

Leaving the Balanced Literacy habit behind: A theory of change

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Have you ever tried to change some aspect of your behaviour? To eat a healthier diet and/or lose weight? To exercise more? To have a better sleep pattern? To spend less time on Wordle and Wordle knock-off sites? All of these, the last one in particular, are difficult to do. Anyone who has studied biology will know that the forces in favour of *homeostasis* are strong, and if you've studied any psychology (or just lived an average life), you will know that the forces that work against behaviour change are also strong.

So, against that background of knowing how difficult change is to undertake and sustain, it is remarkable to see the level of commitment to change that is occurring in classrooms right across the English-speaking world, when it comes to improving early years literacy instruction, so that children are set up for academic and life success.

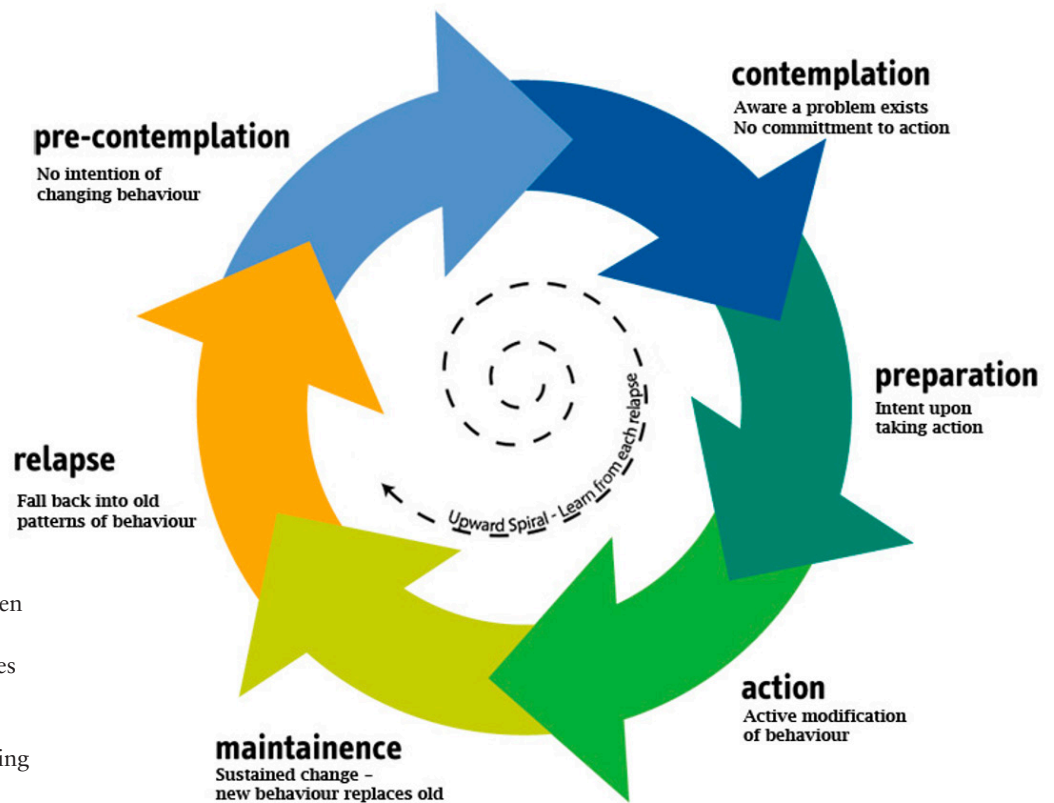
This means moving away from a trusted, comfortable instruction approach that has the beguilingly reassuring descriptor 'Balanced Literacy'. Now when it comes to diet, sleep, exercise and maybe even Wordle exposure, balance is all fine and it's what we strive for. The word *balance* was misappropriated, however, for reading instruction, and mischievously so, to confer false reassurance to teachers and parents that: "We've got this. Everything is there. It's fine. Yes, we do phonics, we just do it in context because reading is a meaning-based activity."

If you would like to understand more about why and how Balanced Literacy cashed in on the vacant but illusory '*golden mean*' space in reading instruction discourse but then failed to deliver, you can do so via links [here](#) and [here](#). In a nutshell, Balanced Literacy is poorly defined and promotes eclecticism; further, it is not premised on a theory of reading that is testable, reflecting its ancestry in Goodman's whole language, *reading-is-a-psycholinguistic-guessing-game* casserole for classroom teachers.

So – the jig is up on Balanced Literacy; and teachers, literacy leaders, school principals, and in many cases, sector-level advisors, want to know how to support a change process towards a model and set of practices that ensures success for the overwhelming majority of students through mainstream, Tier 1 instruction. This means teaching reading in an explicit and structured way, from a position of strong teacher knowledge.

In this post, I draw on a well-known theory of change, *Prochaska and DiClemente's Stages of Change Model*, which is to behaviour change what the *Simple View of Reading* is to early years reading instruction: a model that has been around since the 1980s, has been well-researched, and found to be robust under a wide range of real-world circumstances.

The Stages of Change Model was originally designed for use by clinicians working 1:1 with clients seeking to break entrenched behaviour patterns that



Transtheoretical Model of Change
Prochaska & DiClemente

<https://www.therelationshipblog.net/2016/06/the-five-stages-of-change/>

have become dysfunctional. It has been successfully applied to a wide raft of behaviour challenges in recent decades and *also to organisational change*. I think it's worth a close look with respect to changing school-level reading instruction, because it helps us to understand that:

- Change is a process.
- Change is difficult to initiate.
- Change is difficult to sustain.
- There are identified points of vulnerability that increase the likelihood of lapse/relapse.
- Deliberate actions can be put in place to protect and sustain changes that have been made.
- If we stay the course on change, the general direction we move in is upwards.

An important feature of the Stages of Change Model is that it represents change as a cycle, not a set of linear steps. As such, any school could, at any time, in theory at least, move forwards or backwards in the cycle and will potentially revisit earlier phases in aspects of their work. As long as this is recognised and understood, changes can be protected, and appropriate actions can be put in place if lapses (or, less likely, but more seriously, relapses) occur.

As you can see in the figure above, another important feature of the Stages of Change Model is that the overall direction is up. Stay the course, pick yourself up after you fall off the horse, and get back on again, and in time, things will move in a positive direction,

in spite of some inevitable setbacks. The change will, in time, become the new normal.

In terms of language, some versions of the Stages of Change Model refer to 'lapses' and some to 'relapses'. I prefer to focus on lapses, as these are more likely in the school context than a full relapse to old Balanced Literacy ways. The language of 'lapses' is also more forgiving with respect to mistakes that will probably be made, as discussed further below.

Let's look at the stages identified in the model, which you can see illustrated in the figure above. I will consider each stage in turn, along with the challenges and opportunities it affords in moving away from Balanced Literacy.

As you will see, some challenges and opportunities turn up at multiple points in the change cycle. My musings on these reflect my interactions with literally thousands of teachers in the last couple of decades, as well as my current work in and with schools.

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PRE-CONTEMPLATION –

Change is not on our agenda or the radar. We're happy as we are.

What's happening/challenges	Opportunities
<p>The key risk for schools here is no upward growth in student achievement over time, regardless of the starting point. This risk applies to all schools, irrespective of their overall data, because all schools can improve.</p> <p>Students' outcomes are accepted as largely a result of postcode lotto, rather than being a consequence of instructional quality in the classroom. This risk is not symmetrical though; it applies more conspicuously at the under-performing end of the school spectrum.</p> <p>In the pre-contemplation stage, teacher knowledge concerning the nature of reading as a cognitive and linguistic process, as well as the patterns and intricacies found in the English writing system, will remain low and static, reflecting the unstated assumption that this information is neither necessary nor helpful. There may be a vague awareness that there's a vast 'other world' of knowledge out there about reading, and some moments of disquiet. In some cases, it probably just feels too overwhelming and any rocks that have been tentatively turned over are carefully replaced.</p> <p>I have referred in a 2016 blog post to the evidence on low teacher knowledge on how the writing system works in English, due to the devaluing of this knowledge currency in initial teacher education programs. This has shifted marginally, if at all in Australia since that blog post was written.</p> <p>Most worryingly of all, when schools stay in this space, they can unwittingly sustain a pernicious parent-blame meme that goes something like this: "If parents in this community cared more about their children's education, they would buy more books and spend more time reading to them in the preschool years. It's the parents' job to instil a love of reading, so when they get to school, children can catch on in the classroom."</p> <p>This position has unfortunately been reassuringly propped up by views expressed by some children's authors.</p>	<p>The pre-contemplative space is ripe for the entrance of a disruptor: a teacher, school leader, parent, or allied health professional who asks questions and initiates discussions (neither of which are always welcome) about student data and performance. This person suggests that other approaches exist that should be explored, but they may be initially ignored, ridiculed and/or frozen out.</p> <p>An important strategy here is to 'roll with resistance' rather than locking horns with it directly. Stay connected, keep the conversation going, and listen for clues as to what the real concerns are with respect to the prospect of change.</p>

PREPARATION / CONTEMPLATION –

We've heard some other schools are making changes. We're interested but a bit anxious too.

What's happening/challenges	Opportunities
<p>The naysayers can be quite vocal at this stage and by resisting change, can ensure that the school slots back into its pre-contemplative, all-is-well/we-can-live-with-our-data comfort zone.</p> <p>Sometimes schools dip their toe in the change waters and then quickly remove it, having managed to reassure themselves that they are actually OK.</p> <p>Sometimes schools don't move beyond contemplation and early preparation because the general conclusion is "this will be too hard", or they fall back on "parents in this school won't like it".</p> <p>Another risk that arises is the sunk-cost fallacy. "We've just spent a 5-figure sum on levelled predictable readers, so we can't change tack now."</p> <p>Sometimes teachers buy the rhetoric around explicit and structured teaching of the code being a sure way to kill children's love of reading. Sadly, nothing kills children's love of reading more efficiently than being unable to read.</p> <p>A dominant belief that systematic and explicit literacy instruction is only for 'Tier 2 children' can be an obstacle here. This view is espoused by some teachers, literacy leaders and in some corridors of power in policy circles. It flies in the face of the principles of Response to Intervention however, which is premised upon a strong Tier 1 and higher dose (duration, frequency, intensity) at Tiers 2 and 3, not different approaches.</p>	<p>Sometimes someone attends some particularly impactful professional learning and brings that back to colleagues for discussion.</p> <p>Being in this phase opens up new opportunities for discussions about pedagogy and also about student monitoring tools and processes.</p> <p>Teachers and schools in this stage become open to myth-busting conversations, e.g., busting the myth that explicit and systematic phonics teaching means that this is the only approach to early reading instruction that is used.</p> <p>In the contemplation phase, teachers and school leaders become open to conversations with critical friends and take opportunities to join communities of practice that promote structured, explicit literacy teaching.</p> <p>These barriers to change are readily countered through fact-checking, which is increasingly easy for disruptors and change champions to do because of ready access to communities of practice through Twitter and closed Facebook groups.</p>

ACTION –

We're doing this. We are sick of the status quo and believe our students deserve better. We are going to make it happen.

What's happening/challenges	Opportunities
<p>Sometimes, there is a temptation to move too quickly; to want it all happening tomorrow. This is understandable but hastening slowly is the name of the game.</p> <p>Teachers and literacy leaders will potentially receive conflicting advice at this stage and have to make some judgement calls for themselves, e.g., on whether or not to discard those sets of predictable levelled texts or to find a way of re-purposing them.</p> <p>Some staff may say “yes” to change but in their hearts, they mean “no, not really, but I’ll do the minimum I need to do, to look like I’m on board”.</p> <p>Some staff are at risk of change fatigue because they have been teaching for decades and seen countless changes come and go. Why should they feel energised about this one?</p> <p>Staff turnover can be a threat to sustained change.</p>	<p>Remember the fable about the hare and the tortoise? It wasn't the sprinter who won the race, it was the consistent, determined slogger who stayed the course and crossed the line as the victor.</p> <p>Confer with/visit others in similar settings who are a little further down the road than you and can be a brains trust (and don't forget to pay this favour forward later, when your school is further advanced and can support colleagues starting the journey).</p> <p>This can be tricky to identify, but most leaders have a sense of who is truly on board and who is not. A culture of collaboration: team-teaching, classroom observations and discussion of video-recorded teaching segments helps to break down barriers to discussion of what is actually occurring in different classrooms (and may be aligning with patterns of inconsistency in student data).</p> <p>Agree on priorities for classroom change and then put professional learning, classroom coaching, and collaborative teaching arrangements in place around that. Remind yourselves at regular intervals what your strategic intent is so you can stay the course.</p> <p>Connecting with like-minded schools through communities of practice can be invaluable to guard against an early sense that this is all too hard. Others have walked this road before; walk in their footsteps to make your journey easier. In doing so, you help build the path for those who come behind you.</p> <p>These concerns need to be validated and discussed; left unaddressed, they can become invisible but pervasive barriers to effective change.</p> <p>Anecdotally, I hear of teachers deciding to stay in school because of the buzz created by the reading change journey; the stability that is afforded when turnover is reduced is invaluable.</p> <p>Turnover is inevitable, however, and recruiting for the knowledge and skills required for your refreshed approach will be important, as will be the orientation and early support provided to new staff. It should not be assumed that new staff will just 'catch on'.</p>

MAINTENANCE –

OK, we've made these big changes over the last couple of years; now we need to sustain them

What's happening/challenges	Opportunities
<p>As schools move from Action to Maintenance, there is often a growing realisation that while reading performance (specifically the efficient acquisition of text decoding skills) may have been the trigger for change, it is not the only aspect of literacy that requires attention. Focus moves to deeper knowledge and extended practice with respect to oral language, fluency, writing and spelling. Increasingly, there is interest in incorporating explicit teaching of morphology to support students' abilities to identify word families, for both vocabulary-building and developing spelling skills. There is also often a new-found appreciation for the concept of a content-rich curriculum, to support reading comprehension.</p> <p>In the Maintenance Phase, schools are often refining assessment and monitoring tools as they become more confident in their judgement concerning protocols that align with their new teaching methods.</p> <p>Many schools in this phase also turn their attention to the teaching of numeracy and other core aspects of the curriculum.</p>	<p>Here, staff become engaged with professional learning across the oral language and literacy spectrum, as well as professional learning concerning learning sciences and impactful pedagogies.</p> <p>Interest in cognitive load theory is common, as is interest in explicit instruction, classroom seating arrangements and their relationship to pedagogical aims, and teaching a content-rich curriculum.</p> <p>Maintenance is about maintaining the change process, not just about maintaining the changes that have been made.</p> <p>And the fire in the belly that sustains this process is the quest to shift the needle on children's life trajectories and enable more students to complete school and have access to the social and economic mainstream.</p> <p>Improved data is a pleasing validation of this, but I have never worked with teachers who see data as anything more than confirmation and validation of their path. They have their eyes on the grander goal of better lives for their students; lives that they will not experience if they do not become fully literate citizens.</p>

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LAPSES –

We've dropped the ball in some classrooms/curriculum areas and we're worried we will lose our gains.

What's happening/challenges	Opportunities
<p>A lapse is a short-term and possibly circumscribed “Oops” in an area of reading instruction change that sees a reversion to old, Balanced Literacy ways, such as an early years teacher using Three Cueing (also known as Multi-Cueing, or in the UK, ‘Searchlights’), even though the teaching team has explicitly and unanimously agreed to leave this approach behind.</p> <p>Where a lapse is identified (e.g., by a literacy coordinator), it can be discussed with respect to the rationale for change and corrected via coaching and reminders about the importance of fidelity to the approach decided by the team.</p> <p>A relapse, however, would be more generalised than a lapse, and might entail an entire teaching team reverting to Three Cueing, or to their abandonment of decodable (phonically controlled) texts in favour of a return to predictable, levelled texts for beginning readers. A relapse is a more serious threat to the sustainability of change and can entail some re-orienting conversations about the rationale for change and need for it to be fully sustained. These conversations need to be initiated by leaders.</p>	<p>Conversations about lapses need to be held in a ‘no blame, no shame’ way. Everyone needs to bring curiosity and a solution-focus to the table, so that a lapse is just a pit stop, and everyone is back on track again.</p> <p>The answer to a lapse generally lies in a weak point in the Action Phase.</p> <p>Go back and look at the challenges you faced in implementing change and audit these to see where a crack has opened up to allow some slippage back to the old way/s of doing things. Remember that for all of us, old ways of doing things are familiar and require less effort, even if we know they are not optimal and don't produce the best outcomes.</p> <p>Neither a lapse nor a relapse need be a fatal threat to the change journey.</p>

The opportunities at every stage are vast, as described by Victorian principal [Sue Knight in her ‘sliding doors moment’](#) blog post concerning the journey away from Balanced Literacy.

It's been said that the price of peace is eternal vigilance, and the same could be said of sustaining change. ‘Set and forget’ is never the order of the day, as it will subtly undermine all that you have set out to achieve and contribute to the cancerous discourse of “Oh, we tried that, and it didn't work”.

I will leave you with the sage words of Professor Dianne McGuinness, who was writing nearly 20 years ago, about the late Jeanne Chall's observations of classroom practice and instructional change in the 1960s (emphasis is mine):

*One of Chall's most important discoveries was that **teachers tend to be eclectic**. If teachers are asked, or decide to change to a new program, they do not abandon old activities and lessons from programs they enjoyed teaching or felt was important. Nor do they abandon their philosophies. This can create a situation where **elements from different programs with***

contradictory logics cancel each other out, such as an emphasis on decoding and an emphasis on memorizing the shapes of words. This has profound implications for classroom research, because it means there will always be an overlap of different methods, depending on the teachers' training and on how many different methods they have been asked to teach. (McGuinness, 2004, p. 84)

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

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