Talking about reading has become a bit passé and unfashionable in education circles, but reading is high-stakes for the young people who are the focus of my research – those who have exited education early and empty-handed when it comes to reading skills. No form of literacy, whether traditional or postmodern, is possible unless children achieve the ability to read. Children do not sit down and literate a book, a newspaper article, an online blog, or the instructions for a new game. They read them. If they are lucky, that is.

Recently, Robyn Ewing, Professor of Teacher Education and the Arts at the University of Sydney, wrote a blogpost (Ewing, 2016) critical of the Centre for Independent Studies’ Five from Five Initiative. Five from Five focuses on the key skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Professor Ewing asserts that literacy consists of more than “simple reading skills”, and that it can’t be done in “five easy steps”. I wish to respond to some of Professor Ewing assertions.

The fact that the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has a particular definition of literacy is all well and good, but that does not necessarily translate into useful classroom practices that in turn translate into useful skills for children. The catch-cry “it’s already in the curriculum” is a hollow defence against the evidence that indicates that too many Australian children exit primary school with under-done reading (and writing) skills. There, I used that word again. Reading.

Where is the evidence that Five from Five is touted as “all-encompassing”? It is ironic (and logically inconsistent) that Professor Ewing describes this approach as “simplistic” when there is abundant evidence to indicate that primary teachers in Australia and overseas lack basic explicit knowledge of the complexity of how language works in order to teach reading*. Dr Louisa Moats has stated through the title of one of her publications, that “Teaching Reading is Rocket Science”. However, too few teachers exit their pre-service education equipped with explicit language knowledge and an understanding of the science of reading instruction. Instead, they are fed a steady diet of Whole-Language based approaches such as the Three Cueing system referred to in Prof. Ewing’s blogpost. This approach is used widely throughout Australian schools, yet was not featured in any of the 20 recommendations of the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy.

Similarly, when education academics go to hospital with a suspected heart attack, do they expect that an evidence-based protocol will be followed, or that the doctors in the emergency department are free to interpret the evidence as they wish? In these examples, of course, there is a clear link between practitioner actions and outcomes, but when teachers fail to apply evidence in early years classrooms (because they were not equipped with it in the first place), there is a creeping, insidious poisoning of a child’s potential, that decades later is either explained away as a function of the child’s background, or of the child being “unteachable” for some intrinsic reason.

Unlike pilots and doctors, teachers do not receive confronting and immediate feedback about erroneous practices. This seems to perpetuate a flat-earth belief-system that is impenetrable by those on the outside begging to be heard.

I am part of an Australian Research Council Linkage Project research team which reported last year, consistent with a number of earlier Australian and international studies, that primary teachers’ explicit and implicit knowledge of basic linguistic constructs was limited and highly variable (see Stark, Snow, Eadie &Goldfeld, 2015).

The 78 teachers who participated had a wide range of experience, and were most likely to rate their ability to teach skills including spelling, phonics, comprehension and vocabulary as either “moderate” or “very good”. However most of them demonstrated limited knowledge and stated that they did not feel confident answering questions about their knowledge in these areas.

Expressed in difficult to understand language, an academic study is not a road map to educational success. Where are the words that are needed by teachers who are teaching literacy? The Australian Council for Educational Research recently reported that a high percentage of educators “don’t deny the importance of phonics and phonemic awareness”. Literacy educators need more than a lack of denial in order for their students to succeed. They need knowledge and skills that give them access to decades of cognitive science research on how reading is acquired. How on earth can teachers be expected to enhance phonemic awareness skills when they don’t reliably know what a phoneme is, or how to count them in simple words?

Education is remarkable in two respects: for its capacity to turn its back on evidence in favour of ideology, and for its wasteful approach to the evidence already sitting at its feet and being ignored. Both of these ingrained and indoctrinated responses occur at the expense of the educational livelihoods of children – most notably those who are starting from behind. When education academics get on an aeroplane, do they expect the pilot to say “Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen; there’s probably a particular way that I’m meant to get this Airbus A380 off the ground, but I’d like to try out a few ideas of my own on you today. After all, I’m the pilot, and you’re my passengers”.

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Bear in mind that these teachers worked in disadvantaged schools where staff were sufficiently interested and motivated to respond to a call for Expressions of Interest to take part in
a research study on literacy teaching. A random sample may have produced even more concerning results. It must be stressed, however, that these findings should not invite criticism of teachers themselves. They are doing the best they can with their available knowledge and skill toolkits. We can only imagine the greater reach of their efforts, however, if they were properly equipped with systematic skills regarding the phonics and phonemic awareness aspects of the “Big Five”.

How can a child who receives solid, teacher-guided instruction ranging across phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency be “short-changed”? Seriously? Many children can but dream of having these basics in place in their classroom. Having them in evidence is one thing. Having them based on robust evidence, is another thing altogether. And where is the evidence that children exposed to phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency “disengage from the learning process”? What about the possibility that systematic attention to these features might have the very opposite effect for many at-risk learners?


I do agree with Prof. Ewing that “ongoing teacher professional learning” is needed in this space, because there is an enormous short-fall to be made up.

Instead of parking ambulances at the bottom of the cliff, however, let’s start building fences at the top, in the form of more rigorous teacher pre-service education. One day, a university somewhere will break ranks with the zeitgeist and the wheels of change will start to turn.

Just imagine.

*See for example: