

# FIVE from FIVE: Effective reading instruction in every classroom, every day

Early reading success is the foundation of educational attainment, individual prosperity, citizenship, and quality of life.

International assessments show that as many as one in four Australian children does not reach the minimum standard of reading necessary for progress in school at Year 4 (PIRLS, 2011). Children who cannot read well at this age are unlikely to catch up to their peers without intensive intervention.

These poor reading outcomes are not inevitable. Reading scientists estimate that only one in 20 children will have significant difficulty learning to read. Many of the students who struggle with reading in schools today are ‘instructional casualties’ – they could have learned to read if they had been taught using the most effective methods.

The *simple view of reading* is that reading requires two abilities – correctly identifying words and understanding their meaning. Acquisition of these two broad abilities requires the development of more specific skills. These five ‘pillars’ or keys to reading are widely accepted as the essential components of a quality literacy program. They are: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

There is strong, scientific evidence that the most effective way to teach these skills to all children is using reading instruction methods that are explicit, systematic, and sequential. This is especially important for teaching phonics, which is an abstract skill that unlocks the alphabetic code. Explicit instruction is beneficial for all children but especially important for children at greater risk of reading difficulties – children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, indigenous children, children for whom English is a second language, and children with learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

Low literacy is a persistent problem in Australia and will only be reduced when all schools use effective, evidence-based reading instruction and intervention. This does not require large amounts of extra funding for schools, it simply requires a change in practice. When all teachers have learned to use effective teaching methods, fewer children will need intervention and fewer children will leave school unable to read. The potential for welfare and justice system savings is high.

Billions of dollars have been spent on programs to improve literacy. Yet reading levels have barely shifted. The real problem is that many teachers do not have fundamental knowledge of language and literacy development, and have not been equipped with the evidence-based instructional strategies most likely to be effective in teaching reading. Schools and school systems are using programs that do not reflect the best evidence on effective instruction.

The Centre for Independent Studies’ project – FIVE from FIVE – is working to bridge the gap between the research on effective reading instruction and classroom practice. It draws on the expertise of reading scientists and expert practitioners to provide the highest quality information



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*The Hon. Adrian Piccoli, NSW Education Minister, at the launch of the FIVE from FIVE initiative.*

and resources for policymakers, educational leaders, and teachers. It has an alliance of organisations and people working toward the same goal.

FIVE from FIVE targets school education to maximise its impact. The years prior to school are very important for literacy and language development, but highly effective classroom teaching can reduce the gaps. Unlike early childhood programs which only reach some children, a focus on schools will potentially reach every child, every day.

The FIVE from FIVE website is evolving to provide the evidence base for the five 'keys' to reading and the most effective ways to teach them, to providing specific guidance and resources for parents who want to know how to help their child's reading development, and practical support for teachers who want to know how the research applies in the classroom. The evidence base was published in a research report by Dr Kerry Hempenstall – *Read About It: Scientific Evidence for the Effective Teaching of Reading* – which is available to download from the FIVE from FIVE website.

A key initiative of FIVE from FIVE is advocating for a Phonics Screening Check of Year 1 students in all Australian schools, following the outstanding success of the UK Government's policies on early reading instruction. Since the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check in England in 2012, the number of children not reaching the expected reading standard in Year 2 literacy tests has decreased by a third.

A Phonics Screening Check in Australian schools would reveal which

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schools are teaching phonics well, and which students are in need of support. Phonetic decoding ability is a powerful predictor of reading success; early identification is crucial and intervention is crucial. While phonics alone is not enough to get children reading well, it is essential. Improving this aspect of reading instruction would be an important first step on the road to improving literacy.

*Dr Jennifer Buckingham is a senior research fellow and director of the FIVE from FIVE reading project at the Centre for Independent Studies. The FIVE from FIVE project promotes effective reading instruction through its website [www.fivefromfive.org.au](http://www.fivefromfive.org.au) and social media @fivefromfive and [www.facebook.com/fivefromfive/](https://www.facebook.com/fivefromfive/).*