

# Once more for the people at the back

It's been a busy few weeks with respect to discussion and debate about literacy in the public domain. I have been interviewed a number of times by print and electronic media. Inevitably, only segments and sound bites of my comments are used, so there's not much nuance in the discussion.



**Pamela  
Snow**

Two key events in Victoria have been catalysts for this media activity:

- 1 The announcement by the Victorian Department of Education that a Year 1 Phonics Screening Check will be mandated in this state as of 2023. Details of this plan are still to be announced, but I am at least assured that it will include pseudo-words, which are essential, as I will explain in more detail below.
- 2 The release by the state opposition of its literacy policy, which privileges systematic and explicit reading instruction, accompanied by well-resourced teacher professional learning and an increase in the speech-language pathology workforce in schools to support the development of children's oral language skills and their reading progress.

My tracking of the mainstream and social media coverage of these announcements flagged the usual misconceptions, deliberate or otherwise, so I thought it might be helpful to lay some of these to rest in one place.

As you read through these points, give some thought to [Chesterton's Fence](#), a concept I first encountered when listening to an interview with Stephen Fry. The Chesterton's Fence parable reminds us that taking things away (when we didn't understand why they were there in the first place) is easy. Reinstating them is infinitely more difficult.

| Myth/misconception                                | Setting the record straight   |
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| The debate is about 'phonics vs. whole language'. | I have <a href="#">blogged about this previously</a> . In 2022, if you're still debating this topic as phonics vs. whole language, then you're a few seasons behind on the storyline. The debate now centres around the translation of cognitive psychology-informed 'learning science' into the early years reading space, plus the level of knowledge that early years teachers have about the nature of the English writing system.<br>The contemporary debate is also concerned with teachers seizing their professional integrity from the clutches of bureaucrats, education academics and union officials and calling time on being sold content and pedagogies that are not fit for purpose.<br>The game is up on teachers being the last to be invited to the knowledge-about-reading party and they are fit to riot on the streets about the fact that they have had to fight their way in. |

**Myth/misconception**

**Setting the record straight**

The science of reading is a 'one size fits all' approach.

This is one of those hackneyed clichés that immediately signals that the speaker or writer knows nothing about the science of reading, and less about how to challenge it. The science of reading, like the science of anything, is a body of work, amassed over several decades through the painstaking efforts of researchers from a range of disciplines, using a variety of methodologies. Like the science of how to treat brain tumours, or the science of improving electrically powered vehicles, the science of reading lumbers along, with different branches and facets, and different internal debates, as it should.

I suggest you ask those who reject the science of reading if they also reject the science of perception, the science of memory, the science of language, and the science of procedural learning. If not, why not?

If anyone can point me to a body of scientific evidence that supports the generic, eclectic collection of approaches that loosely bundle under the heading 'balanced literacy', I will cancel my weekend plans and read it. My weekend plans are safe though, because such a body of evidence does not exist.

Inexplicably, however, in 2022, balanced literacy continues to be the approach supported and endorsed by many education jurisdictions in Australia and in other English-speaking countries.

I wonder how much of this support for the balanced literacy status quo can be traced to an embarrassed and self-conscious unwillingness to invest in teacher knowledge and skills at the pre-service and in-service levels, so that our teaching workforce is genuinely 'classroom ready' on exit from university?

'Balanced literacy' sounds so reassuring and complete. Its survival has been propped up by the fact that it is seemingly 'good enough' for more than 50% of students, even if it does look the other way and shrug its shoulders at those who don't achieve benchmarks after three years of formal instruction.

I wonder whether balanced literacy proponents would be comfortable going into a class full of fresh-faced five-year-olds, randomly selecting 10–20% (at least) and sending a note home as follows:

*Dear parents*

*We use an approach to reading instruction that only works for some students. We're sorry to inform you that your son or daughter won't become a proficient reader. We imagine this is going to cause you and them considerable grief and will cast a long, dark shadow over their futures – academically, vocationally and on their mental health. We don't intend to do much of any substance about this, but now you're aware of it, it's basically your responsibility.*

I notice some in the academy are now arguing, disingenuously of course, some version of: "balanced literacy includes systematic phonics". Sorry, but you can't have it both ways. You can't claim that it's better for children to learn the code via indirect immersion in beautiful children's literature, and then in the next breath claim that this instruction is 'systematic'. It just isn't. Teachers know this and parents know it. In hindsight, students know it as well, but it's too late then.

| Myth/misconception   | Setting the record straight  |
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| <p>Children should not be asked to read pseudo-words as part of a phonics screening check.</p> | <p>Sigh. Put the kettle on for this one.</p> <p>Writing systems are codes for spoken language. In English we have an imperfect code, in the sense that it is not blessed with 100% transparency, like, for example Italian, Spanish or Finnish. This reflects the history of English and its rich borrowings from other languages of not only vocabulary items (words) but also their spellings. Pronunciation is a much less stable player than spelling, and its propensity to slip-slide around (over time and across geographic regions) can make spelling look like the culprit for the challenges in reading and writing English, where that is not always the case.</p> <p>All of this means that learning the code and its intricacies takes longer for children learning to read in English and it is an even riskier endeavour when they are being taught by <i>teachers who themselves, have not been taught about the intricacies of their writing system</i> (decades of whole language instruction and eroded content in initial teacher education can take a bow here – see Chesterton’s Fence, on page 21).</p> <p>So – what do pseudo-words have to do with the nature of the English writing system?</p> <p>Pseudo-words are words that are <i>‘phototactically legal’</i> but are not currently regarded as ‘real’ words. Now we need to bear in mind here that the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘not real’ words in English is much fuzzier than some might think. Is ‘google’ a word? What about ‘selfie’? ‘Mansplain’? Language is dynamic because it belongs to its users, so there is not an arbitrary, black and white distinction between ‘word’ and ‘non-word’. That’s one of the reasons we are not still using Samuel Johnson’s dictionary – it does not contain the words that have come into English since its publication. Lexicographers have the fun job of tracking changes in language over time and ensuring that new editions of dictionaries keep up with usage changes that have become so commonplace that they need to be recognised in new editions of dictionaries.</p> <p>Further, to a young child, whose lexicon still has tens of thousands of words to be added, a real word may be judged by them as a non-word, simply on the basis that they have never heard it before and so have no reference point for it.</p> <p>We also need to remember that if it’s having children read the work of high-quality authors that we’re after, they will have to be able to decode through non-words to engage with these texts – think Lewis Carroll, J.K. Rowling, Dr. Seuss, Julia Donaldson, Spike Milligan ... the list goes on.</p> <p>So – when we ask a child to decode a pseudo-word, we are simply giving them an opportunity to demonstrate a transferable skill they have learnt in the classroom – the skill of decoding through an unfamiliar word and ‘getting it off the page’. This is what children need to do with all unfamiliar words so that after a few exposures, the word is ‘knitted in’ (orthographically mapped) in their long-term memory, and they can say it, spell it and explain at least one meaning for it. Its identification then contributes to the overall task of reading comprehension.</p> <p>Making a fuss about asking children to read pseudo-words is as logical as protesting about them being asked to wash their hands before a meal. It doesn’t make sense and it’s not in the best interests of the child.</p> |
| <p>It is insulting to teachers to suggest that reading instruction needs attention.</p>        | <p>What’s insulting to teachers is withholding decades of knowledge about oral language and the nature of the English writing system from them and then looking the other way when large percentages of children fall further and further behind as they progress through the year levels, in plain sight of their perplexed, often guilt-ridden teachers.</p> <p>I wouldn’t mind a dollar for every teacher who has written to me or approached me at a school or a conference to say: “I am wracked by guilt when I think of all those children I could have taught to read if only I knew then what I know now.”</p> <p>Why should teachers have to pay for education degrees that are devoid of evidence-based reading instruction content and then have to self-fund their own learning expeditions, while simultaneously processing their anger and guilt about their inability to deliver on the most basic community expectation of their degree – that they can teach a child how to read? Universities need to stop gaslighting initial teacher education candidates and pretending that they are preparing them to teach reading. Overwhelmingly, they are not.</p>   |

| Myth/misconception  | Setting the record straight   |
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| <p>Teachers are professionals and should be allowed to exercise their own judgement and preferences about how they teach reading in their classrooms.</p> | <p>This is another put-the-kettle-on moment. I have <a href="#">blogged previously about professionalism</a> and education. Some in education like to promulgate the myth that the lucky folk in other professions, such as medicine, psychology, engineering and accounting get to make their own decisions about how they practise their craft. Of course, they do have latitude to exercise discretion here and there, but in the main, being a professional means signing up for a highly constrained form of public accountability. It does not mean: “Don’t question me. Just let me get on with this in my own way.” It does not mean that in education either – the work of educators would have very low currency in the eyes of the community if it did.</p> <p>Many teachers and school leaders are seizing the accountability stick and using it to drive the agenda around student outcomes. Would-be spokespeople for teachers, such as union leaders and education academics, will do more favours to teachers by showcasing accountability than they will by marching the ‘choose your own adventure’ circus into town. Professionalism in other professions also means accountability and public scrutiny, which can involve periods of suspension, mandated re-training, and even de-registration for failure to practice at the expected standard. People who speak for teachers can’t cherrypick the parts of professionalism that are appealing (like making autonomous decisions) and shirk the undesirable parts, like being held to account for poor student outcomes.</p>  |
| <p>Improving decoding skills does not transform reading comprehension skills.</p>   | <p>Decoding has been described as a constrained skill; there’s a fixed number of phoneme-grapheme correspondences in English and once these have been encountered and learnt (stored in long-term memory), they are available to assist students to decode new, unfamiliar words. As students’ vocabularies and knowledge of morphology grows, this also assists them to find their way through polysyllabic words, which in many cases are ‘higher-order’ Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary words, if we apply frameworks such as those described by <a href="#">Isabel Beck and her colleagues</a>.</p> <p>Comprehension, on the other hand, is an unconstrained skill. It depends on a large number of ‘moving parts’ in written text and the ability to decode is simply the non-negotiable entry point. Students then need to grapple with the fact that the meanings of words change according to context and as function of polysemy. They need to understand how syntax works to convey meaning – sometimes by embedding ideas within each other, sometimes by changing word order (active to passive), and sometimes by assembling long, complex sentences containing multiple ideas. Students need to understand figurative language, of which there are many varieties in English, and they need to bring <a href="#">background knowledge</a> to the task of reading comprehension.</p> <p>Reading scientist Nancy Lewis Hennessy, in her 2021 text <a href="#">The Reading Comprehension Blueprint</a>, likens this process to a factory assembly line. When one component or process is missing or faulty, then the product that rolls off the end of the assembly line will also be incomplete or faulty.</p> <p>So too it is with the role of decoding ability and reading comprehension. If skills in decoding are improving but reading comprehension skills are not, then we have only attended to part of the problem and we need to turn our attention to the other facets of language comprehension that support students to understand what they are reading.</p> <p>Saying that “improving phonics doesn’t fix reading comprehension” is akin to saying “putting a steering wheel in the car doesn’t make the car drive safely” if the other components are not fit for purpose and properly installed. But try driving your car without a steering wheel.</p> |
| <p>Some children just can’t or won’t learn to read. We have to accept this inevitability.</p>   | <p>I am always amazed when I hear some version of this assertion. <a href="#">Cognitive science research</a> suggests that we should be successful in teaching 95% of children to read yet in reality we know <a href="#">we fall well short of that bar</a>. There is no moral or ethical defence for designing and maintaining education systems that hardwire a high rate of failure. This is particularly indefensible when the burden of that failure is unreasonably borne by those who are disadvantaged to start off with. If education does not offer a leg-up to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, where will they learn to read? Prison? The unemployment queue?</p>  |

| Myth / misconception   | Setting the record straight  |
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| <p>Structured explicit reading instruction kills the love of reading.</p>                                    | <p>I am not aware of any actual evidence to support this meme but I have been in enough classrooms delivering structured, explicit literacy instruction to have seen the engagement and joy of achievement displayed by children as they master the code and gain independence as readers. I have done extensive research on populations of adolescents who are struggling readers and I am pretty sure that if they had sufficient literacy skills to write a comment on this blog post, it would say that what killed their love of reading was being unable to read.</p>  |
| <p>A school's reading data is mainly a reflection of the socio-economic status of its parent community.</p>  | <p>Family socio-economic status is certainly a strong contributor to the academic achievements of children – no surprises there. When children enter school, however, we should see a gradual diminishing over time of the influence of the home language and literacy environment and an increase over time of the influence of the instructional environment.</p> <p>The quality of the instruction that students are exposed to is the one lever that teachers, schools and school systems can pull – if they have the will and conviction to do so. This is evidenced when we see <a href="#">reports of high-achieving low-SES schools</a>. Their communities have not sent them 'better children'; their teachers have shifted their practice to provide better instruction. This does not necessarily require more funding, but it does require a re-direction of funds.</p>  |
| <p>People who are not classroom teachers have no seat at the table on commenting on reading instruction.</p> | <p>This pot shot is usually levelled at speech-language pathologists (SLPs), who are told to “stay in their lane” by some who are misguided or ill-informed about the <a href="#">scope of practice of the speech-language pathology profession</a>.</p> <p>Reading is a language-based skill and SLPs are experts on language, as part of the human communication system, so it is not surprising that they (we) are working in schools in growing numbers.</p> <p>Not only are SLPs in schools in growing numbers, but they are also stepping up to support initial teacher education. The La Trobe School of Education, of which I am a part, has just appointed its fourth SLP to its academic staff. You are going to need to get used to SLPs in the reading space as that horse has already bolted.</p> <p>Such is the nexus between teaching and speech-language pathology that there is a growing number of <a href="#">practitioners who are qualified in both disciplines</a>. Interestingly, they typically report that what they know about reading, they learnt in their speech-language pathology degrees, not in their initial teacher education.</p> <p>The claim that only people who are classroom teachers have anything of value to say about classroom teaching reflects poorly on those who make it and shifts the focus from the educational needs of children to the professional egos of adults.</p> |

Meanwhile, in the midst of all of this media interest, on Saturday 1 October 2022, I delivered a keynote presentation at the Sharing Best Practice conference in Ballarat, that was organised by Canadian Lead Primary School principal Sue Knight and her hard-working, knowledgeable and committed local team of science of reading change-makers. This was a sold-out event attended by 250 primary and secondary teachers from all over Western Victoria and from further afield. One of our La Trobe Language and Literacy Master of Education students drove for 14 hours from central NSW to attend.

Teachers giving up the final Saturday of their school holidays to attend science of learning events sends a very strong signal to their respective sectors: we want to do this better, and we want to be

supported in doing so. Now. The direction of travel is clear. I hope education leaders and policymakers are listening.

*The article originally appeared on the authors' blog, [The Snow Report](#).*

*Pamela Snow [[@PamelaSnow2](#) on Twitter] is Professor of Cognitive Psychology in the School of Education, at the Bendigo campus of La Trobe University. She is also Co-Director of the Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab in the School of Education at La Trobe University. Pamela is both a psychologist and speech pathologist and her research interests concern early oral language and literacy skills, and the use of evidence to inform classroom practices.*