

Are we there yet?

The long, steep and winding road towards improved reading instruction

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All parents will be familiar with the pleading question from the back seat on long (or sometimes not so long) car journeys, normally delivered in the most whinging (whining for US readers) tone of voice possible: ‘Are we there yet?’ As the youngest of four children, growing up in the 1960s and sitting unrestrained in the back of the family station wagon, mine may have been the loudest voice in this chorus. I hope the advent of car air conditioning, screens and wireless headphones makes for easier car trips these days for parents. However, I have been reminded of the ‘are we there yet?’ plea in the context of recent media interest in the ongoing problem of how we teach children to read (or in many cases do not).

If you’ve missed the recent media offerings, you can find Rebecca Urban’s piece in *The Australian* [here](#) and Jordan Baker’s *Good Weekend* feature article [here](#) (apologies if you strike a paywall).

The road towards improved reading instruction has been made unnecessarily long and complicated as a result of those in the front seat accepting directions from people who may be well-intentioned, but don’t actually know what the destination looks like, or how to get there. It’s also been muddled by advice from people who thought we would be better off heading down a side street because the town down that way is pretty and everyone seems happy there. Some people don’t necessarily think there’s a destination at all; rather that wherever we are right now is just fine and there’s no need to move on to greener pastures.

I thought it might be time to check the map, because there have been some dead ends and unnecessary detours that have made this journey longer and more painful than it ever needed to be.

So let’s see how we’re travelling and do some misdirection fact-checking along the way.

Misdirection 1: Tensions in how to teach reading are a battle between whole language and ‘phonics’.

This is overly simplistic. The key tension, as I see it in 2021, is between instruction that is delivered explicitly by teachers who are highly knowledgeable about all aspects of the English language (spoken and written) and instruction that is delivered by teachers who have been presented with an extremely restricted lens on reading and are overly reliant on a limited and superficial repertoire of classroom materials and routines. Such materials often include expensive classroom sets of levelled (predictable) readers that do not follow a scope and sequence with respect to the teaching of phoneme-grapheme correspondences and sets of ‘sight’ words which children do not have the tools to analyse at a sub-lexical level, so must over-burden their



fragile visual memory systems by learning them as pictographs. Then there is the all-too-familiar whole language throwback, [Multi-Cueing \(Three Cueing\)](#) and some frankly bizarre advice, like telling children to ‘get your mouth ready’ to read an unfamiliar word.

None of this would matter, of course, if we were more successfully teaching 95 per cent of children to read, as the [cognitive psychology research indicates we should be](#)*. We’re not even close.

*If you cannot access this paper by Dr Kerry Hempenstall, the key quote (2013, pp. 108–109) is this:

According to research, we should not be content until the reading difficulty rate falls to around 5 per cent ... Until then, we are not teaching reading well enough, and many students do not have an inbuilt resistance to learning how to read, but should be considered as instructional casualties.

The wrong turn here that has delayed our journey is that universities, by a process of steady erosion of teacher

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knowledge in initial teacher education (ITE) over recent decades, have oversimplified the reading process, for both teachers and children. That means that rather than needing faculty who are knowledgeable about the linguistic basis of reading, universities have reassured themselves that it’s okay for this part of the ITE curriculum to be delivered by academics with backgrounds in anything from [drama, art and secondary English literature](#). This has resulted in a collective form of interpretative dance around such fundamental questions as the meaning of the word ‘literacy’ (insert just about any meaning you like and it will get up; the more postmodern it sounds, the better). I am yet to meet a primary school teacher who sees an opening for critical literacy in their struggle to teach six year olds how to spell; nor have I met a primary teacher who has asked for assistance in supporting students with multiliteracies. If you want to test these propositions, it is easy to do so:

- Ask some recent graduates what theories of reading they learned at university.
- Ask what they learned about the three national inquiries into the teaching of literacy that were held between 2000 and 2006.

- Ask whether reading is a biologically primary or secondary skill, and why this matters.
- Ask what the relationship is between oral language abilities and learning to read.
- Ask them to define phonemic awareness and morphological awareness.
- Ask about the difference between synthetic and analytic phonics.
- Ask what they know about orthographic mapping.
- Ask how they teach spelling.
- Ask whether they are confident identifying and supporting struggling readers.
- Ask whether they need professional learning on critical literacies, multiliteracies and/or neoliberal praxis in the early years' classroom.

Why are students in related disciplines such as speech-language pathology and educational and developmental psychology learning about these fundamental concepts and yet teachers, in most cases, are not? Why have education faculties given away the family china? If you give away the family china, you can't then complain that others find it useful in their work. I wrote about the issue of education discarding precious knowledge from its teacher education programs back in 2017. You can read that blog post [here](#).

Misdirection 2: Calling for improved reading instruction means advocating for a 'phonics only' approach.

This straw man would be laughable if it were not so disappointing and exhausting. It is reading instruction's flat tyre that results in a collective moan from

the back seat, as everyone piles out to stand by the side of the road while even more time is wasted.

As per Misdirection 1, the debate needs to be much more nuanced than this. Advocates of improved reading instruction spend just as much time talking about the role of vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, syntax, discourse and so on, as they do about how speech and print map to each other in English. Related to this, it is inaccurate to suggest that systematic and explicit phonics instruction (whether synthetic or not) by definition bypasses vocabulary development. It does not. Its prime function is to *automatise children's mastery of the code*, but if teachers are teaching decoding without incidentally talking about meanings of words, putting them in sentences and drawing children's attention to morphological markers (e.g., plural -s, present progressive -ing), then there's some low-hanging fruit they can access to enrich their teaching as of Monday morning.

You can decode something you can't understand particularly well (like me reading in my rusty school-girl French), but you can't understand something at all that you can't decode (like me being presented with a page of text written in Arabic). If you don't a) know that there is a code and b) know how to decipher the code, then you cannot 'read for meaning'. Reading will remain an opaque mystery and your academic success will be jeopardised accordingly.

If we can't get past this road-block in the reading debate, we cannot get on to the pressing and important matters of [strengthening vocabulary](#), getting students over [David Corson's 'lexical bar'](#), and [improving their writing skills](#) (to name a few imperatives).

Misdirection 3: The real culprits here are parents. They are either too poor, too non-English speaking or too busy to teach their children to read themselves.

This is a pernicious but transparent attempt to shift responsibility for reading instruction from schools (whose job it is) to parents (whose job it is not).

Does anyone remember the bumper sticker (below) from the 1980s? I wonder why we don't see it anymore. Could it be that the inverse is also true – if you can't read it, did something go wrong in your early reading instruction?

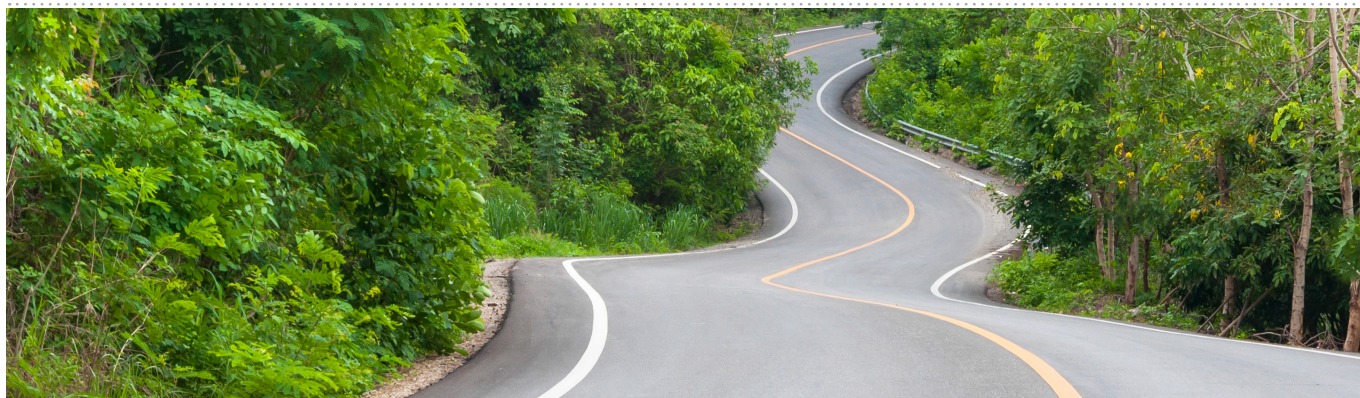
The myth that parents reading to their children will rid the world of illiteracy has been [promulgated by children's author Mem Fox](#) and resoundingly [rebuffed by Distinguished Professor Anne Castles](#) of Macquarie University. This particular misdirection is related to the notion of reading being 'natural', as discussed further below (see Misdirection 5).

Misdirection 4: Teachers are professionals and the rest of the community should just trust them to know what's best for children in their class.

I have written about the issue of professionalism previously (see [here](#)). This idea is so out of step with community standards and expectations, it's hard to know where to start. Doctors, nurses, psychologists, physiotherapists, engineers, speech pathologists, lawyers, etc, are not afforded the freedom to *do their own thing*. Professionalism is a highly constrained form of accountability. Members of other disciplines are held to account by professional bodies when (not if, *when*) they do not do their jobs properly, through errors of either omission or commission.

When was the last time a teacher was held to account by a professional body for

If You Can Read This, Thank a Teacher.



not teaching reading well enough? I don't know either. But this scary reality is what true professionalism entails and perhaps if education academics had to factor that possibility into their pre-service curricula there would be some better attention to detail in what is taught. Academics in medicine, nursing, psychology and a raft of allied health disciplines know that this is the kind of community accountability they are preparing their graduates for.

Misdirection 5: Reading is a natural thing for children to do. Explicit instruction in phonics kills their enjoyment of text. We should foster the ability to read through immersion in high-quality children's literature.

As you can see, there's a few interconnected pieces of misinformation here. If you are unconvinced of the notion that humans have evolved for spontaneous development of spoken language but not for written language, I refer you to the work of [Diane McGuinness](#), [Stanislas Dehaene](#) and [David Geary](#). Unfortunately, the late [Kenneth Goodman](#) gave education the fanciful but empirically unsupported notion that reading is 'natural', like oral language. This became something of a meme in early years education and has been hard to budge.

What teachers who have adopted a [structured literacy approach](#) to early reading instruction consistently report is the *joy* that children display when they can crack the code and lift words off the page. All of which does not mean of course that children should not be exposed to beautiful children's books on a daily basis – books that expand their vocabularies, their comprehension of complex sentences, their imaginations, and their knowledge of the world. That's a no-brainer.

We need to remember though, that listening to adults read beautiful books does no more to teach children how to read than listening to adults play Mozart sonatas teaches them how to play

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the piano. There are several concepts and skills that children need to master in order to do both and instruction delivered by knowledgeable teachers is what makes the difference. Would parents knowingly pay for piano lessons taught by someone who does not understand musical notation and the logic behind it? No, and they should not have to buy into a lottery of hoping that classroom teachers have received adequate preparation for the specialised knowledge and skills required to support children's early reading success.

If reading was as natural as acquiring oral language, why is it taught in schools at all? And if it's so easy for everyone to acquire, why are there so many illiterate people in the world (*who have completed primary school*)?

Perhaps it's time for education faculties to claim reading, and all aspects of how children are best taught how to do it, as their own. This would entail fully embracing the fact that reading is a complex skill that requires teachers to be knowledgeable experts, not guides on the side.

It would entail acknowledging that the English writing system is an imperfect

representation of spoken language and teachers need to understand these imperfections so they are not glossed over with an awkward 'because English' wave of the hand.

It would entail some humility in the face of the fact that knowledgeable language scholars have been tinkering with the English writing system for hundreds of years, yet we ask children at the tender age of five to start mastering it and give them approximately 36 months to do so.

These are only some of the unfortunate misdirections that reading policy makers and university academics have provided to schools in recent decades. They have made the drive unnecessarily long (never-ending some might say), treacherous, and time-wasting for teachers, parents and students of all backgrounds and education sectors.

As with real life, adults can generally cope better with distance, detours and delays, but children will be the ones who experience the pain of an unnecessarily long trip and the seemingly non-existent destination.

So dear reader, no, we are not there yet, but we are not abandoning the journey either.

This article originally appeared on the author's blog, [The Snow Report](#).

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