

# The mission to improve reading instruction – How can we achieve success?

**Jennifer Buckingham,** recipient of the 2019 LDA Mona Tobias Award, reflects on the difficulties of bringing about the changes required to implement effective reading instruction for all children, based on the scientific evidence of what works.

**M**ona Tobias was a remarkable person. She directly and personally improved the quality of life of many children and families through her determination to ensure that their disabilities did not prevent them from receiving the education they deserved.

Many of the previous recipients of the Mona Tobias Award are people that I have had the great fortune of working with in some context or another over the past decade or more, and to whom I have looked many times for inspiration and guidance.

The truth is that I am just standing at the pointy end of the boat. There are a lot of people doing the hard work of rowing who have been at the oars for much longer than I have, so I am going to take this opportunity to acknowledge some of them and give an account of the way some important policy developments have come about over the past decade or so, and reiterate how important LDA and the people associated with it have been.

Louisa Moats' reports published by the Fordham Institute were a revelation

to me. Chester Finn Jr's preface to Louisa's report *Whole Language Lives On: The Illusion of Balanced Reading Instruction* published in 2000 says this about reading instruction: "No domain has been studied more intensely. None has yielded clearer and more definitive findings about what works and what does not. Yet no domain is more vulnerable to the perpetuation of bad ideas and failed methods".

The research underpinning systematic and explicit reading instruction made so much sense to me, but I was lucky; I didn't have a deeply embedded set of misguided beliefs about education that needed to be unpicked in order for the evidence-based arguments to take hold.

**Early reading success is implicated in every other educational issue. If children can't read, education is elusive.**

The inquiry into boys' education in 2000, which was initiated as a result of a paper I wrote for The Centre for Independent Studies, introduced me to MultiLit and to Kevin and Robyn Wheldall. My path crossed with Kevin and Robyn on various occasions after that, including via our mutual friend Noel Pearson, on whom Kevin has had a profound and lasting influence.

As Kevin said in his Mona Tobias speech, "since literacy underpins everything in terms of future success in school and beyond, it is our greatest hope for ensuring a 'fair go' for all Australians regardless of their social background."

When I took up the role of schools editor at *The Australian* newspaper in 2004, *The Australian* had just published an open letter to Brendan Nelson by 26 academics and reading specialists, exhorting him to take action to improve

reading instruction in Australian schools, many of whom were associated with LDA. The letter led to the National Inquiry Into Teaching Literacy, chaired by Ken Rowe.

The report from the Inquiry published in 2005 gave a strong endorsement to the findings of scientific research on reading. It was well received (with the usual exceptions) and its findings were reinforced by the Rose review in the UK the following year.

What happened next? In Australia, we had a change of minister in January 2006 and none of the NITL recommendations were put into action. In England, however, the government moved decisively to mandate systematic synthetic phonics in every primary school, supported by quality teaching resources. Imagine if even one state education minister in Australia had had the fortitude to do that in 2005. We might be in a very different position to where we are now.

When I returned to CIS I realised that all of my policy research work kept looping back to reading and literacy. Early reading success is implicated in every other educational issue. If children can't read, education is elusive.

When the opportunity arose to do a PhD project with Kevin and Robyn, I jumped at it. We wrote a paper called 'Why Jaydon Can't Read', which was part literature review, part policy analysis and part call-to-arms, and many people responded, some in public ways and others within their own sphere of influence.

It was that response that led to the creation of the FIVE from FIVE project. The launch of the Five from Five project, which involved ministers and senators,



as well Kerry Hempenstall and Jackie French – demonstrated that what it was trying to achieve was not just the obsession of a fringe element.

The Five from Five publication that set out the case for introducing the Year 1 phonics check that is used in English primary schools was influential in the Phonics Check being included in the federal government's policy platform in 2017. Molly de Lemos was an invaluable source of guidance.

Pamela Snow and Mandy Nayton, as well as this year's Bruce Wicking Award recipient Steven Capp, joined me on an expert panel to provide advice to the federal minister on the introduction of a Year 1 literacy assessment. The South Australian government, under two smart education ministers, was persuaded to run a trial and subsequently make it a bipartisan state-wide policy. A NSW trial is scheduled for 2020.

The phonics debate organised by Five from Five was another important event. Anne Castles participated in that debate against a high profile team, but ultimately the weakness in our opposing team's case provoked many influential people to finally acknowledge where the strength of evidence lies.

### **... perhaps the most fraught frontier in our collective mission to ensure all children receive high quality evidence-based reading instruction (is) initial teacher education.**

This 'highlights reel' shows the importance of the collaboration that is facilitated by LDA. On that note, I must also mention the value of the DDoLL email network started by Max Coltheart – a giant among giants in the field of reading research.

At the moment, I am involved in what is perhaps the most fraught frontier in our collective mission to ensure all children receive high quality evidence-based reading instruction: initial teacher education. Lorraine Hammond is joining me on a task force appointed by the federal education minister, for which the recent report published by MultiLit through the Five from Five project was the catalyst. Education Council, which comprises all state and territory and the federal education ministers, approved the working party's recommended changes to the ITE accreditation

standards at their meeting on December 12, 2019.

Unfortunately, this mission to improve reading instruction so all children learn to read is constantly being hampered by people determined to preserve the status quo. Reform of policy and practice is hard work and hard won.

Chester Finn, Jr. wrote, "The path to consensus via science is rarely straight; it can take years to achieve and the battles can be bloody. But eventually, the accumulation of evidence is hard, even impossible, to ignore." We have to believe that and never give up.

*Jennifer Buckingham is Director of Strategy and Senior Research Fellow at MultiLit and founder of the Five from Five project.*

Mona Tobias was a trained primary school teacher who was subsequently appointed, in 1937, as the sole staff member of the newly established Physically Handicapped section of the Correspondence School in North Fitzroy. In this role she became known for her pioneering work in developing programs to meet the needs of children with learning difficulties, and particularly the needs of children who had been affected by the polio epidemic of that year. On her retirement at the age of 65, with support from SPELD Victoria, she undertook a course on learning disabilities under Sam Clements at the University of Arkansas, and subsequently took charge of the private remedial clinic Gould House. In this work she exerted a very considerable influence on primary teaching in Victoria. Many thousands of teachers came voluntarily to be instructed by her and many hundreds of children owe directly to her their rescue from the despair of failure. She also inspired many hundreds of parents to provide intelligent support for their learning disabled children. In spite of illness and failing eyesight she continued to see children in her own home until her final admission to hospital in 1980.