May was a busy time in Australian schools with Grades 3, 5, 7 and 9 involved in the national literacy and numeracy tests (NAPLAN). The stress I see in parents and learning support colleagues during NAPLAN time often causes me to reflect on the purpose of the test(s) and how useful they are for students who have learning difficulties.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) claims that the purpose of NAPLAN is to measure the literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge that provide the critical foundation for other learning. They also claim that the introduction of NAPLAN has led to consistency, comparability and transferability of information on students' literacy and numeracy skills. (Don Watson would have had a field day with these weasel words.)

NAPLAN is useful because it identifies students who are struggling with the broad academic skills. Having an objective measurement is important because research has shown that teachers are not particularly accurate in identifying struggling students. For example, Madelaine and Wheldall (2007) randomly selected 12 students from 33 classes and asked their teachers to rank the students based on perceptions of reading performance. They also assessed the students on a passage reading test. Only 50% of teachers identified the same poorest reader as the objective test and only 15% of teachers identified the same three lowest performing readers as the test. We can certainly argue about whether NAPLAN in its current form is the most effective and/or cost-effective method of gathering data on student achievement, but it seems that we cannot rely on teacher judgment alone.

On the downside, NAPLAN represents a test, not an assessment. As all good clinicians and educators know, there is a difference, or should be, between testing and assessment. Assessment is a process that starts with the history and clearly defines the presenting problem or set of problems. The clinician develops a hypothesis or set of hypotheses on the basis of the history. They then gather data (e.g. observations, interviews, tests, and base rates) that are designed to shed light on the hypotheses. It is worth noting that a good clinician looks equally for data that confirm and that disconfirm the initial hypotheses. Good assessment should lead directly to treatment/appropriate teaching for the presenting problem(s) and provide pre-treatment data that allow monitoring of progress. Testing, on the other hand, simply tells us how well or how badly a student performs on a particular test. For example, a student with a low score on a reading comprehension test can be said to have poor reading comprehension. The problem with...
tests is they don’t tell us why a student performed poorly and, if they measure a complex process like reading comprehension, writing, or mathematical reasoning, they don’t tell what component of that complex process is weak.

That is precisely the problem with NAPLAN. The NAPLAN tasks are complex and provide little information that is useful for designing interventions for students with learning difficulties and for monitoring their response to intervention. An example from NAPLAN illustrates this point.

A maths question asked: $4 is shared equally among five girls. How much does each girl get? An incorrect response tells us that the student can’t do the task. So what? The class teacher probably knew that already. What would be useful would be to know if the student failed the item because: (1) they couldn’t read the question; (2) they didn’t know what ‘shared’ or ‘equally’ meant; (3) they didn’t recognise that the item required a division operation; (4) they didn’t know that they could convert $4 to 400c to make the division easier; (5) they didn’t know the fact 40 ÷ 5; or (6) they knew all of the above but have attention problems and got ‘lost’ during the multi-step division process.

Unfortunately, NAPLAN provides none of this specific data. It simply tells us how the child performs relative to some arbitrary benchmark. So where does this leave us? Or more to the point, where does it leave students who have learning difficulties? Both of which lead me to think that NAPLAN is probably not all that useful for students who have learning difficulties or for the parents, clinicians and teachers who work with them. It also leads me to yearn even more for a Response-to-Intervention approach in which schools recognise learning problems early in the child’s school career, assess to define the problem(s), and provide evidence-based interventions that target the problem(s).

Dr Craig Wright
President 2011-2012, Immediate Past-President 2012-2013


From the new Editors

Following Molly de Lemos’s election to the position of President-Elect of LDA at the AGM, the task of editing the Bulletin has now fallen to us.

We would like to take this opportunity of thanking Molly for all of her hard work in editing the Bulletin over the last few years.

This special, double edition combines both issues for 2012. For 2013, we hope to have a fresh, new look and a full colour version of the Bulletin.

In this issue, Immediate Past President, Craig Wright, devotes his column to a consideration of the validity and utility of NAPLAN. In subsequent articles, Anne Castles and Kevin Wheldall also share their reflections on NAPLAN.

In a major feature article, our Inaugural Eminent Researcher Award winner, Linda Siegel, casts a critical eye over the Arrowsmith Program, which has enjoyed considerable publicity in Australia of late.

As you will see, we also feature a number of articles on the theme of teaching synthetic phonics, including a contribution from leading UK reading...
Meet your LDA Council for 2012-2013

Office Bearers

President
Dr Lorraine Hammond
BEd (ECU), PGDip SpLD (RSA London), MSpLD (Middlesex), PhD (ECU)
l.hammond@ecu.edu.au

Dr Lorraine Hammond is a Senior Lecturer at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. She coordinates graduate programs in teaching as well as postgraduate courses, specialising in strategies to teach students with learning difficulties and education support needs. Lorraine has published in the areas of effective interventions to prevent early literacy difficulties and is currently working with a range of schools on implementing an explicit approach to teaching literacy.

President-Elect and Convenor of the Administration Committee
Dr Molly de Lemos
BSc (Hons), MSc (Natal), PhD (ANU), MAPsS
delemos@pacific.net.au

Molly de Lemos was a Senior Research Fellow at ACER prior to her retirement in 2001. Her initial training is in psychology, but since joining ACER in 1967 has worked on a number of projects relating to assessment of educational achievement, with a focus on children from different language and cultural backgrounds and the early years of schooling. She has also worked on projects relating to educational provisions for students with disabilities and the educational needs of children in care. She has had an ongoing interest in issues relating to pre-school education, early intervention, and the assessment and identification of children with learning difficulties, and has also worked in the area of psychological assessment, including the adaptation and norming of measures of intelligence, aptitudes and adaptive behaviour. Her publications include the 1994 report *Schooling for Students with Disabilities*, and the 2002 ACER review paper *Closing the Gap between Research and Practice: Foundations for the Acquisition of Literacy*. She has served on a number of committees and advisory groups relating to assessment and early childhood education, and is currently a member of the Developmental Disorders of Language and Literacy Network Group.

Immediate Past-President and Convenor of the Professional Development Committee
Dr Craig Wright
BPsych (Hons), PhD
craig@understandingminds.com.au

Dr Craig Wright is a psychologist and Clinic Director at Understanding Minds, a clinic that specialises in developmental and learning disorders. He is an Adjunct Research Fellow in the Behavioural Basis of Health Research Group at Griffith University. He is currently involved in research on reading interventions for struggling readers. He is the author of the reading intervention program *Understanding Words*.

Treasurer
Dr Pye Twaddell
BA (Brown – education and American Civilization), MA (Uni of New Hampshire – reading and counselling), PhD (Uni of Sydney – education)
thelearn@bigpond.net.au

Before immigrating to Australia in 1980, Pye taught in the American Title 1 Program for 10 years assessing school entry function and reading achievement, programming and individualising K-8 instruction, and writing yearly grant submissions. Her American teaching certifications are Reading Supervisor and Teacher of Perceptually Handicapped and Early Childhood. Her NSW certifications are Teacher Infants, Primary Special Education and Support Teacher Learning Difficulties and Reading. Pye has taught at, and assisted with, research projects for The Autistic Association NSW and supervised students at the Children’s Centre University of Sydney. She has also worked in schools on the identification of, and intervention for, children with learning difficulties. For over 25 years, Pye has worked in the LD sector primarily in the areas of advocacy, disseminating information (written articles, presentations at conferences and workshops), and writing Federal and State grant submissions and responses to inquiries. She has worked with The Learning Difficulties Coalition NSW, SPELD NSW, and AUSPELD – including running a national speaking tour – and has represented these organisations at the NSW Department of Education (DET). Her PhD research included a three-year longitudinal validation of The Kindergarten Screening Instrument, with combined samples totalling 776 children screened early in the year and 833 children screened late in the year from 15 city, suburban or rural NSW schools (with a full scale Alpha reliability coefficient of .91).

Secretary
Alison McMurtrie
BPrim Ed, PGDip SpLD, MSpecEd
alisonmcmurtrie@gmail.com

Alison McMurtrie is currently working for MultiLit as part of the training and product development teams. She has a wealth of teaching and training experience in the area of literacy in South Africa, the UK and...
now Australia. After obtaining her teaching degree from the University of Cape Town, she studied for a postgraduate diploma in Specific Learning Difficulties at Kingston University and Dyslexia Action, London, UK (formerly Dyslexia Institute). She has just completed her Masters Degree in Special Education at Macquarie University where she was awarded the Vice-Chancellor's Commendation for Academic Excellence. During her career she has worked in a variety of settings, including the not-for-profit sector in London where she was involved in the setting up of dedicated literacy units in inner-city schools.

Margaret Cameron has been a Lecturer at Tabor Adelaide since 2003, focusing on various literacy-based subjects, teaching students with diverse abilities, and student academic support. She completed a Master of Education degree from the University of South Australia in 2008. She has taught in Queensland and South Australia, mostly in specialist roles, as a Literacy Coordinator, teaching and supporting students with hearing impairments and learning difficulties, and general Primary teaching. She has been a SPELD-SA tutor, and has been a Council member of Learning Difficulties Australia since 2008, contributing occasional reviews to the Bulletin and working on the Website Committee.

Council Member
Professor Anne Castles
BSc (ANU), PhD (Macquarie)
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Professor Anne Castles is Research Professor of Psychology and Head of the Department of Cognitive Science at Macquarie University. She completed her PhD on varieties of developmental dyslexia at Macquarie University in 1993 and was a teaching and research academic in the Psychology Department at the University of Melbourne from 1994-2006. She has a strong research interest in variability within the reading-impaired population, and in the causes of different types of dyslexia, including genetic, perceptual and language factors. She is also interested in the process of normal reading development and, in particular, the mechanism by which whole-word recognition skills are acquired by children learning to read. She is an Associate Editor of the Journal of Research in Reading and serves on the Editorial Boards of Scientific Studies of Reading and the European Journal of Cognitive Psychology. She is also committed to translating her research into good educational and clinical practice, and has recently developed the Macquarie Online Test Interface (MOTIf; www.motif.org.au) to provide teachers and clinicians with access to theoretically-based online tests of reading and spelling.

Council Member and Convenor of the Consultants Committee
Sue de Araugo
DipTeaching (Toorak TC), GradDip Teaching (IT) (Deakin), M Ed (Special Education) (Melb)
jdea1952@dodo.com.au

Sue de Araugo has been a consultant member of LDA since 1998 and became a member of the Consultant Policy Committee in 2011. She qualified as a teacher in 1972, and completed an MEd in Special Education at Melbourne University in 1996. She has taught for many years in both country and metropolitan schools. After teaching at the early Primary level at Canterbury Primary School, Sue moved into Reading Recovery and Special Education. She is also a qualified MultiLit tutor. Sue took on the role of Convenor of the Consultants Committee in the 2011/2012 Council.

Council Member
Mary Delahunty
TPTC, BEd, MEd, CertificateEd planning for Special Needs (Monash)
mdelahuntymy@hotmail.com

Mary Delahunty has worked in the field of learning difficulties/disabilities for many years as a Special Education Teacher and as a Student Services Officer in Schools. She began her working life as a classroom teacher before moving to specialist areas in the 1990s. She is a member of the Student Services Southern Network team, and has spent the past 10 years as a professional volunteer at SPELD Victoria, serving as a Board member and Chairperson of the Professional Development Committee for most of that time, and also as a serving member of the Professional Computer and Technology Team. She has presented at many conferences, particularly in the area of technology for students with learning difficulties, and has pioneered the use of voice recognition reading technology as part of the Soliloquy Reading Assistant program developed under the guidance of Marilyn Jager Adams. She has consistently pursued the use of multisensory pathways for children who are failing in the mainstream classroom.

Council Member
Dr Ruth Fielding-Barnsley
Teach BEd (SpecEd), PhD (UNE)
Ruth.Barnsley@utas.edu.au

Dr Ruth Fielding-Barnsley has had an interest in learning difficulties since embarking on an ARC-funded research project into the acquisition of reading with Professor Brian Byrne at the University of New England in 1985. During the following years Ruth gained her Bachelor of Education in Special Education, and in 1998, was awarded her PhD for a thesis entitled A model of...
Dr Alison Madelaine is a Lecturer in Special Education at Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) in Sydney. Alison teaches postgraduate units in effective literacy instruction and special education research methods. In 2003 she was awarded a PhD for her thesis entitled Curriculum-based measurement of reading and teacher judgment of reading performance. Alison’s current academic interests include literacy in general, reading fluency, book levelling, curriculum-based measurement of reading, effective reading instruction and preschool literacy. Several years ago, Alison participated in the Visiting International Faculty Program and taught disadvantaged students with learning disabilities in South Carolina, USA. She has also worked as a senior consultant to the MultiLit Cape York Project which involved increasing the literacy levels of indigenous students, and is a member of the MultiLit Research Unit.

Dr Nicole Ann Todd is currently the Special Education Program Coordinator at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). She is based at the Springfield Campus, Brisbane. Her varied career in teaching, consulting with teachers and as an academic across Australia and overseas, has been based on her passion for enhancing learning for students experiencing difficulties, particularly in the regular diverse classroom. Her research interests include the role of support teachers (working in the area of learning difficulties in literacy and numeracy), as well as the use of technology for differentiation in the classroom. In teacher education, Nicole is researching the enhancement of differentiation skills with pre-service teachers through the use of iPads at the tertiary level and integrated learning. She manages the popular Educational Engagement at Springfield program, which brings together members of the education community for free workshops, lectures and panel discussions on contemporary topics.

Jan Roberts is the Director of Learning Pathways. She is a specialist in primary and secondary students and adults with learning difficulties, teaching them how to improve their skills in literacy and maths. She has presented many seminars on applying current literacy research to the classroom and helped teachers plan whole-school literacy programs. Jan is the author of various resources, including Spelling Recovery (ACER Press and David Fulton, UK), as well as a research-based, structured spelling program for primary and secondary levels and books on inferential comprehension and text analysis. Jan also co-edited, with Dr Edward de Bono, The Six Thinking Hats Manual for Education. She convened the LDA Melbourne conference in 2000 and strongly supports continuing PD for classroom teachers and consultants.
Recipients of our LDA Awards for 2012 are Dr Molly de Lemos, for the Mona Tobias Award, Maureen Pollard, for the Bruce Wicking Award, and Jennifer Buckingham, for the Tertiary Student Award.

Mona Tobias Award 2012

The recipient of the LDA Mona Tobias Award for 2012 is Dr Molly de Lemos.

Molly de Lemos is a former Research Fellow with the Australian Council for Educational Research, and has been a member of LDA Council since August 2004, taking on the role of Secretary in 2005. Her research at ACER covered many areas relating to factors associated with educational achievement, including the effects of early education on later achievement, as well as the effects of language background and school factors such as classroom organisation on achievement. She also worked on the development and norming of various educational and psychological tests, and undertook a government funded study on educational provisions for students with disabilities. Her interest in the development of reading led to her final publication at ACER, her review of the research literature on the acquisition of literacy, Closing the gap between research and practice: Foundations for the acquisition of literacy, which focused on empirical studies that identified the processes underlying the acquisition of reading and the instructional strategies that are most effective in developing reading skills. She has been a passionate advocate for effective, evidence-based instruction for all students, and particularly for those with learning difficulties, regardless of apparent causation or ‘diagnosis’. Molly was the driving force behind the open letter to Dr Brendan Nelson, then Minister for Education, from the group of concerned reading scientists that led to the establishment of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL).

During her time on LDA Council, Molly has been active in organising conferences and seminars, editing the LDA Bulletin, and initiating a strong and continuing agenda of PD events for all members, expanding the program to involve teachers and others outside of the LDA core group of consultants, with the aim of reaching classroom teachers and making them aware of evidence-based best practice, thus leading them toward the implementation of more effective instruction in their classrooms.

Bruce Wicking Award 2012

The recipient of the LDA Bruce Wicking Award for 2012 is Maureen Pollard.

Maureen Pollard is a literacy consultant, teacher and writer. After her initial training as an Infant Teacher at Monash University in Frankston and broad experience in classroom teaching in Australia, UK, South Africa and Spain, she then lectured at Melbourne University in the Department of Language and Linguistics. In 1982, while teaching at Rossbourne School (a specialist school for students experiencing difficulties in the regular classroom), she obtained a Diploma of Learning Difficulties followed by a BEd in Learning Difficulties from Deakin University in Burwood. Maureen then established an innovative program at Tintern Girls Grammar School to support children with language and learning difficulties. The staff in this P–10 program included a psychologist, a speech pathologist, a special education teacher and an integration assistant, and this program became widely recognised as a model for the provision...
of specialist services to students with learning difficulties within a mainstream school. She also developed a literacy curriculum that was explicit and sequential, and which led to consistently high performance, with Tintern Girls Grammar now ranking as one of the top schools in the Year 3 Australian NAPLAN results for literacy. It was important that the teaching in the classroom be consistent with the specialist teaching in the support unit. During her period at Tintern, Maureen was granted leave to do further research overseas, at their expense, to continue her groundbreaking work in the development of effective teaching programs.

In 1995 Maureen set up her business, Learning Logic, and with enormous encouragement from her colleagues, she developed and published a number of programs and resources for teaching literacy, including SoundCheck (2000), a program focusing on sequencing sounds for spelling based on phonemic awareness and phonics, and SoundCheck 2 (2004), which extends spelling skills and knowledge. SoundCheck was created and trialled with the children at Tintern Girls Grammar. Little Learners Love Literacy (2011) is an early literacy program that teaches children to read, write and spell with confidence, using explicit teaching and sequential learning to achieve success. This program is based on the book Milo’s Birthday Surprise, together with the Teacher Resource book of lesson plans, which focuses on the important skills of phonemic awareness and phonics.

Maureen regularly presents workshops on literacy learning and teaching for teachers, speech pathologists, literacy coordinators, and parents in Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, and is a member of the Australian Council of Educational Research Institute which provides research-based professional learning relevant to educators. She also presents for SPELD, Independent Schools Victoria and LDA, and is a literacy consultant to a number of schools, training the teachers in understanding phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge as well as leading them in developing a literacy curriculum that is sequential and explicit.

Maureen has devoted a large part of her life to supporting students with learning difficulties, and she has done so with enormous enthusiasm. While working with teachers and students, no matter what the situation, Maureen has always found a creative way of imparting her knowledge that appeals to students. Her passion is to translate research and theory into practice.

Tertiary Student Award 2012

The recipient of the LDA Tertiary Student Award for 2012 is Jennifer Buckingham.

This award is presented in recognition of significant research reported in an exceptional paper that advances the understanding of theoretical and practical issues in the field of learning difficulties, carried out by a student in the course of their tertiary level studies. As such, it is based on the submission of a research article to be considered for publication in the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties.

Jennifer’s study, undertaken at the Macquarie University Special Education Centre under the supervision of Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Robyn Wheldall (Beaman), was designed to examine the efficacy of a small group literacy intervention designed for young readers who are still struggling after experiencing whole class initial instruction. This research was commended for its experimental approach in examining the effectiveness of a specific approach designed to assist children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds experiencing difficulties in learning to read in their first years of school. Such research was seen as important in that it has the potential to influence teaching practice not only in the Australian context but worldwide.

Jennifer’s paper based on this study, authored jointly with her supervisors, has now been accepted for publication in the LDA journal, the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties.
Learning Difficulties Australia 2012 Annual General Meeting and Awards Presentation

Alison McMurtrie, Secretary, LDA

On Saturday 8 September, approximately 50 members of LDA and invited guests met for the Annual General Meeting at the Treasury Conference Centre, Melbourne. The meeting was followed by lunch and a lecture by Professor Linda Siegel from the University of British Columbia in Canada, who was also presented with the inaugural LDA Eminent Researcher Award.

The LDA Eminent Researcher Award is a new award funded by Taylor and Francis (publishers of the LDA Journal, the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties), to recognise significant contributions by eminent researchers in the field of learning difficulties.

The AGM of any organisation has a function way beyond just fulfilling legal requirements. It is an opportunity to gather together, reflect on the past year’s activities and get inspired for the year ahead. This year’s AGM was no exception.

We heard from the outgoing president, Craig Wright, who described some of LDA’s achievements and areas of focus. These included a successful year of professional development courses in Victoria, Queensland and NSW, a joint conference in Queensland with SPELD and investigation into the development of a new website, which will lead to an updated and more interactive site.

Pye Twaddell, LDA Treasurer, presented the LDA audited financial statements for the year ending June 30 2012 for approval. Pye noted that through the careful monitoring of expenses, LDA has maintained a very healthy cash reserve, which allowed Council to plan Linda Siegel’s tour and upgrade the LDA website.

Special thanks were extended to Dr Louise Mercer and Elaine McLeish. Louise has held the role of President and Past President and made significant contributions to the work, growth and governance of LDA. She is taking a break in the coming year but we sincerely hope to see her back working with us in some capacity in the future.

Elaine has worked for many years as the Referral Officer for LDA’s Tutor Referral Service, mostly in Victoria, guiding and advising worried parents as they seek appropriate help for their children. Her hard work and dedication will be missed and, in recognition of her service, Elaine was presented with Life Membership of LDA.

The annual awards were presented to several people who have made, and continue to make, significant contributions in the area of learning difficulties. Dr Molly de Lemos received the Mona Tobias Award, Maureen Pollard received the Bruce Wicking Award, and Jennifer Buckingham the Tertiary Student Award (see pages 6-7). Molly and Maureen spoke about what sparked their passion for helping those who struggle with learning and the people and places influencing and inspiring them along the way.

After lunch, Professor Linda Siegel received the Eminent Researcher Award and closed the afternoon with a thought-provoking and highly relevant lecture on the over-reliance on the role of IQ scores in the diagnosis of learning difficulties in many education systems. She proposed the Response-to-Intervention model as a more useful and effective way to identify and reduce the number of children disadvantaged by learning difficulties, and spoke passionately about the impact that this would have on the lives of the students concerned and on the broader society.

As the incoming Secretary for LDA, the day was a great introduction to the life of LDA and an opportunity to meet the committed people who make it all happen. LDA also welcomed our new President, Lorraine Hammond, and new Council member, Mary Delahunty. The 2012-13 Council is looking forward to continuing the work of the association, building on all that has gone before to make a difference to those students experiencing learning difficulties and to those who are responsible for teaching and caring for those students.

Treasurer’s Report
For the year ending 30 June 2012

Pye Twaddell, Treasurer, LDA

I presented to the members present at the AGM a copy of the audited financial statements for the year ending 30 June 2012. LDA maintained healthy cash reserves during 2012. Moreover, 2012 revenue was boosted by $33,772 from the Queensland Conference and seminars and by $21,379 from royalties.

Careful monitoring of expenses against budget meant that Council was able to plan and implement significant events, including the speaking tour of Dr Linda Siegel with presentations in Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales.

The LDA Council is also developing an upgrade of the LDA website to provide access to a wider range of information including video and audio files and access to professional development, and expanded member services.

I would like to thank Kerrie McMahon who continues to undertake the full accounting function for Learning Difficulties Australia and Molly de Lemos for undertaking the bulk of LDA administration.
Some 35 years ago, and for reasons that now escape me, I became interested in developing a non-verbal means of assessing Piaget’s concepts of conservation using an operant discrimination learning paradigm. The idea was to demonstrate that many of the young children apparently experiencing difficulty in, for example, conservation of liquid quantity tasks, were struggling not with reasoning per se, but rather with understanding the questions posed by the experimenter. I thought that I had stumbled upon something very clever and my methodology was indeed novel. Sadly, the research literature soon showed me that there were rather more parsimonious means of avoiding asking Piaget’s complicated questions. And one of those researchers who demonstrated this was another young psychologist, at that time, Dr Linda Siegel.

It was in this context that I first encountered Linda. I say encountered because it would not be for another 20-plus years that I would actually meet Linda, in Sydney. We conversed in those faraway pre-email days of the 1970s by actually writing letters to each other about our research. We kept in touch over the years and Linda joined the Editorial Board of the journal I jointly edited, Educational Psychology. In the year 2000, Macquarie University Special Education Centre celebrated its silver anniversary with a conference and Linda was our international keynote speaker. Over the years, we had both abandoned our rather esoteric interests in Piagetian conservation tasks and had become involved in the dark arts of special education, specifically with research on low-progress readers and dyslexia.

As you will see (from the title of her lecture and her article), Linda sees herself as the black sheep of the learning disabilities field – and it is perhaps appropriate that it is in Australia that she should find herself among other black sheep. What is beyond doubt, however, black sheep or not, is that Linda has become a towering figure in the field of learning disabilities.

She is an internationally respected authority on reading and cognitive aspects of learning difficulties, especially with regard to dyslexia/reading disability, reading in second language learners, and young children at risk. She holds the Dorothy Lam Chair in Special Education in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology and Special Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Linda has conducted extensive studies of dyslexia and other learning disabilities as well as research in cognitive and language development. In 2010 she was awarded the Canadian Psychological Association Gold Medal Award for Distinguished Lifetime Contributions to Canadian Psychology. She has recently served as President of the Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD) of the Council for Exceptional Children and has published over 180 refereed journal articles, more than 160 book chapters and five books. It is easy to see why Linda was chosen as the inaugural recipient of the Eminent Researcher Award of Learning Difficulties Australia, which was presented to her in Melbourne at the Annual General Meeting in September.

**An introduction to Linda Siegel, winner of the Inaugural LDA Eminent Researcher Award**

Kevin Wheldall

**Professor Linda Siegel’s visit to Adelaide**

Anne Bayetto

Professor Siegel presented three sessions in Adelaide about her research into early intervention and what the longitudinal data suggested about ways forward when supporting students with reading difficulties. She spoke with special education staff and postgraduate students at Flinders University, and later to Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) literacy managers and representatives of regional support staff (speech pathologists, educational psychologists) and school-based early intervention leaders. There was an even wider audience for her final session when she spoke at the Research in Special Education (RISE) breakfast. This annual networking event brings together Flinders University special education staff, leaders from the three education sectors, and a wide range of managers from non-government agencies who have a focus on students with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Feedback about Professor Siegel’s presentations has been positive and has already generated requests for further information about her research.
Linda Siegel in Queensland

Nicole Todd

Dr Linda Siegel conducted the final engagement of her Australian trip at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) Springfield campus in Brisbane on 18 September. Following her presentation, ‘Confessions and Reflections of the Black Sheep of the LD Field’, a lively panel discussion was held. The audience included classroom teachers, support teachers, school psychologists, heads of special education programs, speech pathologists, pre-service teachers and academics.

Dr Siegel began the evening with some horrifying research into the consequences of not addressing the difficulties children may experience with learning in school, such as suicide or a prison sentence (in North America). Dr Siegel informed the audience of research in assessment and instruction for students with learning disabilities indicating that the commonly used IQ tests do not provide adequate data that can inform teachers of the instructional direction which should be taken with each student. The wide use of IQ testing in Queensland was justified for specific purposes by members of the audience. The audience also went away with alternative assessments which are successfully used in Queensland schools as shared during the panel discussion.

A follow-up session about effective instruction for students with learning difficulties is being considered for 2013 through the Educational Engagement at Springfield (USQ) program. The manager of Educational Engagement at Springfield (USQ), Special Education Program Coordinator at the University of Southern Queensland and LDA Council member is Dr Nicole Ann Todd (nicoleann.todd@usq.edu.au).

Nasty NAPLAN results: What should parents do next?

Anne Castles

The latest NAPLAN results have arrived, and soon enough thousands of Australian parents will tear open the envelope containing their child’s NAPLAN results. They will be faced with a series of graphs that look a bit like mercury thermometers, with the health of their child in reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy represented by hovering black dots.

According to the results, around 92% of Australian students are at or above national minimum standards. Their parents will be pleased to see their child’s dots sitting at the top of the thermometers, confirming that they are performing well. They can then relax and bask in the minutiae of their son or daughter’s accomplishments.

But what about those parents that get a shock? What about those that see dots indicating that their child is performing below expectations for their year level in reading, and maybe even below the national minimum standard? What will these parents do?

Searching for answers

Most will probably get in touch with their child’s school. They will make an appointment with the classroom or learning support teacher. But many will also do some investigating of their own.

They might search the internet for: “How can I treat my child’s reading problem?” or “Is there a cure for reading difficulties?” And when they do, they will be bombarded with information and an enormous number of different reading treatment programs. All, of course, claim to be effective, at least for some children.

Many of the programs will explain how they are effective by using language that is heavy in scientific and technical terminology. Some may point to the “principles of neuroplasticity” (www.arrowsmithschool.org) that need to be understood in order to develop the “physical mechanism of learning”, while others claim to use computer science to “synchronise information and deliver it directly where it is needed” (www.cellfield.com).

One program called the Irlen Method states that it “corrects reading problems that are a result of a processing problem called Irlen Syndrome… This type of reading problem is the result of the brain’s inability to accurately understand and process visual information” (www.irlen.com).

Another called the DORE program (www.dore.co.uk) states it “has found the key to improving cerebellum efficiency is through our unique exercise programme… designed to kick-start the cerebellum and train the brain to speed up and automate the information flow”.

BULLETIN – NOVEMBER 2012
Evidence base

Some of the treatment programs will be supported by solid scientific evidence, with their efficacy established by controlled clinical trials. However, given the cost and difficulty involved in carrying out such trials, these treatments will be in the minority.

Others will not necessarily have been subject to a controlled treatment study, but their methods will be based on sound science. They may be quite similar to other treatments that have been subject to controlled trials and, as such, there might be some cause for confidence in their methods.

But others will have no scientific credibility at all.

The problem is: how can parents, or indeed teachers, tell the difference between programs that are credible or effective, and those that aren’t?

Even well-educated people will find this extremely difficult to assess. I find it difficult and I have been working in the field for many years! Aside from the technical language, many of the sites provide lists of scientific articles to support the claims they make for efficacy. But only expert researchers are likely to have the background to assess whether these articles do in fact provide such support.

The average parent or teacher is left in a confused, frustrated muddle. I know, because we receive calls from people like this to our research centre every week.

Reading regulation

What is needed, in my view, is some form of regulation. In some ways, the issues here are similar to those relating to complementary medicines such homeopathic and aromatherapy products. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) regulates these kinds of products via the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG).

Complementary medicines may be either listed or registered with the ARTG, depending on the ingredients they contain and the claims that are made for them. Registered medicines pose potentially higher risk (for example, containing ingredients known to be harmful to humans in certain circumstances) and are individually evaluated by the TGA. Listed medicines are of low risk.

But for both registered and listed medicines, it is a requirement that sponsors hold information to substantiate all of their product’s claims.

Regulation of reading treatment programs, and indeed of programs for other conditions such as autism and Attention Deficit Disorder, could work in a similar way. As most reading treatments, like complementary medicines, would be considered ‘low risk’, the regulation might be in the form of a voluntary listing process.

What’s needed

Developers of treatment programs could, if they chose, submit their programs to be included on a publicly-available register. This would involve providing details of the program and how it is administered, as well as any relevant scientific evidence or controlled trials.

The problem is: how can parents, or indeed teachers, tell the difference between programs that are credible or effective, and those that aren’t?

The evidence would be evaluated by a panel of experts in the field. The Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing has already set up eight Advisory Committees whose job is to advise the TGA. It would be relatively straightforward to set up an extra committee to advise on treatments for cognitive disabilities.

There could also be levels of listing to reflect different levels of confidence in the efficacy of a program. An A-Listed program would have been found effective in a controlled trial. A B-Listed program might not, itself, have been subject to a controlled trial, but it might be deemed similar enough in its methods to one that has been to be considered likely to be effective by the committee. Finally, a C-Listed program might be based on sound science, leading the committee to affirm that it has the potential to be effective.

Public guidance

If a parent or teacher looked up a program and found that it was not listed, they could conclude that either the developers of that program had chosen not to submit it for evaluation, or that they had submitted it but it had not been approved for listing as either A, B or C.

In time, I would hope that a register like this would promote the success of effective programs and hasten the decline of ineffective ones. It might encourage developers of such programs to be proactive in having their treatments externally evaluated.

But, most importantly, the next time a parent had a nasty NAPLAN moment, they would know where to turn.

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Acknowledgment

This article that was originally published in The Conversation online academic news and opinion website on September 14, 2012. See http://theconversation.edu.au/nasty-naplan-results-what-should-parents-do-next-9591.
The Summary Report of the results for the 2012 NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) testing was released last month (http://tinyurl.com/99jrreg), focusing on achievement in reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation), and numeracy. In brief, the results appear to show little or no change from last year and, more surprisingly, little change compared with 2008 when the first NAPLAN testing was carried out (the ‘base NAPLAN year’).

Because I am currently particularly interested in literacy learning in the early school years, I’ll focus mainly on the results for reading in Year 3. I’ll also focus primarily on the results for New South Wales (NSW) because that is the state in which I live. The interesting comparison data are reported from page 28. Moreover, statistical significance testing of differences is also provided, comparing 2008 with 2012 results and also comparing 2011 with 2012. Using the available information, we can also calculate rough effect sizes (which are not given) from the information provided. (Note that these can only be approximations because we do not have access to the raw scores for each child.)

By calculating the effect size, however, we can gain an indication of whether the differences are worth bothering about or not.

If we look, for example, at the achievement scores for reading for Year 3 in NSW for 2008 and 2012, the mean (average) score rose from 412.3 to 425.7, an increase of 13.4 points, which was statistically significant. The rough effect size, however, was about 0.17 at best, which is very small; so small, in fact, that it is regarded as barely having an effect at all. Researchers tend to regard an effect size of 0.2 as the lowest value to count even as ‘small’. To put this in perspective, John Hattie, in his book Visible Learning, argues that an effect size of 0.4 is what he calls the ‘hinge’ value, meaning that this is the point when interventions become worthwhile.

The results Australia-wide for Year 3 reading were similar with an effect size of about 0.22. Queensland recorded the biggest improvement with an effect size of about 0.44, above Hattie’s hinge and well worth the effort. In this case, the effort is likely to have been the additional year of schooling introduced in Queensland when they introduced a prep/kindy year in 2008. 2011 was the first year that Queensland children in Year 3 were in their fourth year of schooling, when they took the test, as they were in the other states. (The difference between 2011 and 2012 results, although significant, is negligible with an effect size of 0.1, confirming that the big increase was between the years 2008 and 2011.)

The results for reading in Year 5 show very little change occurring over the years. Although some differences are statistically significant, the rough effect sizes are very small.

So what does this tell us in broad terms? It tells us that generally there has been no major improvement in reading performance over the years 2008 to 2012 for children in Years 3 and 5. There is one important proviso, however, and that is the assumption that the annual tests are truly comparable from year to year, as we are assured is the case. If they were found to be not truly comparable, we could draw no meaningful conclusions at all.

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’: http://kevinwheldall.com.au.
Rhona S. Johnston

I have studied the effects of differing methods of instruction on children’s reading for nearly 30 years now. My interest in this began with a visit to New Zealand in 1983, where I observed my nephew learning phonics with a private teacher, Doris Ferry. I learnt from her that the book experience method was used in schools there, and that phonics teaching was not permitted. Having taught phonics in Scotland, I knew that it was a well-established method there. In 1984, Brian Thompson came to visit me at St Andrews University. I proposed that we collaborate on studies comparing children in the two countries, to see what effects the phonics versus the book experience approaches had on the way they read.

We found a number of differences in children’s reading attributable to the different instructional methods in Scotland and New Zealand. Thompson (2010) has argued that these differences suggest that the phonics teaching method has detrimental effects, and he has proposed that these negative effects can be discerned even in adulthood (Thompson et al., 2009). However, the US National Reading Panel carried out a meta-analysis of the research literature and found that children read much better with phonics versus non-phonics tuition (National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD), 2000), so this might be considered a surprising conclusion.

Thompson (2010) has suggested that one problem with phonics teaching is that children taught this way are more likely to classify nonwords that sound like real words (i.e. pseudohomophones such as ‘poast’) as real words. This finding comes from our first study (Johnston & Thompson, 1989), in which we carried out a task where the children had a pack of cards containing real words, pseudohomophones and ordinary nonwords. The children sorted the cards into two piles: words and nonwords. We found that the phonics-taught children were more likely to put pseudohomophones like ‘poast’ in the word pile compared to the non-phonics taught children. However, we also found that the phonics-taught children could read these items out loud more accurately than the other group. We concluded that the phonics-taught children misclassified more of these items because they read them prior to making a decision and found they sounded like words, but that the non-phonics taught children rejected them outright as words without reading them. It is hard to imagine any normal reading situation where the classification of pseudohomophones as words would be a disadvantage. However, the ability to read nonwords well is another matter.

We have always replicated the advantage we found for phonics-taught children in reading nonwords (Connelly, Johnston, & Thompson, 2001; Thompson & Johnston, 2000; Thompson et al., 2008). A child who can read nonwords well can tackle unknown words in or out of context and come up with an accurate pronunciation; this means that it is a very good self-teaching skill. When reading text, such a child is not reliant on guessing what the word is from context (although they can of course additionally use this information). Children taught by the book experience approach, on the other hand, can read some nonwords, so it is clear that they can deduce for themselves information about the link between letters in words and the sounds in the spoken word. Thompson and Fletcher-Flinn have proposed two sources of letter-sound knowledge in their

The National Reading Panel meta-analysis concluded that overall children learn to read better with phonics tuition compared to non-phonics tuition, with low SES children showing a very large benefit.

Continued on page 14...
Knowledge Sources Theory (e.g. Thompson & Fletcher-Flinn, 2006). One is direct tuition in letter sounds. With phonics teaching, children initially learn the letter-sound correspondences as they occur in simple consonant vowel consonant (CVC) words, e.g. /a/ as in ‘cat’ rather than ‘was’. The other source is to deduce the letter sounds through experience with print; they call this lexicalised letter-sound knowledge. Having deduced letter-sound correspondences for themselves in this way, it might be thought that book experience taught children would be at an advantage in reading nonwords that look like words compared to less word-like nonwords, and that phonics-taught children would not show this advantage. In a study of six-year-olds, Thompson et al. (2008) found no difference in patterns of performance between the groups, and indeed found that the phonics-taught group read all of the nonwords 28% better. Furthermore, Thompson has reported that the use of a phonics approach in reading is beneficial for children taught by a book experience approach (Thompson, 1986). In his study of six-year-old New Zealand children reading words, he found that around 20% of responses were real word errors, and 7-8% were nonword errors. Nonword responses are the result of using letter sound or phonic information when reading words, and he found that these responses were highly correlated (around 0.56 to 0.63) with word reading ability, whereas word responses were not. It was clear, therefore, that the better readers were more likely to be using a phonics approach, even though they had not been taught by this method, and that the low achievers were less able to work out how to use a phonics approach to reading for themselves.

Thompson (2010) points out that phonics-taught children have been found to read more slowly than book experience taught children. For example, Connelly et al. (2001) found that the text reading rate was slower for the phonics-taught children, although the two groups had been matched on accuracy of reading. However, they also read nonwords better, made more attempts to read unknown words, made more contextually appropriate errors, and had significantly better reading comprehension. In another study, Thompson et al. (2008) studied below average readers (poor readers being excluded). Despite much more time being devoted to reading instruction for the book experience sample, 42% of the non-phonics taught sample fell into this below average category, while only 32% of the phonics-taught sample did. The non-phonics-taught children did indeed read faster than the phonics-taught children, but they had similar levels of reading comprehension to the phonics-taught children. There is no evidence therefore that reading faster conferred any advantages on the non-phonics-taught children.

Thompson (2010) proposed that the effects of initial teaching technique are so pervasive that they can still be discerned in adulthood. Thompson et al. (2009) found...
right at the start of reading tuition, before establishing sight word recognition; some confusion arises because in analytic phonics the teaching of sounding and blending is often introduced towards the end of the first year at school, after sight word reading has been established. Another important point is that the children in all of the groups also learnt to read for meaning using non-phonic readers, starting six weeks into the phonics programmes. Just under half of the 304 children in the sample came from schools in areas of severe to moderate deprivation. A few weeks after starting school, at the age of 5, the children were entered into one of three teaching programmes. One group learnt by the synthetic phonics method, where they learnt to sound letters and blend the sounds in order to read unfamiliar words; they also learnt to segment spoken words for spelling. The other two groups learnt by the analytic phonics method that is traditional in Scotland, learning letter sounds at the pace of one a week in the initial position of words, seeing families of words all starting with the same letter (therefore learning largely by sight). This method involves learning letter sounds at a slower pace than in synthetic phonics, but in a previous study we had found that a greater speed of letter-sound learning did not increase reading attainment in analytic phonics programmes. One group did a standard analytic phonics programme, and the other group spent half their time doing this, and the other half receiving training in phoneme awareness. The latter group’s phoneme awareness programme was analogous to that of the synthetic phonics group, in that they received training in blending and segmenting words, the difference being that it was not carried out with letters. At the end of the 16 week programme, having received 20 minutes tuition a day, the synthetic phonics group was reading seven months ahead of their chronological age, and of the other two groups, and was around eight to nine months ahead in spelling. The two analytic phonics groups then carried out the synthetic phonics programme before the end of the first year at school.

At the end of the second year of school, only 2.2% of the children were more than a year behind chronological age in reading, 1.1% being behind in spelling, and 5% in reading comprehension. Analyses of the data from those who could not read at all at the end of the experimental programmes shows that at the end of the second year at school, when aged 6.63 years (range 6.08 years to 7.83 years), word reading age averaged 6.87 years (range 5.25 years to 9.33 years). Two children scored at a five-year-old level; at the end of the study, when the children in the study were on average 11-years-old, one had a reading age of 8.25 years and the other scored 12.40 years (having had intensive remedial synthetic phonics tuition). As to the total sample, in terms of the proportion that was more than two years behind at the end of primary schooling, 5.6% were behind in word reading, 10.1% were behind in spelling, and 14% were behind in reading comprehension. At this stage, comparisons against age expectations were all statistically significant: word reading (3.5 years ahead), spelling (1.7 years ahead), and reading comprehension (3.5 months ahead) (Johnston & Watson, 2005).

We have contrasted the Clackmannanshire sample at the age of 10 years with a sample taught by an eclectic method, including analytic phonics, which was used until recently in England (Johnston et al., in press). As in the traditional method used in Scotland, the children in England learnt to sound and blend towards the end of their first year at school, instead of right at the beginning as with synthetic phonics, and were taught the sight word reading of high frequency and irregular words, which was not done in the synthetic phonics programme. It might be thought that the synthetic phonics-taught children would therefore be disadvantaged in reading irregular words. However, despite the lack of sight word training, the synthetic phonics-taught children read all of the low frequency items (i.e. regular words and two types of irregular words) better than the analytic phonics-taught children, and there was a trend for their advantage to be greater for irregular words. Boys are generally more vulnerable to having reading problems, but this study showed that the boys had better word...
reading than the girls if they learnt to read by a synthetic phonics approach, and had equivalent spelling and reading comprehension (Johnston, McGeown, & Watson, in press).

We can conclude from these studies that children who are taught to read by a non-phonics method can deduce some information about letter sounds from print, and they can read some nonwords. Children taught by the phonics approach read words more slowly, but read nonwords more accurately, and in adulthood were less likely to read nonwords by analogy to real words. In some studies, but not all, they made more errors on low frequency irregular words in speeded tests of single word reading. However, they also spent less time on reading instruction in school, and when matched on word reading their reading comprehension was as good as, or even better than, those taught by the book experience approach. It is also likely that a higher proportion of children taught by the book experience approach needed intensive one-to-one remedial teaching than those taught by synthetic phonics. The success of the synthetic phonics programme in Clackmannanshire fits well with the fact that this approach was found by the National Reading Panel to be particularly beneficial for kindergarten and first grade children, including those at risk of reading failure. Although children taught by the book experience approach can work out letter sounds and read some nonwords, less able readers seem to have more difficulty in taking a phonics approach without direct tuition. Indeed, one secondary school boy in New Zealand, on being taught phonics by my cousin, expressed great surprise that letter sounds were a guide to pronunciation and said, ‘Why didn’t anyone tell me this before?’

References


**Rhona Johnston** is Professor of Psychology at the University of Hull. After gaining her PhD, she trained as a primary school teacher and worked with secondary pupils with literacy problems, and then moved into an academic career, first as a lecturer in psychology at the University of St Andrews, then a Reader at the University of Birmingham, and since 2001 has been Professor of Psychology at the University of Hull. She is best known for what has become known as the Clackmannanshire study, undertaken in collaboration with Joyce Watson, which demonstrated the effectiveness of synthetic phonics in teaching children to read. This study has had a significant impact in the UK on government policy relating to the teaching of reading. Rhona Johnston was awarded the honour of Member of the Order of British Empire in the 2012 New Years Honours list for services to education.
Why the renewed interest in Jolly Phonics in South Australia?

Jan Polkinghorne

Some years ago, SPELD SA looked at the number of students presenting to SPELD for additional tutoring and assessment for dyslexia and came to the conclusion that we needed to find a program of teaching reading and writing that could be used by teachers, tutors and parents to serve the needs and learning styles of all students, thus negating the need for a separate, different style of instruction for those with learning difficulties. Governments around the English-speaking world were sharing our concern, and separate reviews in the UK, USA and Australia all came to similar conclusions at about the same time: what was needed was a systematic, explicit phonics approach to the teaching of reading. The UK response was very explicit:

“The April 2005 UK House of Common’s verdict on ‘pre-programmed’ and ‘systematic’ or ‘synthetic’ phonics literacy teaching programs cannot be bypassed. Investigations by Sir James Rose in 2006 into the effectiveness of carefully pre-planned phonics teaching programs resulted in Ruth Kelly, the UK Education Secretary, in commenting as follows: ‘I am clear that synthetic phonics should be the first strategy in teaching all children to read.’” (March 2006)

The USA was not quite so clear cut and only some US states have enforced the teaching of synthetic phonics as the recommended route.

In Australia, in 2004 the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy was commissioned to examine the way reading was taught in schools, and the effectiveness of teacher education courses in preparing teachers for teaching reading. The first two recommendations of the Inquiry show the Committee’s conviction about the need to base the teaching of reading on evidence and the importance of teaching systematic, explicit phonics within an integrated approach. The executive summary of the Inquiry’s report states:

“The evidence is clear ... that direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read. Findings from the research evidence indicate that all students learn best when teachers adopt an integrated approach to reading that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension.”

It goes on to say:

“Overall we conclude that the synthetic phonics approach, as part of the reading curriculum, is more effective than the analytic phonics approach, even when it is supplemented with phonemic awareness training. It also led boys to reading words significantly better than girls, and there was a trend towards better spelling and reading comprehension. There is evidence that synthetic phonics is best taught at the beginning of Primary 1 (the first year of formal schooling), as even by the end of the second year at school the children in the early synthetic phonics program had better spelling ability, and the girls had significantly better reading ability.”

Unfortunately, because of the fierce opposition of the whole word reading supporters, the final recommendations were nowhere near as explicit, thus the door was left open for the continued debate as to whether we should use analytic or synthetic phonics.

All recent research supported the use of synthetic phonics as opposed to analytic or whole word methods of teaching. After exploring the program options available, we chose to recommend Jolly Phonics because it was fun, fast, multisensory, included a great deal of variety, and revision was affordable for both whole school and individual use. It would certainly accommodate the needs of our dyslexic clients within mainstream classes and those needing additional help would just need more of the same, not an entirely different program.

We began conducting training sessions at SPELD on a Saturday but things were not moving fast enough. Teachers were training as individuals, not as schools. They returned from the training full of enthusiasm, but in the main did not have enough impact to change whole school policies. What began the real turnaround was when Jolly Phonics trainers made themselves available to do whole school training at schools either in school time, on pupil free days, or after school or in some cases on weekends. Our mini-revolution began! Teachers in one school started talking to teachers in other schools! Parents chatted in car parks. Mothers in one area compared results with relatives and friends in other areas. The schools where Jolly Phonics had been taken on as a whole school project were getting results. The program when taught with fidelity was getting results. NAPLAN results were being compared. Teachers had a program to follow and standards to reach. Parents could see their children were achieving and they told everyone.

It has now got to the point where parents have been known to “blackmail” school boards: “If you don’t introduce Jolly Phonics, I will move to another school.” In some small schools moving a family of two or three children can have a big impact. There are now educational regions where Jolly Phonics/Jolly Grammar training is a prerequisite to teaching in that area. It is working and our persistence is having an impact on the big picture. A SPELD long-term study into the...
effectiveness of Jolly Phonics is further reinforcing the effect of a systematic explicit synthetic approach.

What are our dreams and hopes? That we can access trainee teachers at the university level rather than wait until they are working in schools. That all schools are working on a synthetic, systematic explicit program to teach reading and writing to students of all ages. It doesn’t necessarily have to be Jolly Phonics, because ultimately the alphabetic code is the alphabetic code and no one can copyright it. After the introduction of the 42 letter sounds and teaching the techniques of blending and segmenting, minor differences in the order of introduction or methods used are irrelevant.

What can we contribute the success of our mini-revolution to? Probably being in the right place at the right time when schools were being called to account and looking for answers. Certainly in having trainers who were affordable, adaptable and willing to work in different locations and out of regular hours so that schools could afford to train the whole staff at once. In having trainers who delivered a practical, down to earth approach which could be utilised at once in the classroom. In having a program that itself told teachers what to do and the order in which to do it. But above all, in having a program which achieved measurable results in a very short time so that it made teachers and parents talk about it and encourage others to try it.

Jolly Phonics does not need to be “sold”: it speaks for itself and has the results on the board. In short – it works!

6. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/02/20682/52383

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Literacy gaps and socio-economic status

Jennifer Buckingham

As a result of the Gonski report and the recent budget cuts to NSW schools, the relative quality and importance of non-government schools to education in Australia has again been questioned.

The most recent issue of the journal Australian Economic Papers has an article by Paul Miller and Derby Voon (2012) comparing the performance of government and non-government schools in the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy) tests.

The objective of Miller and Voon’s analysis was to determine the extent to which differences in performance between school sectors can be attributed to the different characteristics of their students, including socio-economic status and gender. Their article builds upon other published research papers that use data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) and the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). The majority of these studies find that socio-economic status does not completely explain school sector differences.

Miller and Voon estimate and compare the contribution of socio-economic status to NAPLAN performance in the different sectors. They find that for Year 3 students, the main effect of socio-economic status is similar in each sector and in each aspect of the NAPLAN tests (approximate r = 0.3, a figure that corresponds with the strength of the relationship found between socio-economic status and student performance over the last several decades). The picture changes in high school, however. Among Year 9 students, the impact of socio-economic status is significantly higher in independent schools than in Catholic or government schools.

Overall, the results support the findings of Gary Marks’ studies – the superior test results of non-government schools cannot be fully accounted for by the higher average socio-economic status of their students. There is a ‘moderate value-added effect’ of a school sector once student intake characteristics are controlled.

One limitation of Miller and Voon’s study is that it does not account for the prior ability levels of students. It is well known that literacy gaps exist between students of differing socio-economic status when they begin school. It is therefore likely that students in schools with a lower average socio-economic status have started school with lower literacy levels than their more advantaged counterparts. A similar study comparing the growth in scores between NAPLAN tests in Years 3 to 5 and Years 7 to 9 would be instructive.

Reference

Jennifer Buckingham is a Research Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies.
The following article presents a brief insight into a collaborative seminar, recently held in Melbourne, which demonstrated and discussed the use of *Letters and Sounds*: a systematic and synthetic phonic approach to the teaching of reading and spelling. Each presentation either illustrated use of this freely available structured program or discussed a range of ideas, including commercial products and free resources, to support and supplement the materials when using the approach specifically in Australian schools.

**Background to *Letters and Sounds***

Molly de Lemos

*Letters and Sounds* was developed in the UK following the 2006 report by Sir Jim Rose on the teaching of early reading. This report led to significant changes in approaches to the teaching of reading in the UK, with a strong emphasis on the inclusion of systematic teaching of phonics. The *Letters and Sounds* program was developed by independent experts and published by the UK Department for Education and Skills in 2007, in response to the need for new resources to support the teaching of systematic phonics in the schools. It aimed to build children's speaking and listening skills in their own right as well as to prepare children for learning to read by developing their phonic knowledge and skills. It set out a detailed and systematic programme for teaching phonic skills for children starting by the age of five, with the aim of them becoming fluent readers by the age of seven.

National and International research has identified synthetic phonics as the most successful approach to the teaching of reading and spelling in the early years and it is now widely recognised that diligent, concentrated and systematic teaching of phonics is central to the success of schools that achieve high standards in reading.

**Smarter Schools Approach to teaching beginning reading and spelling***

Anne Charles

“The evidence is clear that direct, systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read. Findings from the research evidence indicate that all students learn best when teachers adopt an integrated approach to reading that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension” (Rowe, 2005).

The aim of the Smarter Schools Approach was to implement an integrated, systematic teaching of phonological awareness and phonics in order to support the acquisition of reading and spelling skills. Clusters of schools, teachers, principals and parents within Catholic and Independent schools in Tasmania identified that a consistent approach to teaching phonics would achieve the best outcomes for students. It was recognised this approach would most likely secure optimum outcomes in the children’s acquisition of phonic knowledge and skills, whereas mixing parts from different sequences from more than one program could impede progress. The approach needed to be fully compatible with the wider, language-rich early years curriculum experiences.

Teachers in these Tasmanian schools began implementing the selected approach after a 2010 trial in a small group of schools produced quantitative and qualitative data indicating its success. The schools selected the *Letters and Sounds* framework to teaching phonics as it provided a tightly structured, consistent, cost effective, direct instruction approach to teaching phonics for Kinder/Prep – Grade 2 students. The framework was developed by independent experts in the United Kingdom.

*Letters and Sounds* is structured in six overlapping phases and requires about 20 minutes daily of direct (explicit) teaching. (These phases can be downloaded free from the internet.)

*Letters and Sounds* provides a detailed, systematic structure to teaching the phonics element of reading – not the whole reading program. It is designed to help teachers teach children how the alphabet works for reading and spelling. It is fully compatible with the wider early learning years curriculum. Teachers using this strategy present the full range of language learning experiences within a range of appropriate early years contexts.

*Letters and Sounds* is based on the ‘Simple View of Reading’ that identifies two dimensions of reading – word recognition processes and language comprehension processes. There is considerable evidence to support the need for clear distinction between: (1) processes concerned with word recognition (decoding and sight words); and (2) processes that enable the reader to understand the text (oral language, vocabulary and domain knowledge). The Simple View of Reading emphasises that both word recognition and language comprehension are necessary for proficient reading.

*Letters and Sounds* uses a synthetic phonics approach to teach reading and spelling. The structure involves the
systematic teaching of letter/sound correspondences to automaticity and then this knowledge is used to sound out words to read (decode) and to spell (encode).

*Letters and Sounds* guides teachers through the phases. Children’s progress in learning phonics is tracked through these phases. When evidence suggests that children are secure at a particular phase (they know most of the phonemes associated with that phase and can apply the skills of blending and segmenting), they move into the next phase. Guided by reliable assessments, teachers make judgements about the rate at which children are progressing through the phases and adapt their teaching accordingly. (There needs to be discussion about how to manage the tracking of students’ progress. Assessments are required at the end of phases 2, 3, 4 and 5.)

An essential element of using this methodology (synthetic phonics) is that students should never be asked to read something that is too difficult for them or that they do not have the skills to read. There are ample resources that can be downloaded to support the students with their reading in the initial phases. Decodable texts can be purchased that align to the phases.

*Letters and Sounds* aligns the introduction of high-frequency words as far as possible to the graphemes introduced. Research has shown that when words are recognised on sight, this recognition is most efficient when it is underpinned by grapheme-phoneme knowledge. This means that children will be able to read many high-frequency words very early in their schooling.

One of the benefits of engaging with the professional development and implementing *Letters and Sounds* has been the increasing understanding among teachers about the importance of oral language and vocabulary as the foundation of literacy progress. Teachers also recognised the significance of clear articulation when teaching sounds.

Commitment to the program is a key factor in its success. An essential element in the success of *Letters and Sounds* is that consistency is maintained as the program has set phases, activities and monitoring points. For optimum outcomes, teachers must adhere to the content of the program from start to finish – no cherry-picking!

There should be a co-ordinator to ensure that teachers are supported, particularly in the initial stages of implementation. This role is not very time-consuming once the program is up and running. Time is required to download phases and resources. Teachers need to familiarise themselves with the phases before they commence teaching *Letters and Sounds*.

Every teacher, without exception, has embraced *Letters and Sounds*, commenting that they love teaching from the structure. They say that they can hear/see the difference with a student who has learnt to read and spell using this methodology and all state that they could never teach reading how they had in the past. The students enjoy

the wide range of activities, including games, interactive whiteboards, iPads, and so on. Parents have commented, “I wish my other children had learnt to read this way!”

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) produced a series of podcasts in 2009 called ‘Reading Interventions’. The research presented was funded by the Australian Government and carried out by three universities: Edith Cowan University, Griffith University and the Australian Catholic University. The research clearly identified that a synthetic approach to teaching reading and spelling was superior to an analytic approach. The research also identified that there was no gender difference in the acquisition of reading and writing skills and there was no “wash out effect”.

These podcasts offer educators a professional learning experience, introducing new ideas and research and challenging their current beliefs and practice.

**Teaching Letters and Sounds in the classroom**

**Berys Dixon**

I had been teaching for eight years in a school with many ESL and special needs students when I ‘discovered’ (through Google!) that while I was beavering away with a whole language approach to teaching reading, people across three nations, the UK, USA and Australia had been doing a lot of investigating into this very subject and had all reached the same conclusion:

“The inquiry concluded that the evidence is very clear as to what is essential for an effective program for the teaching of reading: much research has shown that for any reading program to be effective, it must include throughout its first two or three years, extensive systematic explicit instruction in synthetic phonics” (Coltheart & Prior, 2007).

Googling the term ‘synthetic phonics’ opened a cornucopia of information! First of all, ‘synthetic’ was not referring to some tacky artificial fabric: it meant, in reading terms, blending and segmenting or ‘synthesising’ the sounds in our language.

Neuroscientists, educators, researchers, academics and speech therapists were among the many people across the Western world who had made reading acquisition and the best way to achieve it, their major study.

This was fascinating and despite never having been alerted to this by the local educational authorities, I felt that this evidence-based research was powerful background for informing a classroom teacher’s pedagogy.

I discovered that researchers had re-designed the model for reading acquisition and called it the ‘Simple View of Reading’ seeing it as a two-pronged process: word recognition and comprehension skills.

Word recognition includes phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency, while vocabulary and comprehension skills are part of the comprehension process. This was very exciting because it made so much sense and from a teacher’s point of view, much easier to
organise into a manageable, effective teaching program.

Our school had a fairly solid focus on comprehension skills, but we realised that our students were missing out on explicit, sequential instruction in word recognition. It seemed quite obvious when we stopped to think about it – how could they possibly derive any meaning from a text, if they couldn’t decipher the words in the first place?

By this time, I had also ‘stumbled’ upon a number of interesting programs for teaching reading with an explicit, sequential phonics focus. We chose to use The UK Letters and Sounds Guidance for teachers because it was free to download and provided the essential advice, assessments and ideas for resources needed to teach word recognition skills from Prep to Grade 2.

There were five important areas to tackle, all needing an explicit, sequential approach:

1. The Alphabetic Principle
   Our students needed to be aware of how our English language works – how sounds (phonemes) are represented in written form (graphemes) and how these go together to make words.

2. Phonological Skills
   Our students needed to develop their speaking and listening skills and become ‘sounds experts’, particularly at blending and segmenting. Rather than leave this to chance, we taught these skills explicitly and followed up during the day with fun, and sometimes silly activities, particularly targeting the more vulnerable children. They loved playing around with the sounds in their names, for example, and we kept this learning going right through the year.

3. The Alphabetic Code
   The components of the code (‘a’, ‘s’, ‘ee’ and so on) needed to be taught explicitly and sequentially, from simple to complex and at a fairly fast pace, around three graphemes a week, both for reading and writing. The children also needed to understand the purpose for learning this code, so that it would open the path to their reading and writing success.

   We abandoned the ‘sound of the week’ programs, and instead built a daily, explicit phonics session into the program.

   Every session followed a strict, explicit sequence:
   - Tune in – with a quick phonological game and a statement of learning intention
   - Revise and practise previously learnt skills
   - Learn a new grapheme – both reading and writing it
   - Practice using the new grapheme
   - Re-cap on new learning.

   To help with learning and practice, we provided the children with a wide variety of multi-sensory activities. These included: ‘Sound boxes’ with real objects whose names contained the target sound which were so tactile for a five-year-old, whiteboards, skills sheets, graphemes on cards for making words, caption cards and pictures to read, match, write, draw, Sound Spotters (a great resource in Phase 5 of L&S), and games such as Bingo and fun word card games.

4. Reading of Text
   Phonics became the prime approach to decoding unfamiliar words. The practice of using illustrations and the first sound to guess the word was no longer encouraged. In fact, we discovered that looking at the picture after decoding the word gave the children insight into its meaning. So another part of the reading process – vocabulary and comprehension – was being developed. Using their skills to read authentic text became of paramount importance. To foster a love of reading, texts needed to be at the child’s phonological skill level.

   Desperate to provide my students with authentic

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interesting stories and hoping to waylay the ‘nay-sayers’ who said phonics books were ‘boring, illogical tongue twisters’, I produced my own stories that were humorous, followed a plot and catered for developing phonic skills. Amazingly these have now been published and are read by children around the world!

We provided opportunities for reading two or three times every day, little and often, which suited their stage of learning development. As their skills developed, the children were able to access many different sorts of texts and one amazing thing that happened was that instead of just looking at the books in the library, the preps were actually reading them!

5. Writing Text

Segmenting skills, the reverse of blending for reading, needed to be developed for writing. Rather than writing just the initial sound, children needed to be encouraged to apply their knowledge of the code and their segmenting skills to write words communicating their ideas to others. This was an empowering skill for the lowest achievers who used a ‘sound card’ as a mnemonic, to the highest achievers who could use their phonetic skills to formulate quite complex words.

Homework was another essential element. Children were given stories to read at their phonological skill level and graphemes on little cards to make and write words. The parents related well to this because they were comfortable with telling their children to ‘sound it out’. After years of whole language texts, this was at last achievable with texts that held no ‘surprises’.

By the end of the year, there was no disputing the difference this teaching made to the students’ literacy results. The percentage of Preps reading 20 or more words on the Burt test went from 36% to 88%, all but one child (with special needs) were reading at or above the Prep benchmark level and almost half the class were reading at a Grade 1 standard. Eighty-eight per cent of children achieved a score of more than 30 words correct in a dictation test of 37 words, compared to just 53% the year before.

Teaching phonics explicitly as part of the literacy program has been empowering for both myself, and my students. All it takes is a whole school approach with every member of staff being knowledgeable, dedicated and passionate about the best practice in reading and writing acquisition. Not to mention some astute Googling!

Using SoundCheck with Letters and Sounds

Maureen Pollard

It was while I was Coordinator of Tyndryn, the special education support unit at Tintern Girls Grammar, that I developed the SoundCheck strategy. After leaving Tintern to set up Learning Logic, my colleagues demanded, in the nicest possible way, that I put this ‘sequencing sounds strategy’ into print to make it available for other teachers. Of course, we had no idea what this actually involved, however, it happened, and I eventually developed two SoundCheck books.

Students embraced the SoundCheck strategy with great enthusiasm, searching the menu of letter choices to find the correct sounds, circling and sounding them and then writing the word. This caught me by surprise as I thought the students might find it too repetitious. However, what I learnt was that the students loved the confidence the strategy provided and the feeling of success in knowing what to do. There are no tricks in SoundCheck – it is a matter of identifying the correct sequence of letters/sounds to spell the words. Frequently, the difficulty is in reading the words and making the connection from spelling to reading. These two processes need to be linked and the step-by-step sequence of SoundCheck makes this happen.

SoundCheck is an example of translating evidence-based literacy research into a practical strategy to help students learn to spell. It has 52 Phonological Fun activities ranging from rhyme, syllable segmentation, alliteration, phoneme manipulation, deletion and insertion, sorting illustrations according to their medial vowel sounds. Some of these Phonological Fun activities link to letters and combine two important skills in the one activity. Teaching phonological or phonemic awareness is such fun as it involves playing around with and manipulating sounds in words.

SoundCheck enables children to understand how sounds and letters work together to make words. Once they have begun to grasp the principle that sounds in speech can be paired with letters and letter combinations, they can begin SoundCheck. The first SoundCheck Unit starts with seven letters: ‘m’, ‘s’, ‘t’, ‘a’, ‘h’, ‘d’, ‘c’. This allows lots of practice segmenting and blending sounds with only one vowel sound. There is a gradual introduction of short vowel sounds so that each one can be consolidated. By Unit 12, all 26 letter sounds are introduced with plenty of opportunities for practice. This segues nicely into initial and final consonant blends with more practice of all known sounds. The skill of identifying the individual sounds in a consonant blend is important. Digraphs ‘ck’, ‘sh’, ‘ch’, and ‘th’ are then introduced. At this stage an Assessment package can be used to track the progress of the students and to ensure they are ready to move onto the teaching in SoundCheck 2.

Although SoundCheck was developed specifically with and for children with learning difficulties, it is increasingly being used as part of a mainstream literacy program. We know that the majority of children need explicit teaching, so it makes sense for classroom teachers to include SoundCheck as a resource. As special education teachers, we want what is happening in our teaching, to be also happening in the classroom.

The feedback from teachers is that SoundCheck is easy to use, but more importantly it explicitly teaches children the skills involved in spelling and reading.
The structure of *Letters and Sounds* easily links into *SoundCheck* as the units can be used in the order and sequence required; both programs are based on synthetic phonic principles. *SoundCheck* complements the six phases of *Letters and Sounds*.

**Making use of *Letters and Sounds* in *Wordshark 4***

Cheryl Dobbs

Finding rich resources to support students’ learning is an essential element of any teaching environment, but it is also important that such resources also motivate and capture a student’s interest if you want them used. I first started using the computer program *Wordshark* many years ago when I was looking for good-quality spelling and reading software to use with the students I was either teaching to read or who had struggled with the process. At the time, there were few computer resources around that appealed to students of mixed ages and abilities, offered structure and flexibility and could be used both at home and school. However, *Wordshark* did all of this and I have continued to use it ever since. Students enjoyed the activities because they were presented in a game-like format: they gained a sense of achievement each time they played and if they used the program for short periods on a regular basis using one of the structured courses, significant gains were observed.

When *Letters and Sounds* was first introduced into UK schools, the structure of this was added as an additional course to those already contained within the software. It follows the same timeline as the materials that can be obtained online, but allocates specific games, using sound, speech and image, for the students to play. The structure begins by introducing students to a few initial sounds (phonemes) before quickly moving into activities that specifically focus upon blending and segmenting, two of the essential skills that students need to develop. There are many activities, including those which encourage the student to vocalise and record sounds and words for themselves as well as reading words, phrases and sentences, again following the same order and structure. Assessment activities are also available which ensure that it is easy to check whether a student is ready to move on to the next stage or would benefit from additional activity. The course in *Wordshark 4* is an interactive version of the paper-based materials.

The variety and appeal of these activities ensure that even those who have difficulty or need more time to consolidate their learning have plenty of opportunity to practise at their own pace with different activities to give them the structure and repetition required to develop important skills. As the student progresses through the course, games are specifically recommended and give sufficient variety to maintain interest, but also build upon existing knowledge in a manner that ensures success.

*Wordshark 4* can be used on both a computer and interactive whiteboard, but it is also now available as a USB. This means that the ability to create individual programs of work for single students and to keep a record of their activity makes it ideal for those of us who work with students in different locations, as it is so easy to set up work for them to continue with others at home or at school.

*Letters and Sounds* was introduced into the UK as one literacy resource for children’s first years in school, but *Wordshark* also includes other structured courses, including one that could be used to support any of the other synthetic phonics programs commercially available or as an independent resource on its own. I have successfully used both of these courses with older children who have struggled with learning to read and to their support spelling difficulties as part of my literacy toolkit. For me, good resources not only have to be of quality and fit for purpose, but they have to be engaging for both parties to use as a measure of their efficacy.

Further information (including Australian suppliers) can be found at www.wordshark.co.uk.

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Further reading and links

*Letters and Sounds* is free to download. Other sites such as twinkl and Babcock LDP have resources to support *Letters and Sounds*. Lesson plans for each phase and assessment tasks can be downloaded from the Phonicsplay website.

**Note**
Terms used are defined as follows:

**Systematic phonics:** systematic phonics instruction provides instruction in a carefully selected and useful set of letter/sound relationships and then organises the introduction of these relationships into a logical instructional sequence.

**Synthetic phonics:** refers to the concept of ‘synthesizing’ which means ‘putting together’ or ‘blending’. Letter-to-sound correspondences are explicitly taught and practised and this knowledge is then used to read (decode) and to spell (encode).

**Analytic phonics:** letter/sound relationships, breaking down already known words into separate components, generally word families are used.

**Authors**

Molly de Lemos was a Senior Research Fellow at ACER prior to her retirement in 2001, and since 2004 has been a member of LDA Council, serving as Secretary from 2004 to 2012. She has had an ongoing interest in issues relating to pre-school education, early intervention, effective teaching of reading, and the assessment and identification of children with learning difficulties. She has also worked in the area of psychological assessment, including the adaptation and norming of measures of intelligence, aptitudes and adaptive behaviour, as well as measures of educational achievement. Her publications include the 1994 report *Schooling for Students with Disabilities*, and the 2002 ACER review paper *Closing the Gap between Research and Practice: Foundations for the Acquisition of Literacy*. She has served on a number of committees and advisory groups relating to assessment and early childhood education, and is currently a member of the Developmental Disorders of Language and Literacy Network Group. Molly was the recipient of the 2012 Mona Tobias Award.

Anne Charles has worked for the past 20 years for both Independent and Catholic schools in Tasmania in an advisory capacity in the areas of special education and appropriate reading and maths programs. She currently works part-time both for Independent and Catholic schools and is based in Hobart. Last year Anne presented a session on Letters and Sounds at the Smarter Schools National Forum for Literacy and Numeracy. This presentation is now available on the DEEWR Teach Learn Share website: www.teachlearnshare.gov.au.

Berys Dixon (berys.d@gmail.com) is a trained primary teacher with many years experience in teaching young children to read, particularly in ESL and low socio-economic settings. She became dissatisfied with the whole language approach to reading and began to study the current scientific research on reading and spelling. She switched to a phonic-based approach using the UK program *Letters and Sounds*, and saw substantial improvements in the children’s abilities in reading, writing, comprehending and enjoyment of literature. Berys has also developed a series of small booklets to support the teaching of *Letters and Sounds* in the classroom. This simple resource gives children the opportunity to practise and enjoy their reading. These booklets have now been published by Smart Kids, a NZ company that distributes worldwide.

Maureen Pollard (maureen@learninglogic.com.au) is a literacy consultant who works with teachers, schools and parents to help children learn to read and write with confidence. Her workshops focus on specific strategies to build phonemic awareness and alphabetic knowledge. Maureen has taught literacy in the UK, Spain, South Africa and Melbourne. Much of her experience in developing learning and teaching strategies for whole school populations came from her years as Head of Special Education at Tintern Girls Grammar in Ringwood. Maureen’s publications include *SoundCheck*, *Sylvester Syllable Game* and the early literacy program *Little Learners Love Literacy*. Maureen was the recipient of this year’s Bruce Wicking Award.

Cheryl Dobbs (cheryl.dobbs@bigpond.com) is an independent consultant who advocates the use of technology to develop literacy teaching and learning. She has a background that has covered mainstream education, adult literacy, software development and working with students with a range of learning needs here and in the UK. Her enthusiasm and knowledge for technology covers all ages and abilities. Cheryl has recently returned to work in Melbourne and has re-established her advisory role whilst continuing her research into the use of digital technologies to support writing development.
The times they are a-changin’ … but some things stay the same

This is the text of a speech given on 23 August 2012 at ‘Hallowed Ground: The Future of Reading’, a National Year of Reading Event jointly hosted by the City of Sydney Library and the Australian Library and Information Association.

Anne Castles

I am a researcher from Macquarie University, with a background in cognitive psychology. I have spent the last 20 years or so trying to understand reading – specifically, how it is that children learn to read, and why it might be that some children find it particularly difficult to learn this most important skill.

I became fascinated with reading very early in my research studies. I think there were two main reasons for this: firstly – no doubt like everyone else here – I loved reading myself as a child and wanted to ensure that other children experienced what I did and were not denied this joy.

Secondly, I was amazed by the variation in interest and ability in reading that could be seen in an average school classroom. As many of you here would be aware, if you take a typical class of Year 1 children – all apparently bright, happy, curious little buttons – some of them will already be onto their second Harry Potter, and others will barely be reading at all – still learning their letters. Why? It’s very hard to pick which child will be which. I really wanted to understand why this ability comes so easily to some but is so difficult for others.

Even after 20 years, I’m still trying to get to the bottom of this! But I’ve certainly learnt a lot along the way, and this is where the theme of today’s event comes in: what is the future of reading, or, from my perspective, the future of learning to read?

I would like to argue that decades of research have taught us some very fundamental things about how reading works and what children need to learn in order to read effectively. And I think that these basics are not likely to change in the near or distant future. So, in relation to these skills, in a sense we can learn something about the future of reading by looking to our past. However, there is an exciting and changing future as well, with amazing new technologies allowing children to acquire these basic skills in far more effective and interesting ways than has ever been the case before. And I think that’s really the power of the future here.

So let’s start with what’s not going to change. What are these basic skills that children need to learn? Decades of research have been pretty consistent on this. First, children really do need to learn what for a long time was the F-word in reading instruction: phonics.

There is now a massive amount of research to show that children who know the relationships between the letters that they see on the page and the sounds that those letters make – who know how to sound words out – make faster progress in reading than those who do not. And children with reading problems very often are found to have difficulty at this very basic level.

Why is being able to sound words out so important? It makes perfect sense when you think about it. Written language is a kind of code, and phonics skills help children crack it. If they see a written word for the first time, they don’t have to ask someone what it is, or try and guess it by looking at the picture on the page. They can sound it out for themselves and then match it up with a spoken word that they know. Since children already have thousands of words in their spoken vocabulary when they start to learn to read, this allows them to link this funny-looking new thing that they’re seeing with a whole lot of knowledge and information that they already have.

As one reading researcher put it, without the capacity to sound words out, learning to read would be like learning the contents of the telephone book!

Now of course children vary in how much they need to be taught phonics versus figuring it out for themselves. Lots of children are able to pick up the basic rules on their own, without explicit instruction. This is probably why some teachers find it hard to believe that phonics is so important – they see many examples of success without it. But, another substantial group of kids – those that we might want to worry about, those that might be thought of as being at risk for reading problems – really do need to be explicitly taught. And that is not going to change any time soon.

What is the second basic skill? Well, anyone that has learned to read in English knows that phonics alone will never be enough. With phonics alone, how on earth would we read words like “yacht” or “blood” or “meringue”? And we’d be pointing over there to “circular kway”! Yes, to become fluent readers, children do need to learn to recognise words ‘by sight’.

And this is not just the case for those weird words like “yacht”, but for all words. You and I don’t read by sounding everything out as if we were seeing it for the first time. That would take forever! Certainly, no-one would ever get to the end of War and Peace.

We recognise words quickly and rapidly because we’ve seen them thousands of times before. Sounding-out certainly helped us get started, but then we had to move beyond that. And children must do the same – that is why they need to build a “sight vocabulary”, with lots of exposure and repetition, particularly of the tricky words. And that is also not going to change any time soon.

I want to be clear that no one thinks that these basic skills are the end-point of the learning to read process. The end-point of the learning to read process is my 12-year-old son curled under his doona at midnight with a torch because he can’t possibly go to sleep until he gets to the end of The Hunger Games. But these
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skills are the building blocks, and we know that most reading problems can be traced to difficulties in these basic skills.

We reading researchers often use the analogy of learning to play the piano. To be a good pianist, you have to learn your scales. No one thinks playing scales is the end-point of piano playing, but you won’t be a good pianist unless you do them. Beginning pianists have to practice their scales even though skilled pianists don’t. In just the same way, beginning readers have to use phonics even though skilled readers don’t.

So I’ve talked about what isn’t going to change in reading’s future, but what is going to change? Well very fortunately for your children and mine, I think that that is all about the delivery. One of the reasons phonics went out of fashion in the 1970s was because it was just so darn boring – for the child and for the teacher. So many worksheets and drills, and writing out line after line.

But with the technology available to us today, children can have a wonderful, engaging, interactive experience while still being taught these basic skills. There are online companies that have built phonics programs around exactly the kinds of learning principles that make children motivated – they are bright and animated. The children have their own ‘avatars’ and earn points by demonstrating their learning – that can then be used to dress or decorate their avatars. They can go on adventures, where the clues are gradually revealed as they demonstrate higher and higher levels of skill. They can have online competitions with other children at the same level as them, not just in Australia, but all over the world. And there’s nothing like a competition to get kids going! It is true that learning can’t always be fun, and we shouldn’t expect that, but if it is fun – that’s a bonus.

The opportunities for teachers with these technologies have also expanded enormously. Many of these programs allow teachers to tailor the program to exactly what an individual child needs. For example, they can input into the program the exact set of sight words that a particular child doesn’t know and needs to learn, and the learning games and activities will then be built around those sight words, for that child. They can monitor online exactly what each child has done, how much time they have taken, and what they have achieved. They can adjust the reward structure depending on the needs of the child. I think new technology allows for individually structured learning that would be almost impossible in a more traditional classroom setting.

And in terms of the second basic skill, building a sight vocabulary through exposure and repetition, new technology also has a lot to offer. Print is all around us – arguably more so than ever before – with social media like Facebook and Twitter all being heavily text-based. Whereas once children might have communicated with each other by getting on the telephone or going to a friend’s house, now they start typing!

In conclusion, I think the future is very bright for reading, and for learning to read. It is easy to be fearful of new technologies – to think that they are going to over-stimulate children, or destroy their attention spans, or send their brains to porridge. I know of no evidence that any of those things is the case (despite a fair bit of scaremongering around the place). On the contrary, as long as we keep an eye on the lessons of the past, new technologies will take us into an exciting future, with reading at its core.

Professor Anne Castles is Head of the Department of Cognitive Science at Macquarie University and Deputy Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders. You can follow her on Twitter (@annecastles), where she comments on issues related to reading difficulties and other cognitive disorders.

An evaluation of a Tier Two small group ‘MiniLit’ intervention for young struggling readers: A randomised control trial

Jennifer Buckingham, Kevin Wheldall, and Robyn Wheldall, Macquarie University

In the 2010 National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), 6.3% of Year 3 children – the equivalent of 15,000 children nationally – did not meet the minimum literacy levels considered appropriate for their age. Wide variations in literacy abilities are evident, in fact, even when children begin school, and this is often associated with socioeconomic background. Without high quality reading instruction, literacy gaps persist and widen as children progress through school impacting on academic achievement as well as school completion and post-school outcomes.

Even with high-quality classroom teaching, some children will still have difficulty learning to read. For these children, early identification and intervention with an effective supplementary reading program can help to prevent ongoing reading difficulties. In a Response-to-Intervention (RtI) model of reading instruction, ‘tiers’ of instruction of increasing intensity are provided to children, according to need. In a typical RtI implementation, children who are not making good progress with whole-class literacy instruction (Tier 1) are provided with supplementary small group instruction (Tier 2). Those children who do not respond to Tier 2 intervention receive one-to-one, specialised instruction (Tier 3).

Very few small group (Tier 2) evidence-based literacy interventions for young struggling readers are used in Australia. The most common reading intervention in Australian schools is Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993) – a one-to-one remedial literacy program available only to students in Year 1. As such, Reading Recovery is relatively costly and limited in reach.
MiniLit (Meeting Initial Needs in Literacy) was developed by the MultiLit team to meet the need for a Tier 2 intervention that includes all of the components of effective reading instruction identified in large-scale reviews of reading research both in Australia and internationally. These components are: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Each MiniLit lesson is highly structured and sequenced and uses direct instruction techniques such as model-lead-test. MiniLit has previously been the subject of a number of studies, three of which were pilot studies and one a small experimental trial. These studies each provided positive evidence of the program’s efficacy.

A second experimental trial will be reported in an article to be published in the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties. In this study, 22 students in Kindergarten and Year 2 in a public primary school in New South Wales participated in a randomised control trial. The experimental group attended MiniLit lessons for one hour each day, four days a week, for three school terms. The control group remained in their usual classrooms for literacy instruction. All students were given a short battery of tests both before and following the MiniLit intervention. The test battery consisted of: the Martin and Pratt Nonword Reading Test which measures phonological recoding; the Burt Word Reading Test which measures single word reading; the South Australian Spelling Test which measures written spelling; and the Wheldall Assessment of Reading Lists (WARL) which measures single word reading fluency.

Statistically significant differences (p<0.01) were found, favouring the MiniLit group, between the experimental and control groups for the Martin and Pratt Nonword Reading Test and the Burt Reading Test after three terms of instruction, with very large effect sizes. Positive, but non-statistically significant, differences in favour of the MiniLit group were found for the South Australian Spelling Test and the WARL, with large and small effect sizes, respectively. The strength of the results in the Martin and Pratt test is also seen in the students’ percentile rankings. After three terms, only three of 11 control students were above the bottom quartile (bottom 25%), and none were above the 40th percentile. In the experimental group, eight of 11 students were above the bottom quartile at post-test, and seven of these were at the 50th percentile or higher.

Several factors may have influenced the results. The program was unfamiliar to both the instructors and the students. Treatment integrity data collected through lesson observations indicated that this affected the quality of instruction. Failure to achieve statistical significance in the tests where there was a large treatment effect may have been due to the reduced sample size. The relatively small and homogenous sample, and the limited scope of the tests, constrain generalisation of the findings but, overall, the study findings provide further evidence for the efficacy of the program. MiniLit had a powerful effect on phonetic word attack skills and single word reading, and positive but weaker effects on spelling and oral reading fluency, when implemented in a regular school setting. This study adds to the extent research literature on effective Tier 2 interventions for young struggling readers.


Note: This study was completed by the first author (under the supervision of the second and third authors) who won the 2012 LDA Tertiary Student Award for this work.

Excellent brain food! An unsolicited book review

Peter Westwood

Last week, on a humid afternoon spent productively in my air-conditioned local library, I was fortunate enough to stumble upon a book titled Reading in the brain. This text was written in 2009 by Stanislas Dehaene, director of the Cognitive Neuroimaging Unit in Saclay, France. He is one of the most active researchers in the field of neuroscience, and has been involved for some time in exploring the processing of language and number in the human brain. In discussing what the author terms ‘the hidden logic of our spelling system’, he provides us with much that we did not know about our writing system in English and in other languages. The writer explores in great detail the origins of reading and writing as cognitive behaviours, and identifies their neurological underpinnings. He seeks to address what he calls the ‘reading paradox’ – namely that our cortex, which evolved over millions of years in a world totally without writing, has had to adapt to recognising words and symbols. How is this possible? And what are the implications of this for the teaching of reading?

Dehaene devotes eight chapters to addressing the associated issues, with each chapter written in a clear and elegant style that even those with minimal knowledge of neuroscience can follow and enjoy. Most importantly, he interprets the neurological perspective in terms of its teaching and learning implications. In this respect he reveals a remarkable grasp of pedagogy, far beyond that found in most neuroscientific texts and journal papers. His plea is for designing and using teaching methods that are truly ‘scientific’ in the sense that they bring together the best research knowledge from psychology, neuroscience and pedagogy.

Members of LDA will be heartened by Dehaene’s categorical statements: “Cognitive psychology directly refutes any notion of teaching via a ‘global’ or ‘whole language’ method” (p. 219) and “We now know that the whole-language approach is inefficient; all children regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds benefit from explicit and early teaching of the correspondences between letters and speech sounds. This is a well-established fact, corroborated by a great many classroom experiments.”

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As easy as I K E A…?

Kevin Wheldall

IKEA has to be one of my least favourite shopping venues. Doubtless many excellent homeware products are available there if you are brave enough to enter the IKEA maze. But, frankly, I break out in a cold sweat on the rare occasions I venture inside and vow to take a ball of string next time, so that I’ll be able to find my way out again. I have to admit, however, that I am always fascinated by the Scandiwegian names of the various items on display. Last time I visited, I started to copy some of the words down until I was put off by the nervous looks of fellow shoppers who were clearly not as amused. ‘SNITSIG’ read one sign; STUVA read another; and then came GORM, LEKSVIK, BOLMEN, MAMMUT, BARNSLIG and SNIGLAR, like a troop of dwarves from Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings.

If it were not for the presence of the items themselves or the smaller explanatory labels in English, I would not know to what these words referred. Nevertheless, I could read them all aloud easily (if not necessarily pronounced totally correctly), as could most young fluent readers who have been taught the alphabetic principle of letter/sound correspondence, also known as phonics. In fact, walking through IKEA and reading the signs is a bit like taking the sort of reading test we give young children to find out if they are making good progress in the basics of learning to read.

Such tests of ‘nonwords’, words that are phonically regular but have no meaning in English like ‘snitsig’ or ‘gorm’, can be very useful. They help to tell us how well children are able to decode words they have no chance of utilising their existing knowledge of word meanings. But if they cannot decode the words on the page in the first place, they have no chance of using their existing knowledge of word meanings.

By using IKEA type tests of meaningless words, we can help to determine whether children are progressing well in the important precondition of being able to decode words. If they are, then when they encounter unfamiliar words in future, they will be able to use their phonics skills to sound out the word, relate it to a word already in their spoken vocabulary and, hence, derive its meaning. Of course, we also need to assess other aspects of a child’s reading skill such as reading fluency and, especially, reading comprehension per se. But it would be a mistake to dismiss nonword tests as irrelevant in the quest for meaning. Something to think about the next time you go past the SNIGLAR and the MAMMUT in your quest to find that elusive IKEA exit.

Note: You can follow Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM on Twitter (@KevinWheldall) where he comments on reading and education (and anything else that takes his fancy). You can also follow his blog, ‘Notes from Harefield: Reflections by Kevin Wheldall on reading, books, education, family and life in general’ (www.kevinwheldall.com).

... continued from page 27

Furthermore, it is coherent with our present understanding of how the reader’s brain works” (p. 326). He also explains: “It simply is not true that there are hundreds of ways to learn to read […] when it comes to reading we all have roughly the same brain that imposes the same constraints and the same learning sequence” (p. 218). I am sure that this observation will not sit comfortably with the very many Australian primary school teachers who still subscribe fully to the (highly questionable) notion of students’ ‘unique learning styles’ and ‘individual differences’, and who claim that ‘one size does not fit all’ when it comes to teaching methods. Too often these misguided beliefs seem then to translate into a lack of any systematic instruction during the crucial early years of schooling.

Dehaene has finally convinced me that genuine dyslexia does indeed have a neurological underpinning. In all my years of writing about students with learning difficulties I have always fought shy of committing entirely to this viewpoint, but this book consolidates the scientific evidence. Dehaene goes on to state that teachers should not feel discouraged and defeated by the knowledge that dyslexia is brain-based – he points out that evidence from brain imaging shows that well-targeted, intensive and prolonged intervention can increase the literacy skills of dyslexic students. Their progress is most evident when the intervention involves not only phonological skills and decoding instruction, but also strengthens students’ motivation and attention to task. He states that maximising attention and positive emotions can have a very beneficial effect on learning at a neurocognitive level.

I recommend this remarkable book to all teachers of literacy. It adds tremendously to our knowledge base on reading, writing and spelling.

Reference

The Arrowsmith Program: The triumph of hype over science

Linda Siegel, University of British Columbia

Those of us who work professionally with people with learning disabilities know the anguish, lack of self-esteem, and despair that often haunts these individuals, their parents and teachers. We all wish fervently for any cure to fix the problem.

Capitalising on the desires of the teachers and parents of children with learning disabilities, the Arrowsmith Program offers a “solution” to learning problems. The program is based on the concept of neuroplasticity: that the brain and the nervous system are capable of changing. This concept of neuroplasticity is derived from a century of research showing changes in the brain and nervous system after various kinds of experience or learning. Barbara Arrowsmith designed the program in 1978. It consists of a series of repetitive exercises that children do daily, for example tracing Hindu script with a patch over one eye, watching and responding to clocks on the screen, and memorising sequences of shapes and finding them in a group of figures.

Claims of the Arrowsmith Program

The website (www.arrowsmithschool.org) makes the following statement:

“The Arrowsmith Program identifies, intervenes and strengthens the weak cognitive capacities that affect learning. It is possible for students to strengthen the weak cognitive capacities underlying their learning dysfunctions through a program of specific cognitive exercises.”

The website further claims that:

“Our program has proven effective for students having difficulty with reading, writing and mathematics, comprehension, logical reasoning, problem solving, visual and auditory memory, non-verbal learning, attention, processing speed and dyslexia.”

Their philosophy is one of treating the “underlying processing deficits”. The website states that, “Students with learning disabilities have traditionally been treated with programs designed to compensate for their difficulties – students who have difficulty with handwriting, for example, would be taught to use a keyboard or accommodated with more time to write exams. The goal of the Arrowsmith Program, by contrast, is to help students strengthen the weak cognitive capacities underlying their learning dysfunctions. The Arrowsmith Program deals with the root causes of the learning disability rather than managing its symptoms.”

In fact, this is a quite unfair characterisation of other programs in that many treat the underlying problems directly, for example, the Orton-Gillingham Program (e.g. Simpson, Swanson, & Kunkel, 1992), the Wilson Program e.g. Guyer, Banks, & Guyer, 1993), Abracadabra (e.g. Savage et al., 2009), and Multilit (Wheldall, 2009), among others.

“It’s been thought deficits in the brain cannot be reduced, only compensated for. But a Toronto educator aims to prove that’s not the case.” (Sydney Morning Herald)

Barbara Arrowsmith has implied that her approach is novel because she believes that she is changing the brain; but educators have believed for centuries that when people were taught skills, the learning was reflected in changes in the brain, as opposed to the left big toe or the right elbow.

All this ‘change’ comes at a high price, however. The annual tuition fee for the 2012-2013 school year is $22,500 Canadian dollars (Arrowsmith School, Toronto) and $27,480 Canadian dollars (Eaton Arrowsmith School – Vancouver) (approximately equivalent to US dollars and Australian dollars at the time of writing). In addition, one must attend the school for three-four years to reap the benefits, although the website does say, “If a student is unable to complete the three to four year program, they achieve benefit for every year they are in the program.”

What the research says

Given all these claims, it is appropriate to ask what the research says about the effectiveness of the Arrowsmith Program. There are two studies cited on the website, the Lancee and the Catholic Board study. Neither of these studies provide evidence of the effectiveness of the Arrowsmith Program and suffer from a variety of methodological problems.

1. Neither study has a control group. Obviously, a control group is necessary to show that any observed improvement was due to the treatment and not merely the passage of time or that some other less expensive program might result in the same benefits. Furthermore, the control group should have similar scores to the treatment group at the start of the study.

2. There are various problems with the measures used in the studies. In the study conducted in the Toronto Catholic School District, the measure that was used was grade level. This measure is not considered a good one because of its psychometric measurement problems. Percentiles or standard scores are considered the appropriate ones to use. A grade level improvement of one grade level means something quite different at Grade 2 than at Grade 6.

3. In the study conducted by Lancee, one of the problems with this study is that all of the measures, from copying to arithmetic, are considered equal. This method is similar to taking height and weight and averaging them. So a person

Continued on page 30...
who is very tall (height above average) and very thin (weight below average) would be said to be average. The measures used are quite different and should not be averaged together.
4. To be included in the study, a child had to have at least one score below the 15th percentile. However, a low score on a test of copying is not the same as a low score on a test of reading. The latter would be considered much more of a problem. The battery included tests of copying, crossing out letters, and auditory and visual memory. If a child had a problem on these tests, and not on the achievement tests of reading spelling or arithmetic, we would not say that this child had a learning disability. It is simply impossible to say which of these children had a learning disability. Because of this inappropriate way of averaging scores, it is not possible to say who improved and on what.
5. Some unknown proportion of the children were not LD in the first place. We do not know how many children were actually low in achievement when they started the Arrowsmith Program. We are not provided with enough information. Some may have not had much of a problem.
6. We do not know how many and who dropped out. This is a problem for both studies. It is possible that the children with the most severe deficits dropped out.

Vancouver study
I conducted a small-scale study comparing a classroom using the Arrowsmith program in the Vancouver School District to a class for children with learning disabilities that use a combination of direct instruction and small group learning through projects, film-making, and journal-writing activities. The children in both classes were assessed before and after the program on a variety of reading spelling and mathematics tests. I found that there was very little improvement in the children’s academic skills in either class. In some cases, the academic skills of the children actually decreased. It should be noted that the classroom program cost a small fraction of the Arrowsmith program.

Science versus hype
The website features glowing testimonials to the progress that students have allegedly made as a result of the program. The Arrowsmith program may be short on scientific evidence to support its validity but it is long on hype.

Norman Doidge, a psychiatrist in Toronto, praised the program in his recent book. It is important to note that Doidge has never published a referred journal article on learning disabilities (source: Google Scholar). It is also not clear that he has any training in the area of learning disabilities.

The program has received praise from a writer in the Sydney Morning Herald. It is important to note that the writer of the article had her trip from Australia to Toronto paid for by Harper Collins, the publisher of Barbara Arrowsmith’s new book. Objectivity has no place in the theatre of hype.

When I spoke out stating that there was no research supporting the effectiveness of the Arrowsmith Program and questioned the validity of it, I was threatened with a lawsuit. One person on a blog subsequently remarked that if they have enough money to pay an expensive lawyer, then they should be able to afford to do research.

In spite of the testimonials on the website, not all the students have been satisfied. I received a letter from a former student who wrote, “I am a former student at Arrowsmith School’s Toronto branch. Looking back to the time when I attended the school, I think it’s one of the biggest regrets in my life. I simply did not see the purpose of their program nor the huge amount that it cost… Then there was also the constant promotion of their school and requesting parents to let students be filmed and interviewed... I also really regret falling back two years in school and not being able to be around kids of my average age group.”

Issues to consider
The Arrowsmith program design is based on the assumption that treating these learning dysfunctions transfers to broad skills such as reading and mathematics. However, this has not been investigated empirically. The children in the Arrowsmith Program do not receive content area instruction in reading and mathematics, although that is changing. There are negative cumulative effects of poor reading and low school achievement over time in children with learning disabilities. If transfer from these discrete skills to broad skills does not occur over time for the children enrolled in the Arrowsmith program, there is potential for lost opportunity to acquire background knowledge, continue to develop reading ability, concepts and knowledge associated with content area learning. If these children only receive curricular instruction half of the time, and not in all areas (e.g. mathematics), and these discrete skills do not transfer, this may be very detrimental.

Invoking brain-based explanations for learning
Invoking brain-based explanations is a frequently used tool for programs purporting to help children with learning disabilities. For example, there is no evidence to support these 19 processes as representing the only, or the most important areas for academic skills. Larry A. Alferink and Valeri Farmer-Dougall (2010) urge caution in invoking brain-based explanations for learning:

“Certainly our understanding of how neurons work, the role of neurotransmitters, and data showing correlations between brain activity and academic tasks has provided distinct clues into how a child learns. 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. Thus, the problem is not with what neuroscientists and educators know, but with what they think they know. This ‘filling-in-the-gaps’ results from a variety of factors including misunderstanding of the research, misinterpretation or over interpretation of the data, and a belief in claims that are unsubstantiated or go beyond what the evidence supports.”

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Buyer beware
In my opinion, hype has triumphed over science in the case of the Arrowsmith Program. There is no credible evidence to support the claims of the program. Objectivity has no place in the theatre of hype.

References

Linda Siegel
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Fonetik Spelling

Readers of the *LDA Bulletin* may be interested to visit the website created by Craig Jackson, an educational psychologist in New Zealand. He is the designer of the remedial approach known as Fonetik Spelling. This approach encourages weak spellers to attempt to spell a new word phonetically (as it sounds) and then to check the correct spelling by entering the attempted word in a Franklin Spell-checker. After checking carefully, the word is then entered correctly into the student's written work.

The website contains a very clear video presentation illustrating the steps involved in teaching a student to apply the Fonetik method. I recommend that readers have a look at this demonstration, and then consider the teaching principles involved in the lesson. What skills are being developed? Do they help the student to become more independent in relation to spelling?

www.fonetik.co.nz or via ezispel.com

Program Review: Phonics Alive! 2 The Sound Blender

Phonics Alive! 2 The Sound Blender is published by Advanced Software, Noosaville, Qld (2004). The teacher’s manual is written by Judith Hall. Price ranges from $45.41 for the home version CD plus operating manual and $100 for a single school version CD plus teacher’s manual, to $590 for an unlimited network licence. To purchase visit www.phonicsalive.com.au

Review by Fay Tran
The *Sound Blender* is both a teaching and practice program for children developing and consolidating phonics knowledge and skills. The program consists of 12 sequenced modules, practising the blending of sounds ranging from single letters in Module 1, to ‘ch’, ‘sh’ and ‘th’ in Module 6, to ‘or/ore’, ‘aw/au’, ‘phi’, ‘kn’, and ‘wr’ in Module 12. The child is guided through each exercise by an encouraging Australian voice, sounding like a friendly teacher, and is rewarded for correct decisions by amusing graphics. Each module contains exercises practising the recognition of the target letter/sound combination, reading words and writing words. All also have a rhyming exercise, except Module 1, which is an introductory unit working on CVC words. The last two exercises, ‘Building speed in Blending’ and ‘Keyboard skills’ are time limited.

The program normally starts a child at the point that he stopped the previous session, even if this is not at the end of a module. However, the teacher has the option of moving the child to another module or even an exercise within a module. There is an option of printing out a certificate of achievement at the end of each module showing the percentage of correct decisions made by the child when working on that module. The teacher can also access a diagnostic report indicating which items were incorrect.

The home version comes with a CD, an operating manual and lower case letter stickers for the computer keyboard. The school version also has a Teacher’s Guide in a ringback folder that includes several pages of phonics-based exercises for each module. These can be photocopied and used as a sequential spelling or word reading program with or without the computer program.

Continued on page 32...
For each exercise, the student is asked to make decisions which require phonics knowledge and blending skills, and they quickly discover that guessing does not work. For example, when the child is asked to select the word for a picture of a clock, the choices are ‘lock’, ‘cluck’, ‘clock’, and ‘clash’. If a child persists with a trial and error approach, as they all do in gaming these days, I point out that every mistake loses points from the final score, and that usually changes the strategy to careful blending. I like the instant feedback after each word and the friendly request to have another try when a word is incorrect.

Children enjoy the amusing graphics and most enjoy trying to beat the clock in the timed exercises. The quick reading exercise has ample time for the child to choose the correct word, but I find that my students often struggle with the time limit in the final exercise, which requires the child to type the word quickly. I like the fact that the target word is displayed and then disappears, before the child is permitted to start typing, but my students spend the waiting time frantically trying to position their fingers over the correct keys, so that they can type the word quickly once the program voice says ‘Go’! I would prefer the option of extending or removing the time limit for this exercise.

I have used The Sound Blender for several years, working with children with learning difficulties both in a school setting and also as a private tutor. While I use other programs as well, I like to make sure that every child works through the 12 modules of The Sound Blender when they are ready to do so. For me, The Sound Blender is a practice and revision program, brushing up on blending skills, but it is also the ideal program for children to use at home or in the classroom. Because it both teaches and practises blending skills, it can benefit the child user, even if the supervising parent or teacher does not have the skill or knowledge themselves.

Elaine’s retirement
It was a sad day when we said thank you and goodbye to Elaine, our Referral Officer, in June. A special thank-you must be made to Molly de Lemos for finding a replacement for Elaine.

Transition to new referral system
Ruth Jeffery took on the role of Acting Referral Officer from 14 July.

The transition from Elaine to Ruth took place in three phases.

In the first phase, starting at the beginning of April, Molly set up a database to enter the data from the request for referral forms, going back over the past month (i.e. from the beginning of March). All the information provided by the parent on the Request for Referral Form was entered on the database, with the further information on the Consultants to whom the request was referred, the Consultant who took on the referral being added, and then finally the information on invoicing and payment of the referral fee. Over this period, some changes were made to the Request for Referral Form and the way in which the database was structured. This was to ensure that the information required was collected and recorded in a form that made subsequent data entry and analysis easier and more efficient.

In the second phase, once the database had been set up and the data entry was operating smoothly, data from the Request for Referral Forms and the further information on the Consultants to whom the request was referred, as well as the payment of the referral fee, was passed on to Ruth Jeffery. This phase started in early June.

In the third phase, starting on 14 July, responsibility for actually making the referrals by responding to parent requests for referrals, sending information on appropriate Consultants to the parents, notifying the consultants concerned, and following up the referral and the invoicing of the referral fee, was taken over by Ruth. For this purpose, Ruth was provided with the profiles of the Consultants as well as a ‘search file’ of Consultants which included information on their areas of specialisation and their location, to facilitate matching the requirements of the person being referred to an appropriate consultant in their geographic location.

This three-phase transition led to a very smooth transfer from Elaine to Ruth as Acting Referral Officer.

A major change in the new system is that instead of the payment to the Referral Officer being based on a proportion of the Referral fee (two-thirds to Elaine, one-third to LDA), payment to the Acting Referral Officer will be based on hours worked, and the referral fee will be paid direct to LDA. Another associated change is that instead of the Referral fee being based on the cost of one tutoring session, a standard referral fee of $60 is now being charged for each referral taken on. This new referral fee applies to all referrals handled...
Report from Victorian Referral Officer

This will be my final report for the Bulletin after 10 years as the Referral Officer in Victoria. In April 2002 I took over the referral work from Rosemary Carter. It was a daunting task to follow someone who had done such an outstanding job but Rosemary provided a comprehensive handover and continuing support and advice throughout the decade. I could not have done it without the access to her wisdom and knowledge.

In more recent times I have also had the benefit of working closely with Jan Roberts as the leader of the Consultants’ Committee. Jan’s support has been crucial to me, especially during some tough personal times. Thank you Jan.

I have also developed other friendships with Consultants over the years whose positive feedback about my work has helped to keep me motivated. I will miss both the personal and professional contact with Consultants.

The transition to a new Referral Service is underway and consultants will be kept informed by Molly de Lemos. For the past few months, I have been providing Molly with all the data related to the Referral Service and she has been establishing an extensive database. I ceased handling new referrals at the end of July but will remain available to provide support as required. I am extremely grateful to Molly for the huge amount of time and expertise she has provided to ensure as smooth a transition as possible.

Finally, I want to give my best wishes to all Victorian Consultants. It’s been a privilege to work with such a highly professional and dedicated group.

Elaine McLeish
Referral Officer, Victoria
ehmcleish@iinet.net.au
### Summary of referrals: October-December 2007-2011

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### Referrals by year level: January 2011 – March 2012

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## Analysis of current LDA membership, as at 19 August 2012

### Summary of current membership 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Consultants</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Life M</th>
<th>Life CM</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members renewing</td>
<td>147</td>
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### Summary by state

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<th>SA</th>
<th>WA</th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>TAS</th>
<th>NT</th>
<th>Int</th>
<th>Total</th>
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### New members 2012

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<th>Student</th>
<th>Total</th>
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### Members renewing 2012

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<th>Student</th>
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<th>Life CM</th>
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### Members not renewing 2012

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</table>
Membership Application Form 2013

Deadline for next issue of LDA BULLETIN: 1 March 2013

EDITORS:
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Organisation __________________________________________

(Institutional membership)

Type of organisation __________________________________________

(Indicate whether school, or if other institution, please describe nature of institution)

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(Institutional membership)

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Email __________________________________________

Tel ____________________________ Mobile ____________________________

Degree/Qualification __________________________________________

(Individual membership)

Current Occupation/Area of Interest __________________________________________

(Individual membership)

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When using EFT please include your name in the transfer information fields, and send completed application form to LDA by mail, fax or email, giving date and reference of EFT payment.

or

Charge my  ☐ VISA  ☐ Mastercard

Card No ____________ ____________ ____________ ____________ ____________  Expiry ____ / ____ / ____

Name on Card __________________________________________

Signature ____________________________ Date ____ / ____ / ____

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