curriculum (DfE, 2012a; DfE, 2012b). The words assessed are selected to take account of children’s developing ability to spell a wide range of words, including common, polysyllabic words, words that conform to regular patterns and words with irregular patterns.

The test format at Levels 3–5 in Key Stage 2 (7–11 years) involves the test administrator reading aloud 20 words to be inserted by the students into appropriate gaps in target sentences. At Level 6, there are 15 such words, chosen to demonstrate additional spelling strategies required for low-frequency, less familiar words (Standards and Testing Agency [UK], 2012). At Key Stage 2 Level 6, examples include: “I would like to improve my__________ of history.” (Dictated word: knowledge).

“Learning ____________ languages will help you when you travel abroad.” (Dictated word: foreign).

This format may well be superior to the system currently used in NAPLAN, because it requires a student to spell words from dictation and embed them in meaningful sentences provided on the test sheet. Such a format must surely satisfy even the teachers who still adhere most strongly to the whole language belief that all literacy assessments should be authentic and always in context.

Continued next page >
Will we see real change?
The major problem in bringing about change in spelling standards is that, since the 1970s, Australian trainee teachers have been given no guidance whatsoever within their methodology courses on how best to teach children to spell. When the whole-language movement arrived in the late 1970s, the literacy gurus of the time deemed that spelling, like phonics, should never be taught as a separate topic, arguing instead that children learn to spell most naturally as they engage in the act of writing. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to suggest at the moment that methodology lecturers in Australian universities have suddenly changed their course content. Indeed, many of these lecturers are the very same gurus who pushed whole language so strongly in previous years. Has anyone checked to find out if they now feel the need to address the topic of spelling instruction in their courses? Equally problematic for serving teachers is the fact that spelling instruction rarely, if ever, features as a significant workshop topic within ongoing in-service professional development programs.

Bringing about significant improvements in students’ spelling in Australian schools may be much more difficult than the policy-makers and ACARA anticipate.

References


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ACARA. (2012c). National Assessment Program: Achievement in reading, persuasive writing, language conventions and numeracy.


Did you know that Hagrid (of Harry Potter fame) is dyslexic? No, nor did I until I read Linda Siegel’s remarkable new book, Understanding Dyslexia and Other Learning Disabilities. Of course, looking back, all the signs were there; not least the birthday cake for Harry that read ‘HAPPEE BIRTHDAE HARRY’. Oh, and by the way, Albert Einstein was not dyslexic; it’s a myth.

These are just two of the examples Dr Siegel draws on to illustrate her engaging account of the problems experienced by children and adults who have learning disabilities. In her revealing inside stories of the misery (and some joys) experienced by those who have LD, we hear about Winston Churchill, Picasso, Hans Christian Andersen, Susan Hampshire and William Butler Yeats. The works of Jane Austen, George Elliot and Ruth Rendell are also drawn on to provide examples of LD in fiction, as well as numerous real world case studies.

Drawing on this eclectic array of sources, buttressed by her mastery of the research literature to which she herself has contributed so strongly, Dr Siegel has produced an engaging account that will captivate parents, teachers, and (not least) those working in the LD field.

Kevin Wheldall

Book Review
Understanding Dyslexia and Other Learning Disabilities, by Linda Siegel.
Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press, 2013
ISBN 978-1-926966-14-4
Two camps have emerged in the Gonski wars. One camp says it’s all about the money. The ‘I Give A Gonksi’ campaign gives the impression that the proposed school funding reforms represent a big, fat cheque for public education. The implication is that if you don’t “give a Gonksi”, you don’t care about schools.

The other camp says money doesn’t matter at all. People in this camp argue that since previous funding increases for education have not measurably improved performance, further funding increases will fare no better. Some members of this camp say funding reform is pointless and the only policies worth pursuing are those directly related to improving teacher quality.

As usual, the truth is somewhere in between. Money is not everything, but it’s not nothing either. At the most basic level, schools need adequate and stable funding to operate effectively. Within certain parameters, additional funding used in the right way can be very beneficial.

But funding reform is about more than the size of school budgets. It is about creating the incentives and conditions for schools to use their resources effectively. It’s about making sure that taxpayer dollars are going to the students and schools where they can do the most good.

Better selection, preparation and professional development of teachers will be the key to improving education in this country, but funding reform is more than a sideshow. It is widely acknowledged that the way schools are funded now is too complex and often arbitrary. Public funding comes from multiple sources, each with its own set of accountability requirements. Different arrangements for different school sectors have created ongoing grievances and distractions from the real work of education.

Hoping to resolve this problem, the review committee led by David Gonski undertook to design a new funding system for all schools. The review committee’s proposal had a clear rationale – funding should be calculated according to the needs of children – and tried to strike a balance between the competing goals of individual and social equity. In a model favouring individual equity, every student receives the same amount of funding for their education irrespective of family circumstances or the school they attend. In a model favouring social equity, funding is not evenly distributed; disadvantaged students receive more funding. It is not easy to reconcile both these approaches, and the promise that “no school will lose a dollar” made the task even more difficult.

A ‘no losers’ clause has been the Achilles heel of the current system of funding for non-government schools (the SES system) and is now bedevilling the Gonski reforms. Because of the ‘no losers’ clause, the proposed model could not have a cost-neutral objective and could not be implemented without a large increase in the total funding quantum. If the pure application of the model, no matter how cleverly or carefully designed it is, reduced any school’s funding, it would be unacceptable. This explains the long, arduous and secretive processes that have taken place in Canberra since the publication of the Gonski committee’s report in February last year. The model has been tweaked and massaged to make sure the numbers churn out are politically palatable before any detail saw the light of day.

In the past year, the NSW and Victorian state governments have developed new funding mechanisms of their own. The Victorian model is similar to the Gonski committee’s proposal but costs less. State governments are well aware of the tenuous relationship between spending and outcomes on education. They’ll need a very good reason to commit substantial amounts of extra money.

It has become increasingly apparent that the funding model proposed by the federal government bears only a passing resemblance to that originally recommended in the Gonski report; the new model has been described as ‘opaque’ and ‘unworkable’. As a result, an initially popular reform has lost momentum and support.

The likelihood of resolution seems to change by the day, as political events overtake policy negotiations. At the time of the original 30 June deadline, only NSW, SA and the ACT had signed on to the reforms. There is now talk of not only extending the deadline for other states but also deferring implementation. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that it will fail altogether.

Jennifer Buckingham is a research fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies. This article was originally published in The Australian, 5 April 2013 (online edition).
PIRLS before swine:
Or why Australia sucks at reading

John Lennon was renowned for his sharp, and oft times acidic, wit. When asked if Ringo was the best drummer in the world, he responded that Ringo was not even the best drummer in the Beatles! I was reminded of this when reviewing the latest (2011) results from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (or PIRLS). Not only were Australian students not the best readers in the world, they were not even the best readers among the English-speaking nations surveyed. They were, in fact, the worst. We can take small comfort from the fact that New Zealand performed only marginally (and not significantly) better than Australia.

The PIRLS project essentially assesses reading comprehension by requiring students to read selected texts and then to answer questions about the material read. Year 4 students are assessed because this typically marks the point of transition from learning to read to reading to learn. (Note that 2011 was the first time that Australia had taken part in PIRLS.)

Overall, 45 countries were included in the study (excluding those countries who tested older or younger readers or who took part for their own internal benchmarking purposes, and whose results are not reported). Australia came 27th in the league table of countries (with a mean score of 527), below all other English-speaking countries and significantly lower than 21 other countries overall, including all other English-speaking countries except New Zealand (mean score 531).

To put this in perspective, let’s look at how some of these other English-speaking countries performed. Singapore (mean score 567), for example, came fourth, one of the four top performing countries significantly above the others. Northern Ireland came fifth (mean score 558) and the United States came sixth (mean score 556) (compared with 14th out of 40 in 2006). England came 11th (compared with 15th out of 40 in 2006) and Canada (mean score 548) came 12th. (Note the improvements in performance from 2006 to 2011 by both England and the United States.)

As well as reporting mean scores by country, PIRLS also provides details of performance against four benchmarks: Advanced, High, Intermediate, and Low (and those who fail even to qualify for Low i.e. Below Low). In Australia 7% of students failed even to meet the Low benchmark and a further 17% met only the Low benchmark. The table below includes comparison percentage figures for other English-speaking countries of interest.

In summary, Australia and New Zealand have over twice as many students failing to meet even the minimal Low standard as Northern Ireland, Singapore, Canada and the United States; and over one and three quarters times as many low-performing students overall (Below Low and Low combined). England falls in the middle of these two groups of countries.

These results may have come as a shock to many educationists who had been blithely arguing that there was no literacy crisis in Australia. But they provided simple confirmation for Australian reading scientists who had been warning of this problem for some time and had argued (remarkably accurately, as it turns out) that a quarter of Australia’s students could be regarded as low-progress readers. In 2004, a group of Australian reading scientists and clinicians wrote an open letter to the then Federal Minister of Education, Brendan Nelson, arguing the need for reform regarding the way reading is taught in Australia and the need for literacy teaching to be based on the available scientific evidence. The subsequent National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading reported at the end of 2005, essentially reiterating these concerns and stating clearly what needed to be done to improve reading standards in Australia. In short, the Report was subsequently simply ignored.

Moreover, following the implementation of the National Assessments Program – Literacy and Numeracy (or NAPLAN) from 2008, we were subsequently assured...
Dyslexia SPELD ACT (DSA) is coming!

Jo Whithear

Every state in Australia has a ‘SPELD’ – a not-for-profit organisation established to support people with specific learning disabilities, particularly dyslexia. Until now, the ACT has not. Dyslexia SPELD ACT (DSA) was recently accepted as a member of AUSPELD, the federation of SPELD Associations.

The new SPELD will offer:
• Free website information for parents and professionals and a quarterly bulletin distributed to every school in Canberra;
• An online bookstore with resources that reflect best practice for students with disabilities;
• For members: Psychological services including consultations and assessments, a parent support group, a tutor referral service with registered tutors trained in evidence-based interventions, professional learning courses and workshops and seminars with national and international guest speakers for the ACT and surrounding region; and,
• A tutor training workshop on 27-29 November 2013.

Our proposed 2014 program includes:
• Educational psychologist Alison Hatcher presenting on ‘What is dyslexia?’ and ‘Why handwriting still matters’ – 18 and 25 February;
• Genevieve McArthur from Macquarie University presenting on ‘Making evidence-based decisions to assess dyslexia’ – 28 March;
• APS president Tim Hannan presenting an evening workshop for parents on ‘What you need to know to help your child’ followed by a full-day presentation for professionals on ‘Identification and interventions for children with SLD’ – 6-7 May;
• International guest speaker Pie Corbett (UK) conducting writing workshops in July or August.

DSA will officially launch on 27 October 2013. Full services will be available from 2014. The DSA website is under construction and will be operational soon. Parents and colleagues in the ACT are encouraged to become members of DSA and come to our launch in October! For more information contact Louise or Jo at dyslexiaspeldact@gmail.com.

Jo Whithear has been a Consultant member of LDA for a number of years and runs the Canberra Reading Clinic. LDA looks forward to working with DSA in the years ahead through collaborative projects and sharing of common aims.
How children learn to read: A position statement

Molly de Lemos

This position statement was developed to clarify what I see as the basic facts relating to how children learn to read, and how best to teach them, as supported by current theory and scientific evidence on the processes underlying the acquisition of reading.

1. The purpose of reading is to gain meaning from written text.
2. In order to gain meaning from written text, it is necessary to convert the written text to the spoken word.
3. Comprehension of written text is dependent on the ability to link the written word to the spoken word, and so to access the meaning of words through knowledge of the spoken language.
4. Reading comprehension is dependent on the same skills as listening comprehension, and is dependent on vocabulary knowledge, subject and context knowledge, and higher order thinking skills such as reasoning and inference, which are applied to the interpretation of both spoken language and written text. A competent reader should be able to comprehend in written form what they can comprehend in spoken form.
5. English is an alphabetic language, and the ability to convert written text to the spoken word is dependent on knowledge of the alphabetic principle. This requires a knowledge of the association between letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent (phonics).
6. In order to associate sounds with letters, it is necessary to be able to distinguish the smallest unit of sound in each word (phoneme), so that each sound can be associated with the appropriate letter (single letter) or grapheme (a combination of letters making a single sound, such as “sh” or “igh”).
7. Learning to read is not a natural process, like learning to speak, and systematic teaching of the alphabetic principle is essential to learning to read.
8. Reading to children is important in developing their oral language skill and vocabulary knowledge, as well as their knowledge of the world and their thinking and reasoning skills, as in following the logical sequence of a story, and in making inferences about causes and consequences of certain events. This experience provides the basis for comprehension of both oral and written language. However, children do not learn to read by being read to.
9. Learning to read requires specific teaching of phonics. While phonics can be taught in different ways, the research evidence indicates that the most effective approach to the teaching of phonics is synthetic phonics.
10. Teaching children to recognise words by sight, unless used in conjunction with an effective...
phonics-based teaching program, is not an effective way to teach children how to read. While learning irregular words by sight is necessary, this should not be done before children have learned to recognise the common letter-sound correspondences and have acquired some basic decoding skills. Teaching children to memorise words by looking at the shape of the word and/or the beginning or end letters before they are able to recognise letters and the link between letters and sounds and to decode simple words is not helpful in learning to read.

11. Memorisation of words by sight in the beginning stages of reading is not the same as automatic word recognition in skilled readers. In this case, skilled readers build up a bank of words recognised immediately by sight, without the need to decode the word, but this nevertheless involves recognition of the individual letters that make up the word. Only when skilled readers come across an unfamiliar word is it necessary for them to apply their decoding skills to arrive at the corresponding spoken word.

12. Once children have learned to read through decoding of text, the more they read, the greater the number of words that they will be able to recognise automatically, thus enabling more fluent reading and freeing up the cognitive demands of the task so that they can focus more on comprehension than on decoding. This is referred to as the self-teaching hypothesis, and leads to what Stanovitch has termed the Matthew effect, whereby good readers read more and therefore increase their exposure to print, and consequently their word recognition skills, and their fluency and speed of reading, while poor readers who read more slowly have less exposure to print, and therefore less opportunity to build up a bank of words recognised by sight, thus spending more time and cognitive energy on decoding unfamiliar words, and falling further behind in their reading achievement.

13. An effective program for teaching of reading and literacy skills involves a focus on the development of oral language skills at the pre-school level, together with exposure to the letters of the alphabet and the sounds associated with each letter, followed by systematic teaching of letter-sound correspondences and decoding skills in the first year of school, with the reinforcement of these skills through reading of decodable books. Once basic reading skills have been achieved, continued reading of increasingly complex texts is required to develop vocabulary, fluency, speed of reading, and comprehension skills. The ultimate goal is independent reading, both for pleasure and for learning.

14. Some children have difficulties in learning to read. These difficulties may be associated with poorly developed oral language skills due to home background or other factors, failure to teach the essential skills required for reading (letter-sound correspondences and decoding skills), or underlying processing difficulties, and particularly difficulties with phonological processing. It is estimated that about 20 to 25 per cent of children have difficulties in learning to read, and require some additional support. Regardless of the source of the difficulty, the most effective intervention for children with reading difficulties is systematic teaching of the alphabetic code.

15. In some cases, children have persistent difficulties with reading, despite good oral language skills, exposure to an effective program for teaching of initial reading skills, and remedial assistance over a period of time. In such cases the source of the difficulty is likely to be related to an underlying neurological processing difficulty, and such children are likely to require ongoing intervention and support for their reading difficulties. It is estimated that approximately 1 to 3% of students would fall into this category.

16. The term dyslexia is commonly used to describe a difficulty with reading that is severe, persistent and not responsive to remedial intervention. However a diagnosis of dyslexia is only possible when other possible sources of reading difficulty are excluded. This can be a complex and time-consuming process. Since the research evidence indicates that effective strategies for addressing reading difficulties are the same, regardless of whether the reading difficulty is attributed to dyslexia or to other causes, it has been argued that a diagnosis of dyslexia is not necessary for remediation of reading difficulties, and that resources spent on obtaining a formal diagnosis of dyslexia would be better spent on providing effective support for students with reading difficulties, regardless of the source of the difficulty. For this reason some reading researchers prefer to use the term ‘low-progress reader’ in preference to ‘dyslexia’ when working with students who have a reading difficulty.

Molly de Lemos is a psychologist and former educational researcher with the Australian Council of Educational Research. She is the author of the report, Closing the Gap between research and practice: Foundations for the acquisition of literacy, published by ACER in 2002. She has been a member of LDA Council since 2004, and is currently LDA President-elect. Email: delemos@pacific.net.au.

References
The everyday experience of American babies: Discoveries and implications

Editor’s note: In our view, the seminal work of Hart and Risley is some of the most important research in child development in recent decades and deserves far greater exposure. We are sure that readers will agree that the implications of their work for teaching children with learning difficulties cannot be overstated.

Todd R. Risley

Like many other professionals inspired by John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., Betty Hart and I devoted our early careers to programs to give poor children a head start on learning. We all thought we could break the ‘cycle of poverty’ in one generation through preschool education. We all learned instead that providing 15 to 20 hours a week of enriched experience and practice when they were four and five did not bring poor children up to the level of the average American child in later school success.

Betty’s and my response to this was to consider the family lives of the children before they entered preschool. Since children are awake (and able to learn) about 100 to 110 hours in every week of life, they would already have used up over 15,000 hours of learning-opportunity time by age three. We wanted to know how full or empty of learning experience were those hours of opportunity – and to compare the lives of babies from the poorest families with the lives of babies from working-class and professional families.

Our book, Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children, was published in 1995. It was the first report of the voyage of exploration that Betty and I began in 1982 when we set out to find out what parents and babies actually do, all day long, in real life, in American homes. From birth announcements in Kansas City newspapers, we recruited 42 new babies from a wide variety of families – some parents were doctors and lawyers, some were business owners, some had white-collar jobs, some had blue-collar jobs, some were working poor, and some were on welfare. When the babies were seven months old we began to visit their homes each month at different times when they were awake on days, evenings and weekends, until they were 36 months old. During each visit, we recorded (with audiotape and notes) everything said to the baby, all talk the baby overheard, and everything the baby did or said during an hour of daily life. Each of the resulting 1200 hours of recordings took about 20 more hours of work: 11 hours to transcribe; another hour to independently transcribe a sample to assess inter-observer agreement; and eight more hours to code each utterance for context and grammar and to enter it into the computer.

We had asked the simple natural history question “What actually goes on between American parents and babies in everyday family life while babies are learning to talk?” After 24,000 person-hours – or 12 person-years – of work, we had collected enough reliable data on enough families to give a first approximate answer to that question. We had our own notions of what we might find – ‘hypotheses’, we called them – but the most important things we found surprised us. Since the findings seem to have also surprised most people who read about them, we think of them as ‘discoveries’. There were seven surprising discoveries that we reported on in Meaningful Differences, and in our 1999 book: The Social World of Children Learning to Talk. This paper reviews those discoveries.

1. A lot of talk goes on between average parents and typical infants and toddlers in everyday home life.

We found that during each hour they were awake at home average American babies heard an average of 340 utterances and 1,440 words per hour addressed to them. They were personally responded to 150 times, and received 17 affirmations per hour from their parents.

If this is the average amount of language experience that typical American babies get at home, how do infant and toddler out-of-home daycare programs compare? How do the home lives of special needs babies, or older children, or babies of other cultures compare? And most important to remember, this is the amount of language experience that is being given – hour after hour, month after month – to those ‘average’ children against whose achievements all other children are compared.

2. There are large and consistent differences between families in the amount of time, encouragement, and talk given to their infants and toddlers.

We found that in an hour together, some parents spent more than 40 minutes of their time interacting with their babies and some spent less than 15 minutes. Some parents took more than 500 turns of interaction in their ‘social dance’ with their babies, and some took fewer than 150 turns an hour. Some parents expressed approval and encouragement of their babies’ actions more than 40 times in an hour of family life, and some less than 4 times. And, some parents said over 3000 words, and some said fewer than 200 words in an average
hour to their babies.

For each family, the amount of time and talk that parents gave to their baby was consistent across time, so the differences between babies’ lifetime experience mounted up. When we extrapolate the talk that we recorded for parents across all the waking hours of their infants’ and toddlers’ lives, we estimate that by the time children were three years old and starting preschool, some children would have already heard over 33 million words said to them by their parents, while others would have heard only 10 million; and some would have already heard over 500,000 affirmative statements about their actions from their parents, while others would have heard less than 60,000.

This was our most surprising discovery: that the size of the differences between families in the amount of talk to babies is so enormous – and that those differences add up to massive advantages or disadvantages for children in language experience long before they start preschool.

3. ‘Extra’ talk is more complex and positive – automatically!

We found that both talkative and taciturn parents used similar numbers of initiations, imperatives, and prohibitions per hour to govern their children. This is the ‘business’ talk that all parents of young children must do: “stop that”; “come here”; “what you got there”; “hold still”, “put that down”. The most taciturn parents usually said little else beyond this necessary business talk, but whenever parents talked more than was necessary for just business, the ‘extra’ talk was not more business talk. Instead it was ‘conversational talk’ about other things. It was ‘chit-chat’ and gossip and running commentary that was automatically rich in the varied vocabulary, complex ideas, subtle guidance, and positive reinforcement that are thought to be important to intellectual development – the ‘good stuff’ of developmental psychology.

This discovery is vitally important to any effort at parent training. Whenever a parent simply talks more, or can be induced to talk more, most of the extra talk has to be descriptive and conversational. As commentary and conversation increase, business talk will stay constant and the parent’s ratio or ‘parenting style’ will automatically improve. Focusing on parenting style misdirects our efforts. We don’t have to (try to) get parents to learn how to talk differently to their children. We just have to help them practice talking more. They all know how: even the most taciturn mothers in our study all had moments of ‘ebullience’ when they were sociable with their children – and at those moments their talk to their babies was the complex and positive ‘good stuff’.

4. Toddlers’ talkativeness stops growing when it matches the level of their parents’ talkativeness.

We found that parents talk to their infants and toddlers at the frequency per hour that is typical between all members of their family: amount of talking is a characteristic of the ‘microculture’ of a family. In a taciturn family, talk between everyone is mostly only to get something done, only about necessary business, while in a talkative family everyone has conversations and engages in commentary and ‘thinking aloud’ in addition to the necessary business talk. As toddlers began talking, their utterances containing recognisable words increase in frequency until their utterances match their parent’s frequency of talking. At this point growth in talking levels off, and a toddler’s frequency of talking stabilizes at whatever level is typical within her or his family – because they are talking about the same kinds of things: business only, or business and commentary and conversation.

5. Expressive language practice is linked to receptive language experience.

We found that at three, children of average families express themselves in language about 400 times an hour, children of the most talkative families express themselves over 600 times an hour, while children of the most taciturn families express themselves less than 200 times an hour. We assume that children’s verbal fluency in using language is a function of amount of practice. If we extrapolate across the waking hours of toddlers’ lives, we estimate that by the time they are three years old, average American children will have accumulated about eight million words of expressive language practice, and children of the most talkative families will have accumulated over 12 million words, while children of the most taciturn families will have accumulated less than four million words – less than half the expressive language practice of the average children when they enter preschool.

6. The amount of family talk is a characteristic of low and high social class.

We found that welfare parents were taciturn. Working-class parents (with either ‘blue-collar’ or ‘white-collar’ occupations) varied greatly from the most talkative to the most taciturn. Parents with advanced, professional degrees were mostly talkative.

We were shocked by this discovery – and amused at our shock. We, like our friends and colleagues in our college environs, unconsciously assumed that almost everyone was more-or-less like us, except, of course, for those people who were in trouble. Virtually all the people we knew talked a lot to their children – and to everyone else. It was a shock to realise that we, and all our super-educated friends, were as deviant from average Americans in one direction, as welfare recipients were in the other. We now listen in our colleagues’ conversations for the casual assumption that most people think and act like we with graduate degrees do. We hear it often, and smile. Conversely, in our experience with taciturn families, we find that they are bemused by people who ‘talk all the time’ to babies, and often think it an odd, even silly, thing for adults to be doing. But more important was to
find such great diversity among American working-class families. Some working-poor families talked to their babies as much as professionals. But, some affluent business families talked as little as those on welfare. And their amount of talk – not their social class or income or race – predicted their children’s intellectual accomplishments.

7. Amount of family talk accounts for children’s vocabulary growth and related intellectual outcomes.

We found that the large differences in the amount of parent talk that infants and toddlers received, particularly the amount of non-business conversation and commentary, was powerfully related to large differences in the size of the toddlers’ vocabulary growth and to standardised test measures of their intellectual achievement at age three \((r = .78)\) and later at age nine \((r = .77)\). Parent talkativeness to babies accounted for all the correlation that existed between socio-economic status (SES) – and/or race – and the verbal intellectual accomplishments of these American children.

Socio-economic status and race are moderately correlated with measures of intellectual achievement. Most scholars assume that SES and race are only ‘marker variables’ and that the ‘real’ things contributing to intellectual achievement are simply associated with SES or race. From our findings, parent talkativeness or, more broadly, parent ‘sociableness’ with their babies seems to be the major ‘real’ variable since it accounted for all the variance (other than measurement error) in those children’s intellectual achievements.

Most scholars also assume that both experience and biology are always involved in human behaviour, and that both culture and genetic makeup interact and contribute to children becoming similar to their parents. Parents may be taciturn or talkative due to both their biological temperament and their own childhood experiences. Of course they pass along their biological temperament to their children through their genes. But, it is through their family micro-culture that they pass on to their children – while their children are still babies – the habits of talking a lot or a little, of what things to talk about, and of talking for pleasure or only for business. And, it is through this family experience that parents pass along their family culture to the next generation: a culture of family life full of words and social dance – or empty.

There are massive differences between American children in their vocabulary growth and subsequent intellectual achievement. We have known this since we began the ‘War on Poverty’ initiative in 1965. This is why hundreds of preschool intervention programs were created at that time. But, since Betty’s and my longitudinal research measured vocabulary growth more thoroughly and carefully than ever before, these differences were seen directly, with little obscuring measurement error, very early in children’s lives. That there are equally massive differences in the amount of language experience accumulated by American babies we did not know, but discovered through this longitudinal research. Babies’ receptive and expressive language experience was measured so thoroughly and carefully that differences could be seen clearly with low measurement error. This thorough and careful measurement of both language outcomes and language experience permitted the surprising discovery that the large differences in the amount of language experience that had accumulated before the children were three years old accounted for most of the equally large differences in vocabulary growth and verbal intellectual outcomes by age three – and many years later. By age three, some children were so hopelessly behind in total language experience and resultant total vocabulary size that no later preschool or school intervention could catch them up.

Many parents are raised in a family culture of sociableness. They pass on to their babies the culture of sociableness (and conversation) itself, a pattern that is repeated for generations to come. These are advantaged families and advantaged children. But in many of the family subcultures of poverty, the hours of babies’ lives are mostly empty of adult-provided structure and symbolic accompaniment and interaction is only when necessary. To change these family subcultures we must focus on teaching parents, and potential parents, how to fill up all the awake time of babies with activities and conversation so that they are accumulating as much coherent and symbolic experience and social dance practice as their advantaged American age-mates – hour after hour, day after day, month after month from the very beginning.

References

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Small bangs for big bucks: The long-term efficacy of Reading Recovery

Kevin Wheldall

‘Best Evidence in Brief’ is a fortnightly email newsletter “brought to you by the Johns Hopkins School of Education’s Center for Research and Reform in Education and the University of York’s Institute for Effective Education”, both led by Bob Slavin. In the latest issue (January 30, 2013 http://tinyurl.com/a9bn66a), there is an interesting item entitled ‘Lasting effects from Reading Recovery’ citing a recent report (dated December, 2012) by Jane Hurry from the Institute of Education, University of London (the British home of Reading Recovery). Hurry’s report is entitled ‘The impact of Reading Recovery five years after intervention’ (http://tinyurl.com/avhubv9).

This is how ‘Best Evidence in Brief’ reports the study (with a link to the report):

“A recent report for the Every Child a Reader Trust looks at the impact of Reading Recovery five years after intervention. The program is known to have impressive effects in the short term, but less is known about its long-term effectiveness. This study suggests that the substantial gains which result from receiving Reading Recovery in Year 1 (the UK equivalent of Kindergarten) continue to the end of primary school.

“At the end of Year 6 (the UK equivalent of 5th grade), the study followed up 77 children who had received Reading Recovery five years earlier, 127 comparison children, and 50 children in Reading Recovery schools who had not received Reading Recovery. Findings showed that children who had received Reading Recovery made significantly greater progress in English than the comparison children by the end of Year 6. The 50 comparison children in the Reading Recovery schools were also significantly out-performing the comparison group in non-Reading Recovery schools on the reading test. It would be reasonable to conclude from this summary (published by two research centres apparently devoted to championing evidence-based practice) that Reading Recovery had already been shown, unequivocally, to be effective in the short term and that now there was convincing evidence for its efficacy in the longer term too, at the end of Year 6, in fact.

Many reading scientists are less convinced of the efficacy of Reading Recovery in the short term; see, for example, Reynolds and Wheldall, 2007: http://tinyurl.com/bggyl46. But let us concentrate, for the present purposes, on the reporting of longer term effects as reported by Hurry and summarised by Best Evidence in Brief. This is how Hurry, herself, summarises her findings in her report:

“Reading Recovery is part of the Every Child a Reader strategy to enable children to make a good start in reading. Reading Recovery is well known to have impressive effects in the shorter term but less is known about its long term effectiveness. The present study followed up at the end of Year 6: 127 comparison children, 77 children who had received Reading Recovery five years earlier and 50 children in Reading Recovery schools who had not receive Reading Recovery. The children who had received Reading Recovery had made significantly greater progress in English than the comparison children by the end of Year 6, achieving on average 55% of Year 6 results are reported by the author (Hurry) as follows:

Continued next page >
p<.036, effect size (Cohen's d) = .31). However, they were not significantly better than the comparison children from the Reading Recovery schools on any of the measures (reading, writing or maths). Indeed the comparison children from Reading Recovery schools, i.e. those that were poor readers at six but did not receive the programme, were also doing significantly better in reading than the comparison children from non RR schools (ß=.222, p<.002, effect size (Cohen's d) = .24)." (p. 12) (present author's emphasis)

So, let's be clear about this. The children who received Reading Recovery did not perform significantly better than the comparison students from the same school who had not received Reading Recovery. (Note: no details of statistical significance testing or effect sizes are reported for these comparisons.)

But the conclusions section of the report states (and this is the only conclusion iterated):

“These findings indicate that effects of Reading Recovery are still apparent at the end of Year 6 and that even the children who attended Reading Recovery schools but were not offered the programme benefited somewhat from the ECaR programme.” (p. 22)

It is a source of some consternation to reflect on the fact that neither the report’s author (Hurry) nor the writers of ‘Best Evidence in Brief’ appear to have considered the (to me) obvious alternative conclusion: that there is no need to actually take part in Reading Recovery; merely attending a Reading Recovery school appears to be sufficient!

Another interpretation of these data is that they provide no evidence for the long-term efficacy of Reading Recovery because those children in the school who did receive Reading Recovery performed no better than those who did not. And both of these groups performed better than the comparison children in the non-Reading Recovery schools. In other words, there is no discernable effect for the program per se, only for differences between schools.

Moreover, even the significant differences between the two groups in the Reading Recovery Schools and the non-Reading Recovery school are accompanied by only small effect sizes, all of which are below Hattie’s hinge value of 0.4.

Considering the huge expense involved in one-to-one Reading Recovery tutoring, these are very small bangs for very big bucks.

Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall, AM is Chairman of MultiLit Pty Ltd and Director of the MultiLit Research Unit. You can follow him on Twitter (@KevinWheldall) where he comments on reading and education (and anything else that takes his fancy). He also has a blog, ‘Notes from Harefield: Reflections by Kevin Wheldall on reading, books, education, family, and life in general’: www.kevinwheldall.com. Email: kevin.wheldall@pecas.com.au.

A little light relief ...

My Favorite Joke About Asperger’s Syndrome: aka the Balloon Joke

A guy is flying in a hot air balloon, and he’s lost. He lowers himself over a field and calls to a guy:

“Can you tell me where I am and where I’m headed?”

“Sure. You’re at 41 degrees 2 minutes and 14 seconds North, 144 degrees 4 minutes and 19 seconds East; you’re at an altitude of 762 metres above sea level, and right now you’re hovering, but you were on a vector of 234 degrees at 12 metres per second.”

“Amazing! Thanks! By the way, do you have Asperger’s Syndrome?”

“I do! How did you know that?”

“Because everything you said is true, it’s much more detail than I need, and you told me in a way that’s no use to me at all.”

“Huh. Are you a clinical psychologist?”

“I am, but how the heck did you know that??????”

“You don’t know where you are. You don’t know where you’re going. You got where you are by blowing hot air. You put labels on people after asking a few questions, and you’re in exactly the same spot you were five minutes ago, but now, somehow, it’s my fault!”

Published by Peter Flom (http://voices.yahoo.com/my-favorite-joke-aspergers-syndrome-4066683.html?cat=69).
Professional Development

Upcoming LDA Professional Development Events

Creating a high performing school – the place of explicit instruction, an evidence-based approach to improving school outcomes

Sydney, Friday 30 August 2013
Presented by Dr Lorraine Hammond (Edith Cowan University), Greg Sullivan (Principal of Dianella Heights Primary School, WA) and Ray Boyd (Principal of West Beechboro Primary School, WA).
This practical one-day seminar is designed to equip principals, deputy principals, curriculum leaders and teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to introduce an explicit approach to instruction in order to raise student outcomes. The seminar will outline typical challenges for schools, how to design curriculum and set targets, the role of coaching and the importance of an ongoing program of professional learning.

To register, visit the LDA website www.ldaustralia.org.

Other Upcoming Professional Development Events

MultiLit Reading Assessment Professional Development Workshop

Friday, 18 October 2013 (Sydney)
Tuesday, 29 October 2013 (Perth)
Wednesday, 6 November 2013 (Melbourne)
Friday, 8 November 2013 (Sydney)
Monday, 25 November 2013 (Brisbane)
Tuesday, 3 December 2013 (Adelaide)
Monday, 9 December 2013 (Sydney)
Friday, 13 December 2013 (Canberra)
Cost: $450 pp (incl GST)

Assessing student progress is critical to ensure that no child in your school falls through the cracks. This Workshop will help you to get the most out of your reading assessments, demonstrating best practice in using assessment data to inform learning practices and meet the reporting requirements of government funded programs. The Workshop is designed for classroom and learning support teachers, school counsellors, principals and literacy coaches. The Workshop will cover different types of reading assessment, what to assess, what to look for in a good reading test and how to use reading tests effectively within the school context. Administration of the Wheldall Assessment of Reading Passages (WARP) will be covered in this Workshop.

For queries or to register, email multilit@multilit.com.

Recent LDA Professional Development Events

Standardised Testing – Use and Interpretation of Standardised Scores
Melbourne, Saturday 3 August 2013
Presented by Wally Howe, Educational Psychologist and Director Psychological Assessments Australia Pty Ltd (PAA).
This workshop covered the principles of standardised testing and the interpretation of standardised scores, and focused particularly on tests used for the assessment and monitoring of students with learning difficulties. The workshop was designed to provide a better understanding of the meaning and use of scores for all those who are required to make judgements on the basis of standardised scores.

Oral Language Foundations for Literacy: A Speech-Language Pathology Perspective on Reading Difficulties
Melbourne, Saturday 22 June 2013
Presented by Dr Roslyn Neilson.
This workshop examined oral language and its relationship to reading and reading difficulties. Dr Neilson, a speech pathologist in private practice, brought a wealth of knowledge and practical experience to this important area. Assessment tools to help practitioners make informed decisions and strategies to help students with language impairment and reading difficulties were discussed.

Essential Concepts for Assessing and Supporting Students with Learning Difficulties
Melbourne, Saturday 27 April 2013
Presented by Dr Craig Wright, Psychologist and Director of a multi-disciplinary clinic specialising in developmental disorders of childhood.
The main aim of the workshop was to provide attendees with an understanding of how to apply scientific methodology to their teaching/practice decisions. The workshop covered the use of epidemiology and genetic data to inform assessment and treatment decisions; the use of research on the cognitive basis of developmental and learning disorders to guide assessment tools and techniques; the evaluation of evidence relating to the treatment of learning and developmental problems, the evaluation of treatment outcomes; and how to conduct practice-based research.
A meeting of the Consultants Support Group was held on 2 July, followed by a meeting of the Network Leaders Group. Various issues were raised and discussed at these meetings, including the problems relating to the lack of suitable postgraduate training courses that provide an adequate coverage of the learning difficulties area, the need for more focussed PD requirements to ensure that Consultants are keeping up to date with theory and evidence-based practice relating to support for students with learning difficulties, and ways of maintaining communication between the various network groups. Consideration was also given to a discussion paper prepared by the Beaumaris Network Group, which raised a number of issues relating to Consultant membership and the Referral Service, as well as more general issues relating to the management and purposes of LDA. A meeting to discuss these issues further is being planned for 31 August, when our President, Lorraine Hammond, will be in Melbourne following the Sydney Seminar on explicit instruction on 30 August.

Two new members were welcomed to the Consultants Support Group; Trevor Smithson, leader of the Lilydale /Croydon Network Group, and Diane Barwood, a long-standing member and former President of LDA. The Consultants Support Group is chaired by Sue de Araugo, Convenor of the LDA Consultants Committee, and other members of the group are Jan Roberts, Lyn Franklin, Olivia Connelly, Joan Cooper, Anne Barton, Anne Pringle, Mary Delahunty and Molly de Lemos. The Network Leaders Group includes, in addition to Trevor Smithson, Joan Pilbeam (Canterbury Group), Gay Shelton (Heidelberg/Lower Templestowe Group), Pauline Wilson (Glen Waverley Group), Olivia Connelly (Pascoe Vale Group), Susan Spencer (Beaumaris Group), Rob Nicoll (Geeong Group) and Ann Ryan (Wangaratta Group).

Consultant News

Recent figures indicate a take-up rate of about 40 per cent of requests for referral received.

Referral Service
Consultants registered with the Referral Service will be aware that the proposal to introduce an annual fee for registration with the Victorian Referral Service has been put on hold pending further review of issues relating to the Referral Service, the costs of running the service, and the proposed move to an online service. In the meantime, the current service is continuing to operate efficiently under Ruth Jeffery as Acting Referral Officer, and recent figures indicate a take-up rate of about 40 per cent of requests for referral received.

Professional Development
Rhonda Farkota’s session on ‘Evidence-based Learning in the Classroom: Direct Instruction at Work’ on 23 March was well attended and we had excellent feedback from attendees. Craig Wright’s workshop on 27 April on ‘Evidence Based Practice’ was also well-attended, as was Roslyn Neilson’s workshop on ‘Oral Language Foundations for Literacy: A Speech-Language Pathology Perspective on Reading Difficulties’, which included information on her widely used phonological awareness test (SPAT-R), as well as a new lower level version of this test for children at school entry level. The workshop by Wally Howe on the principles of standardised testing and the interpretation of standardised scores, originally scheduled for May, was deferred to 3 August.

Consultants might also like to make a note of the biennial joint SPELD-QLD/LSTAQ/LDA Conference in Brisbane on 20–21 September. The theme of the conference is ‘Pedagogy in Practice’ and the keynote speakers will be LDA President, Lorraine Hammond and Professor Andrew Martin from Sydney University. Also presenting at this Conference will be Jan Roberts (on ‘Individual teaching of students with learning difficulties’), Mary Delahunty and Pat Minton (on ‘Developing Technology Links in Learning for Students with Literacy and Numeracy Difficulties’) and other well-known speakers such as Tom Nicholson (on Spelling) and Christine Killey (on Mathematics).

A reminder that comments and suggestions from our Consultant members, as well as contributions to the LDA Bulletin, are always welcome.

Sue de Araugo
Convenor, Consultants’ Committee
Email: jdea1952@dodo.com.au
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To book your advertisement, contact Kerrie McMahon on ldaquery@bigpond.net.au.

LDA Publications for sale

LDA has a number of publications available for sale, including:


Back issues of the LDA Bulletin and the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties, from 2005 onwards, are also available for purchase.

The Bulletin can be purchased singly or in the form of multiple copies for schools or teacher training institutions.

Copies of the Journal are $20 per copy.

For availability and costs, email Molly de Lemos at delemos@pacific.net.au, and to place an order, email ldaquery@bigpond.net.au.
Ad Hominem versus logical arguments: May the logical arguments win

Ms. McLachlain objects to my article on Arrowsmith (LDA Bulletin, Vol 45, No 1, April 2013) with a series of ad hominem arguments. She casts aspersions on me as a person rather than dealing with the logic of my arguments. Rather than attacking the logic, she offers personal attacks to support her position.

The basis of my article is that there is no scientific evidence to support any gains made by students in the Arrowsmith programme. “Siegel makes one legitimate point – that by now, there should have been an empirical study done to verify the benefits, if any, of the Arrowsmith Programme.” This is exactly my point; there is no evidence to support gains made by students in the Arrowsmith Programme. It has been around over 30 years. Surely, it should have been evaluated by this time.

Specifically, she writes of me that I am “not a neuroscientist or an expert in neuroplasticity or the other type of learning difficulties that Arrowsmith caters for”. It is not clear how she comes to that conclusion. I have published a number of papers in the field of reading, spelling, writing, and/or mathematical disabilities and neuroscience, including some analysing the basic cognitive processes involved in brain functioning and also studies of magnetic resonance imaging of the brain. It would be interesting to see her definition of a neuroscientist. Does she mean someone who supports the Arrowsmith Programme?

She reveres Norman Doidge (this is the correct spelling, not the one that she used) as a great expert in this field and yet I can find no publications on neuroscience in refereed journals written by Doidge. He did write a book but books are not peer reviewed and have not been judged by scientists.

As for the evidence for Arrowsmith’s “success”, she notes specifically, that there are testimonials. These are not scientifically valid. Psychologists in Toronto and Vancouver have told me that they see many former students who did not benefit from the Arrowsmith programme and are angry, often depressed, and not achieving in elementary, secondary and post-secondary school. This “scientific” evidence is similar to testimonials; it has no validity.

Ms Lachlain claims that I did not cite Alferink & Farmer-Dougan (2010). This is puzzling as I certainly did cite it. Alferink & Farmer-Dougan make a number of important points, including the idea that so called “brain based evidence” of learning should be interpreted with caution. They write that: “The problem, then, is not with the neuroscience data themselves, but how authors of these purported brain-based approaches appear to have erroneously filled in the missing research gaps.”

Has ACER jumped the shark?

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is the premier educational research body in Australia, and among its aims is to “assist educational decision makers at all levels in their identification and implementation of evidence-based policies and practices”. This is a vital objective as educational policy in Australia has long ignored the results of educational research to its detriment – a problem pointed out by the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in 2005, and in various more recent reports from the Victorian Auditor-General and the Productivity Commission.

The ACER Institute has organised a conference for later this year: ‘How the Brain Learns’. It aims to inform educators and the wider community of the findings from neuroscience that might reduce learning difficulties. One would assume that presenters at the conference would have been selected on the basis of their capacity to present useful evidence-based research findings. This means that proposals for instruction should have strong empirical support provided by numerous, well-designed, independent studies. This would preclude both shonky commercial products and well-intentioned, but evidence-light, approaches from its ranks.

Among the presenters is Barbara Arrowsmith, the developer of a “brain-based” program that purports to repair the cognitive functions underlying learning problems. It is a program that has had much uncritical media coverage already in Australia, despite the absence of serious research support. In the studies described on the Arrowsmith website, none reported employing a control group. This would rule out publication in any peer-reviewed educational journal, and preclude any findings from being considered evidence-based. Further, it is a hugely expensive program that would cost around $100,000 for the full four school-year package.

At a time when education is being intensely scrutinised, it ill behoves the premier Australian research body to make such an egregious error. ACER, what were you thinking?

Dr Kerry Hempenstall, RMIT