

# Submission to Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group

## From Learning Difficulties Australia

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Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA) is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching based on scientific research. Its aim is to promote understanding of learning difficulties and to support the work of teachers and other professionals who teach students with learning difficulties. It includes Classroom Teachers, Special Education Teachers, Educational Psychologists and Speech-Language Pathologists who deal with children who demonstrate learning difficulties – that is, children who, for a range of reasons, do not thrive in mainstream classrooms, and who are referred for specialist help. LDA is grateful to have the chance to contribute to a discussion on teacher education in Australia, as we feel that many of the problems that our members encounter could be ameliorated with changes to teacher education programs.

It hardly needs to be argued that basic literacy is a prerequisite for any academic progress, and is also an essential part of successful participation in occupational and social activities.

Professionals within the LDA network most frequently encounter children who are experiencing difficulty with acquiring basic literacy – that is, difficulty with learning how to identify printed words efficiently, to comprehend what they are reading (if they can decode the words), and to express their ideas in written form. This present submission relates to the first of these three concerns – the skill of learning to decode words efficiently and recognise them accurately and fluently. It is felt by LDA that this is an area in which government changes and initiatives have the potential to make relatively simple and cost-effective changes that could have very far-reaching effects.

This submission therefore addresses the question raised in the Issues Paper concerning the identification of the teaching practices that produce the best student outcomes, with a specific focus on the earliest stages of learning to read. Three specific questions raised by the Ministerial Advisory Group's paper will be addressed: the issues of how to identify the most efficient way of teaching, how to reflect on evidence, and the way in which content knowledge interacts with teaching practices in the area of teaching early reading.

LDA would like to argue that:

1. We have serious concerns concerning a common approach to supporting early literacy development – an approach that is evident in the Australian Curriculum, espoused by the Reading Recovery philosophy, and used in many teaching institutions. This approach, which involves teaching phonics only within a 'balanced' approach to reading - is influenced by a theory of early reading development that is out of date and unsupported by empirical evidence. There is substantial evidence that the incidence of basic literacy problems would be reduced if school curricula routinely ensured that teachers were using more efficient ways of teaching reading in primary school – that is, teaching phonics in its own right, in a systematic and 'synthetic' way. This 'synthetic phonics' approach separates the (equally important) issue of supporting language and reading comprehension from the process of teaching phonics.
2. Principals, Teachers and Special Education teachers would be better prepared to choose efficient literacy programs, and to adapt literacy teaching programs for children with extra or different learning needs, if teaching institutions provided education both on the nature of early reading development and also on the language knowledge that underlies phonics programs.

## **Issue: Identifying the most efficient way of teaching children to read**

The 'Reading Wars' have already been addressed in three government enquiries in English-speaking countries – the Australian Government Enquiry into the Teaching of Literacy initiated by Dr Brendan Nelson (Rowe, 2005), the USA National Reading Panel Enquiry (NICCHD, 2000) and the UK Rose Report (Rose, 2006). Each of these enquiries summarised the research literature that supports very clearly the efficacy of teaching children phonics, as opposed to the avoidance of phonics that was advocated in early Whole Language Philosophy of the 1970s. At least in the USA and Australian reports, however, a so-called 'balanced' approach was adopted as the final recommendation – phonics should be taught within a balanced approach to reading that also valued reading comprehension. With this 'balanced' approach it seemed, at first glance, that the 'Reading Wars' could at that stage be left behind. This is not, however, the case, and there remain serious theoretical and empirical concerns about a 'balanced' approach to reading instruction (see, for example, Moats, 2000a).

The 'balanced' approach to literacy instruction begins with the assumption that reading is quintessentially about getting meaning from print. It is argued that it follows that reading activities should always be embedded in the process of making meaning. In this line of reasoning, phonics issues are related to the structure of the written code rather than to the meaning of texts, and phonics patterns therefore should be addressed incidentally, as the patterns crop up within meaningful texts, rather than out of the context of meaning texts. In addition, this 'balanced' approach assumes that when it comes to identifying and discussing patterns related to the written code, text meaning is always paramount, so that when a child is trying to identify an unknown word, the first clue to the identification of a word must be its possible meaning within the text, rather than the letters with which it is spelled. Children are encouraged not to sound words out, but rather to think about words they might mean in context and guess their identify on that basis.

An alternative approach to literacy instruction emerges from the 'Simple View' of reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986), which has gathered a good deal of empirical support over the past three decades (Adams, 1990; Buckingham et al, 2013). The 'Simple' view proposes that reading is indeed about getting meaning from print, but there are two distinct strands of variables that enter into the process: code-related factors and meaning-related factors. If either strand is weak, the reading process is inefficient. The factors are almost indistinguishable when one observes fluent, mature reading, but it is important to be able to separate them out when one is teaching beginning readers. Meaning-related learning starts with early oral language development and continues to be relevant throughout the lifetime of any reader. Code-related learning, however, is more limited: it has roots in children's early phonological awareness and concepts of print, but it is ideally established and fully consolidated in early primary school. Once code-related skills are established and automatic, this allows the individual who has 'learned to read', to 'read to learn' for the rest of his or her life.

The research evidence is quite clear: although some individuals do manage to consolidate a grasp of code-related skills without explicit teaching, these are only the individuals who as children brought other strengths to the reading-learning process. Where there is any disadvantage brought to the process of learning to read – and there are of course many sources of disadvantage – children make much better process if phonics patterns are taught to them systematically. Teaching should be sequenced, cumulative, and should allow for sufficient practice to allow the skills to become accurate and automatic. Children should be taught to synthesise words from component letter-sound knowledge, and to segment words to identify their phonemes and choose appropriate letter patterns.

LDA would like to argue that individual words' sound and letter patterns can and should be studied in an orderly, systematic and complete way in early years classrooms, allowing all children, including children with learning challenges, to focus clearly on these patterns and learn them efficiently and thoroughly. Individual words convey meaning in their own right, and these meanings should be

discussed as part of a phonics lesson. As children are able to read and spell more words they start to access and create meaning in sentences, paragraphs and longer texts, and these become the major focus. However, in the first instance, the critical skills of early phonics should be taught in their own right in activities which focus on individual words/word study. Once the basic spelling code has been mastered, regular word-level work allows learners to systematically work through the English Language's more complex spelling patterns, and as these are mastered, incorporate them successfully into longer text".

### **Issue: Reflecting on evidence to support the choice of teaching practice**

There are several commercial phonics programs available to school Principals as options into which they can devote school resources, and many of the available programs have been implemented in schools around Australia. Although the programs vary in cost and in user-friendliness, there is a consensus that any phonics program, if implemented carefully, will improve the code-related skills of early primary school children (NICH2000; NELP 2008). Note that the purchase and use of systematic phonics programs has, to our knowledge, only been actively discouraged by one Australian State, with the introduction of the NSW L3 Program for the early literacy curriculum. The current New Australian National Curriculum does not discourage phonics, but it uses only terminology relating to 'balance', and makes no mention at all of the importance or usefulness of teaching phonics systematically. Some, but not all, teacher education programs do introduce at least a few lectures on phonics and phonemic awareness – what it is, and how it might be taught (e.g. Tetley & Jones, 2014); this does not seem to be a current feature of university program accreditation. Even when teachers have received pre-service or in-service training in helping children with literacy challenges, their confidence remains very low indeed when it comes to implementing phonics programs or helping children with additional challenges (Tetley & Jones, 2014; Serry, Rose & Liamputtong, 2014). Decisions about whether or not to adopt a given systematic phonics program are left to Learning Support Teams around the country, with no support from teaching institutions in the individual schools' task of reviewing the theory and research behind the program. It is clear that there is a huge need for guidance and clear direction from a process like the current Teacher Education Review.

### **Issue: The interaction between content knowledge and teaching practice for developing teachers**

There is one very important current challenge for all teacher education institutions that might choose to provide specific courses on teaching phonics within the early reading curriculum. This challenge relates to the historical fact that almost all current pre-service teachers are themselves products of the Whole Language movement in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and this means that they themselves have very low levels of explicit knowledge about the alphabetic code. It would, however, require only a modest investment in time and expertise to remedy this situation, with the introduction of a course in every teaching institution that introduced very basic phonetics so that teachers can analyse the speech stream accurately, and very basic phonics so that teachers can understand the orthographic and morphemic patterns of English spelling (Moats, 1999; Moats 2000). It is felt that background expertise such as this would be invaluable for regular classroom teachers, and of course also for teachers who work with more challenged children - children for whom programs need to be presented sensitively and flexibly.

### **Conclusion**

If children achieved the beginning stages of learning to read quickly and with confidence, the stage is set for them to become lifelong learners with a positive attitude to literacy. The effects of failure, on the other hand, are devastating and costly, both for individuals and for the society in which they grow up. It is vital for the Ministerial Advisory Panel to take into consideration the arguments presented here about how teachers might be helped to teach early reading more efficiently and effectively within our Australian schools.

Thank you for considering these suggestions in the Ministerial Review.

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