Decodable or predictable: Why reading curriculum developers must seize one

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Despite the promise to 'improve clarity', 'declutter' and remove 'ambiguous' content, the *new draft curriculum* has left teachers guessing when it comes to when, and how, to use texts in the first two years of school. The requirement for teachers to choose between two types of texts remains in the proposed new curriculum, revealing a lack of understanding by the curriculum developers about the purpose and structure of each text.

In the first two years of school, children require many opportunities to practise their phonics skills, which is achieved by reading decodable texts. Predictable texts, in comparison, are incompatible with phonics instruction and do not support beginning readers to master the written code for reading. Once the code has been established, children can move onto a broader range of reading material. If ACARA's objective for the proposed curriculum is to provide "a clear and precise developmental pathway" for reading, then references to predictable texts, and any reading strategies that require children to guess words from pictures and context, need to be removed from the current content descriptions focused on learning to read.

Research we recently conducted revealed that there is confusion among teachers on how to use different types of texts in beginning reading instruction, which the current review of the national curriculum does little to address. While the draft curriculum signals a win for those advocating for more emphasis on systematic phonics instruction, the continued reference to predictable texts, and the associated whole language strategies known as the three-cueing system, is seen as a missed opportunity to align all reading-related content to an established body of scientific knowledge.

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority's (ACARA) chief, *David de Carvalho* claims that the draft curriculum for English "allows teachers to choose a range of texts" (para. 17) to support the development of critical reading skills while also promoting the broader motivational and literary aspects of reading. However, rather than providing choice, the continued lack of guidance and clarification about when and how to use each text serves only to keep teachers guessing. Ironically, 'guessing' is one of the strategies that beginning readers must default to when trying to read words from texts that are not instructionally matched to the classroom phonics program. The features and structure of predictable texts, the earliest readers in many levelled reading systems currently used in Australian classrooms, promote memorisation rather than decoding and encourage beginning readers to guess words from pictures and context. Research has *repeatedly shown* that these strategies are not sustainable in the long term and that it is poor readers who are most disadvantaged when pictures are removed from the text, and the capacity to memorise words reaches its limit.

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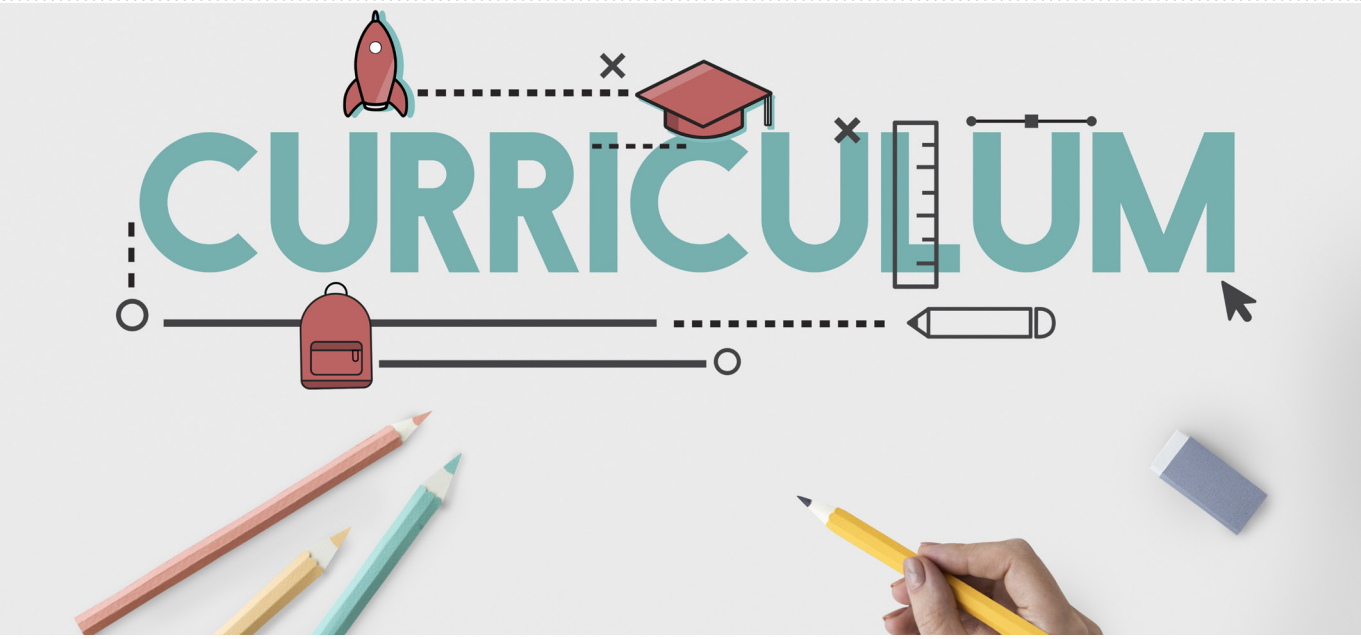

Text types

It is not so much choice that teachers require to meet the instructional needs of children, but the knowledge about how to use different texts for different purposes. *Research has identified* two sets of processes involved in reading proficiency: language comprehension and decoding. While literature facilitates the development of language-related skills such as vocabulary and comprehension, and decodable texts scaffold children's mastery of the alphabetic code, *predictable texts contribute very little* once children commence formal reading instruction. A clearly articulated curriculum would facilitate teachers' ability to determine when to use a particular text for a particular purpose.

Survey on teachers use of texts

The *results of our research* draw attention to this issue of how teachers use different types of texts to support beginning reading development. We surveyed 138 Western Australian Pre-primary and Year 1 teachers because we were concerned that the guidance on approaches to reading instruction and text types in the current curriculum was ambiguous and confusing.

Teachers were asked about the approach they used to teach phonics, the type of texts and the strategies they used when teaching reading, and their beliefs about decodable and predictable texts. In Western Australia, teachers are directed by the Department of Education (DoE) to use systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) and, in our study, 93% of the teachers reported that they taught phonics using a SSP approach.

On the basis of this approach to reading, we expected an equivalent number of teachers to use decodable texts. Surprisingly, a majority of teachers (56%) reported using both predictable and decodable texts to support children's reading development. Of the teachers who only used decodable texts (25%), all but two used a range of strategies more suited to predictable texts.

As expected, teachers who only used predictable texts (18%) used prompts associated with these texts, but they also used strategies more suitable for decodable text such as asking children to 'sound out each letter'. This could be confusing for children when reading a text that doesn't include words that can be read using current alphabetic knowledge. Predictable texts feature high-frequency (e.g., girl, where, as) and multisyllabic words (e.g., doctor, balloon, helicopter) that reflect common and relatable themes for young children, rather than words that align with a phonics teaching sequence.

Fluency and texts

Two-thirds of the teachers in our research agreed with the statement that predictable texts promote fluency. This belief possibly accounts for the fact that so many teachers used predictable texts despite using a systematic synthetic phonics approach. While there is some evidence to suggest that predictable texts facilitate the *development of fluency*, the relationship is not well understood.

When children first apply their knowledge of phonics to decodable texts, fluency does initially appear to be compromised. Learning to read is hard work, and it takes at least two years of reading instruction before children reach a level of proficiency where they are able to apply their skills to the broader curriculum, or to what is commonly known as 'reading to learn'.

In contrast, the repetition of high-frequency words and the predictive nature of words and sentences in predictable texts gives the impression that children are reading fluently as they memorise sentences that can be recited both while reading, and in the absence of the text. While alluring to teachers, the promotion of these strategies compromises the development of the alphabetic knowledge required for reading a complex orthography such as English, and as such should not be prioritised over careful and accurate decoding, despite the temptation to do so!

A lack of fluency when learning a new skill is evident in many areas of learning, and yet it seems to be less well tolerated in beginning reading instruction. One possible explanation for this is the dominance of whole language reading theories, upon which the idea that learning to read is as natural as learning to speak has been promoted. This has resulted in the proliferation of a range of instructional reading strategies that are no longer supported by research, but as our research showed, continued to be used by classroom teachers. It

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is our contention that the continued use of these strategies is a direct result of the ambiguity evident in the curriculum documents. It has simply not kept up with the research and will continue to act as a barrier to effective implementation unless clarity around the use of texts is provided.

Which books and when?

Children learn about the correspondence between speech and print by being exposed to books from an early age. At the *pre-reading stage*, prior to knowing that letters can also represent print, and that there is a predictable relationship between them, children benefit from being read to from a wide range of books, including children's literature that features predictable text. There are many great examples to choose from, including well-known classics such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, *What Do You See?* and *I Went Walking*.

When teachers read books with rhythmic patterned language, children begin to understand that each printed word on the page represents a spoken word. This helps children to understand the segmental nature of speech, a valuable first step in their reading journey. The predictable texts currently used by teachers to meet Foundation and Year 1 curriculum objectives, while far less engaging than children's literature, are more appropriate for children who are at this stage of their reading development because they do not require children to actually use their knowledge of the alphabet to read. While teachers can (and should) continue to read children's literature, including books with predictable text and rhyming patterns, to children beyond the preschool years, there is no instructional value in using 'levelled' predictable readers to support children's development once formal reading instruction has commenced.

When children enter the alphabetic stage of reading, they must transition from being read to, and joining in, to becoming the reader of the text. During this stage, children benefit from text that supports decoding as a primary strategy for reading. Decodable texts have a specific purpose: to scaffold children's mastery and application of the alphabetic code in reading. Once children have mastered the alphabetic code, the reading of natural language texts, with more diverse vocabulary and complex language structures, should be encouraged. It is crucial from this point that motivation for reading is maintained.

The disconnect between the use of text and the teaching approach being employed, as well as the inconsistent use of strategies to support children when reading evident in our research, can be seen as a direct result of the requirement in the curriculum to use both decodable and predictable texts. It is likely that without a change to the current curriculum, this will continue to be the case.

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